



ORION PROTECTION BOOK TWO

STRIPPED

SKYLAR KINGSLEY

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FROM THE AUTHOR

My mission is to give you a hefty dose of the “real thing”, to make your reading experience more enjoyable. While writing the books, I used real Marines to breathe life into the hot heroes of OPS. We would all like to thank you for your continued support. Please enjoy the hard work and effort of all those involved!

Love,
Skylar

DEDICATION

For Linda.

I love you more than rainy days, tattoos, and chocolate.

MIA

My father lived two separate lives, and though I hated it, part of me was exactly like him.

As the years passed, I understood why my mother must have left. But why she didn't take us with her was a puzzle I had yet to solve. None of that mattered now, not my dad's run for District Attorney, my upcoming bar exam, or my double life. My sister Tasha was all I had, and I was regretting ever leaving her with our father to go to law school in Los Angeles.

My world was crumbling. My father and his slimy brother were up to something undoubtedly terrible. Tasha had disappeared, and no one cared.

I leaned against the cool bathroom wall, taking some pressure off my already aching feet. The cold tiles temporarily soothed my hot skin and eased my nerves. Bending down towards my stilettos, I glanced beneath the stalls and found myself alone. The small black purse I carried vibrated on the bathroom counter. I picked my phone out as a second text message came through. I read the screen, frustrated it was not my sister, but the asshole I called 'dad'.

Dad: Don't worry about Tasha. She's on vacation with a friend.

Me: What friend? She's not returning my texts. Something is wrong.

Dad: I didn't ask. I'm focused on winning the election. It's time you realize she only cares about herself. She'll be

back when the money runs out.

I put my phone down and looked to the ceiling, desperately trying to stifle the bubbling emotion in my gut. The bathroom door swung open and Roxanne, a perky girl a few years younger than me with short chestnut hair walked in. As she entered a stall, I dabbed at my eyeliner, hoping to hide a tear that had escaped a minute earlier. A quick run of my hands down my thighs straightened my dress, and using my fingers as a comb, I smoothed out my dark hair. *Pull it together, Mia.*

Roxanne exited the stall and washed up, then stood at the sink next to me applying more lipstick. “What’s going on with you?” She popped her lips, admiring her bright pink pout briefly in the mirror.

“Nothing. Everything is fine.” I exhaled.

Roxanne turned toward me, putting a hand on the sink, “Stop. I know you don’t like to talk about your personal life. I respect that. But we’re still friends, right?”

Friends was not the right word. Roxanne didn’t even know my real name.

“Jesus, girl. We’re at least co-workers and we talk about stuff.”

“I’m having a moment—and yes, Rox, you’re my favorite dancer.” I tried to crack a smile.

“You are the Unfuckwithable Ice Queen. Why are you so off your game tonight? It’s only 3 PM and you’re hiding down here.” Her eyes narrowed. “And for fuck’s sake—have you been crying?”

I looked down, embarrassed at my break in composure. Roxanne stepped forward, touching my elbow with a gentle hand, and tilted her face to look into my eyes, “You look like you need a hug, a shot, or a fuck.”

I forced a smile. “Please don’t hug me.” I had a strict “no touching” policy with everyone, girls and customers included.

“We could fuck, but it’s going to make things real awkward at work.”

I grinned gratuitously at the joke.

Roxanne crossed her arms and stuck a hip out, “Talk or shots?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I have a sister. She has a drug problem. She’s been clean for over a year. After her last relapse, she promised to call or text every single day. I left home to work here, and I worry about her all the time.”

“She’s younger?” Roxanne asked.

“Just turned eighteen.”

“And she calls every day?”

“I at least get a message or a silly meme every day.” I shifted in my heels, the anxiety moved in waves from my arms to my legs. “It’s been three days since I’ve heard from her.”

“Do you have a family member who can look for her?”

I shook my head. “Tasha is all the real family I have.”

“Oh.” Roxanne’s lips pressed together in a flat line. “I can see why you’re upset.”

I brought my fingers to the bridge of my nose and pressed in, trying to relieve the tension building in my forehead. Worry paired with long days of studying and working the night shift was giving me a terrible headache. I thought about my last conversations with Tasha. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but maybe I was too concerned with school to notice.

“It’s just ... she wasn’t in a bad space. There are usually signs before she relapses. I feel like she’s in trouble.” I took a deep breath. As I exhaled, I knew exactly what to do. “I have to drive down there and look for her.”

“How far away does she live?”

I pulled my phone from my purse, checking for the minute possibility that I had missed a message. “She lives in San Diego.”

“Girl, go. You can be there in less than two hours if you leave now.”

She was right. “I kept thinking she would text back, but there’s been nothing. Rox, our father is not a good guy and he has no idea I dance. He would do something terrible if he found out I was here working. I’m putting you in jeopardy by just telling you about Tasha.”

Rox put a hand on my elbow, and I let her comfort me. “Honey, I’m not scared of your dad—I don’t care who he is. I’ve already been through hell, that’s how I ended up here. You’re not the only one at this club hiding something. It’s going to be okay. You were trying to finish school, right?”

“Yeah, I’m finished. I just have a big final exam left. I was going to take Tasha soon and hide somewhere safe ... start a whole new life together and away from our father. Now I’m in full panic mode.”

“Just go. Find your sister and get out of town. I’ll tell Danny you have a family emergency. Take the back exit, so no one bothers you.”

“Thanks, Rox.” I hurried from the bathroom and down the stairs to the dressing room. Within a few minutes, I was out of my dress and heels and in jeans and a T-shirt. I tossed my bag over my shoulder and headed up the stairs. The low lights of the club made it easy to follow the wall to the back exit without being seen. Club protocol required a bouncer to escort every dancer to their car, but tonight I skipped the formality.

I pushed the club door open, sucking in a lung full of fresh air as I stepped out. Breathing a hundred varieties of perfumes and colognes was worse than polluted city air. A recent rain shower had lasted long enough to leave the unmistakable smell of rain and a shiny slickness on the ground. One thing was certain—these L.A. streets needed a good wash.

One of the parking lot lights flickered in the dark, dimming the usually well-lit area. I scanned my surroundings with a careful eye. The security door closed behind me, immediately getting the attention of three men leaning against a car parked to the right of mine. Though the club was one of the nicest in L.A., there was never a shortage of assholes hanging around outside. These three were young, good-looking, and probably

drinking before they entered the club for a night of debauchery. I knew the type; just out of college with a wealthy daddy who paid for grades and good times. Cocky pretty boys were the worst—always trying to get your number and never leaving a tip.

Here we go. I walked quickly over the wet cement through two rows of cars, thankful there was at least one empty spot between my car and them. As I approached, they stopped talking and watched me intently.

The frat boy look-a-like closest to me was about 5'10" and holding a bottle of Fireball Whiskey. He smiled his approval at me as I approached.

"Hi, Beautiful. You work in there?"

"Not right now." My BMW chirped as I unlocked it just before pulling on the handle. I tossed my bag over a stack of textbooks in the passenger seat.

"Slow down. Lemme talk to you."

Refusing to look up, I pulled on my door. It didn't budge. He had a hand on top of it, holding on with a firm grip.

I sighed and started the car instead.

"Move. Your. Hand."

"I asked you a question, sweet thing. We've got a good hook-up meeting us here. You wanna party?" His friends chuckled behind him as they passed the bottle around.

I turned my head slightly, refusing to look him in the eye, "I'm only going to tell you one more time. Move your hand and let me go."

"What if I don't want to? What if I think you should stay here and party with us?" He shifted his weight to lean over the top of my door with both hands—too full of himself to believe I didn't want to party with his clearly inebriated entourage.

One of his eager friends dressed in similar designer jeans and a polo shirt was practically salivating. "Yeah, baby." He spoke from behind the main douchebag. His two sidekicks took a step closer to my car. *Bad move.*

In one swift movement, I gripped the handle and slammed the door shut, catching his fingers between the frame and the door. He yelped with pain and jumped back as I closed the door again and locked it. I popped my car in reverse, the screech of my wheels drowning out his whimpers as he held his smashed fingers close to his chest. “You crazy bitch!”

I exited the parking lot and rolled down the window, giving them the middle finger. *Fucking narcissistic assholes.*

Why was it so hard to be a man with manners and common decency? Throw alcohol in the mix and those three assholes were unpredictable and dangerous—something I learned to spot when I first started dancing.

I picked up speed as I entered the freeway. Interstate 5 would take me straight from L.A. to San Diego. Maybe Tasha didn’t go to Vegas. Could she be at a new friend’s house ignoring me, forgetting about our pact to always stay in touch? *No way.*

I glanced at the passenger seat. The stack of books beneath my bag triggered my memory. I fumbled around for my phone and speed-dialed Sarah. Bluetooth picked up the call immediately.

“Hey! What’s up?” Sarah answered, undoubtedly studying at her kitchen table. We were study buddies for the bar exam, and accountability was a big part of our friendship. We shared notes and study materials. In fact, I shared everything about my life with her since we started law school, everything except where I went at night.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to study on Monday. I have to go to my dad’s house, and I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

“Wait. You avoid your dad like the plague.” She paused a moment before blurting out, “Oh my gosh. Tasha hasn’t called you yet.” Sarah knew how important her calls were.

“No—and my dad said she’s on vacation with friends, but none of them know where she is. I’ve called them all.” I twirled a piece of my hair nervously around my finger.

“How is your dad the biggest asshole, but still running for D.A. in San Diego?” Sarah grunted in frustration. “Want me to come with you?”

“Trust me. One day, everyone will know how corrupt he is. You’re a good friend for offering, but you stay and keep studying.”

“Actually, I’m taking the evening off to meet up with Ryan.”

I rolled my eyes. “He only talks to you when he wants to get laid, and you know it. Otherwise, he acts like you don’t exist. I don’t like it.” Sarah was too sweet to handle a fuck boy.

“You’re one to talk! Mia, you only see a guy if YOU want sex. Then you totally lose interest.”

I cracked a sly smirk. She wasn’t wrong.

“Maybe I can have a fun fling, too.” Sarah paused before giggling, “Except you have that weird thing about kissing. I would definitely need to kiss.” Her laughter made me smile, despite the heaviness of my day.

“Kissing is just so ... intimate. It’s next level.” I shook my head, knowing I had a real issue. “I have never met a man I would want that kind of connection with. They all suck. I’m jaded.”

Sarah giggled. “You and Julia Roberts are the only ones who feel like that.”

“All the men in my life are looking to use me, take from me, or lie to me. Doing it first is a survival skill. It’s some kind of fucked up karma I’ve inherited. And on that note—back to you. Are you going to be fine when he doesn’t call you until the next time he needs sex?”

“You’re so dark. I’ll be fine. I’m going to channel my ‘inner Mia,’ and not just with him, on my next interview too.”

Everything about that statement worried me. “Being emotionally unavailable should not be on your goal list.”

“I’m serious! Girl, you are amazing. Men trip over their feet everywhere you go and you could not care less. You study your ass off and work for pennies on the dollar. Domestic abuse cases are emotionally exhausting. But you’ve got fire. Whatever non-profit snatches you up after we take the bar will be lucky to have you. I mean, your future husband is doomed, but your career path is lit.” Sarah giggled.

“No doubt.” I sighed. “Even the word husband makes my stomach churn. Marriage feels so ... archaic.”

“I’d feel that way too if my dad was trying to marry me off for business leverage.” Sarah made a barfing noise.

We laughed together for a second and my heart felt lighter. She made my fucked-up life feel better. I loved my externship working domestic abuse cases for Orange County. Sarah was still looking for her niche, but she came from a family that loved her, and I was always a little jealous of that.

“Do you think your uncle will be at your dad’s house?”

The thought straightened my face. “I hope not, but probably.”

“He’s the one who blackmailed that judge in the DUI case we talked about, right?”

“Yes, that one. He made the blood alcohol test disappear, and the judge dropped the charges.” My uncle was just as bad as my father—maybe worse.

“That’s right ...” Sarah paused as she remembered the worst part, “Oh, gosh. The DUI guy killed someone while driving drunk a few weeks later, right?”

“He wasn’t just ‘someone’. He was our gardener. Tasha and I used to see him every week. He was nice to us. He brought us gifts sometimes.”

“Your father and Arthur are the reason lawyers have a bad name.”

“Girl, they are terrible human beings. They’d be the same awful men in any other profession.”

“That’s true. I’m sorry you have to go back there.”

“I’ll be fine. Sarah, call me if you need anything. I’ll try not to be long, and meet up to study as soon as I’m back. God knows we can’t take too many days off.”

“It won’t take you long to catch up. Find Tasha and get back here. Mia, honey, be safe.”

“I will. Text me if you need me.”

We hung up, and I stepped on the gas as I merged into the fast lane. Every minute that passed without a call from Tasha reassured me I wasn’t overreacting. If Tasha really went to Vegas, then she was there with someone she just met—and that was a terrible decision for a recovering addict. First, I would check her room. Then, I would see if my father or Arthur knew anything else.

Since our mom left, our lives had been garbage. I withdrew from everyone, but Tasha was a sensitive kid. She felt deeply and started doing drugs to numb herself to the world. I hated myself for leaving, but I couldn’t go to school and take care of her. The regret had become an intangible filth I couldn’t wash off. A guilt that ate me from the inside out. I tightened my hands on the steering wheel, feeling as if I had sacrificed my sister for my career.

The drive kept me focused, and traffic moved faster than usual. If no one was home, I could snoop around for clues. The side door was open and I slipped in, tip-toeing by the same laughing Buddha statue that sat at the door my entire life. I followed the spiral staircase to Tasha’s room. Vanilla and lavender—her favorite scent—hit me as soon as I opened her bedroom door. Indie rock album covers, dried flowers, and picture collages decorated her walls.

I searched through her room for clues about where she went. All her old hiding spots for drug paraphernalia were clear. Her bed was undisturbed. Nothing looked out of place.

The abrupt laughter of my father and his brother filled the long hallway between the kitchen and my father’s office, echoing up the staircase. They had just arrived and were celebrating, undoubtedly drinking my father’s favorite scotch.

I stepped lightly down the hallway and listened from outside the door.

“The polls are showing you leading. This time, in two weeks, you’ll be a front runner at the primaries for San Diego District Attorney. If we keep the momentum going, you could win the general election.”

“All thanks to you.” My dad clinked glasses with Arthur. “I win this election, turn my head when that shipment comes in and we’re set.”

“We’ll have unmatched leverage. Every big mover on the West Coast will pay to get their product through San Diego.” Arthur wheezed as he laughed.

“Yes. We make an example of this Russian pain in my ass. Once I burn him, the city will call me a hero. Then, the others will pull money out faster than we ask for it.”

Oh, no. They’re fucking with the Russians. My father played both sides. I knew his game. He’d prosecute one gang and extort another to continue their illegal operations. The worst criminal of them all.

“And Tasha?” Arthur asked.

“It’s almost better if she never comes back. She’s become too much of a liability. I thought she’d marry into a proper family, but she’s done nothing but cause trouble,” he sighed. “We’ll handle this shit with her after the election.” My father’s bitter words made every little hair on my neck stand up. *Cold-hearted bastards.*

“How crazy was Mia when she texted you? Do you think she would file a missing person’s report?” Arthur prodded.

My father’s crystal tumbler hit the desk with a thud. “She knows better. And if she does, squash it immediately.”

“Here’s to winning the election and finally getting rid of that walking disaster of a daughter.” The clink of crystal completed Arthur’s toast.

A phone beeped. “The car is here. You go ahead and I’ll be right out.” I jumped into the hallway bathroom, peeking to see

who left. My father walked to the car and Arthur stayed in the office. Thankfully I had parked down the street. My father would leave without ever knowing I was here.

I pushed a piece of unruly hair behind my ear, thinking of how to escape before Arthur knew I was here. Checking for a clear hallway, I hurried back to Tasha's room. If she left on her own, she hadn't planned to be gone long. I sat on her bed, trying to think as my heart thumped in my chest. Tasha wasn't a kid anymore, and I had no evidence she was in trouble—except for the gnawing ache in my gut.

Calling the police wasn't an option, not with Arthur using his connections to chill any disruption to my father's campaign. Arthur would ensure she wasn't "missing" and I would look bat shit crazy.

Then, I remembered an organization I came across while assisting the District Attorney's office with a missing woman's case. *What was the name?* I closed my eyes and tried to picture the company heading on the paperwork. *Oh!* "Orion Protection Services". Leaning my elbows on my knees, I googled the name on my phone. Minimal details popped up, but there was a contact—Cadie, and an email with a P.O. Box in Reno, Nevada.

Expect a response within twenty-four hours was the only other information.

I used my phone to email some details of the situation, how I couldn't go to the police, and that my father was running for office and refused to help. I left out Tasha's past drug problems and our father's illegal endeavors. Life had taught me to trust no one with everything. Besides, who would help a stripper avoid her corrupt father while searching for her missing recovering addict sister? I couldn't risk it.

I hurried back to the hall and snuck into my father's office. No one was there. I went to my father's desk, hoping to find something to point me in the right direction.

"What are you doing here?" Arthur stood in the doorway, his beady cobra eyes glaring at me from across the room. His tie hung loose around his neck and his button-up shirt

wrinkled over his portly belly. His almond-shaped eyes and dark hair a constant reminder of our shared bloodline. My father was taller and thinner, but the family resemblance was undeniable.

“I’m going to find my sister and bring her home.”

“Your sister will be back soon. We don’t need bad publicity before the election.”

I walked toward him, refusing to be intimidated. Arthur held his arms up, feigning defeat. “Look, I think it’s adorable. Giving up Daddy’s money to do your own thing. Playing lawyer.” He grunted as he cleared his throat. “But you’re just a slut like your mom.”

I pulled my arm back, closed my fist, and threw all my weight into a punch, nailing him directly in the jaw. A year of cardio kickboxing gave me a powerful right hook. “Shut up about my mom.”

Arthur grabbed his face in pain, cursing me while he opened and closed his jaw to check its mobility. “When this election is over, I’m going to the bar about your little late-night freak show. Everyone will see your true colors. You’ll never be a reputable attorney.”

He was still holding his jaw as I stepped by him. “If you say one word about me to anyone, I will write a full article about all the discrepancies I’ve seen. All the laws I’ve watched you break. And I will send it to every news station on the West Coast.” I walked past him and out of the office while he seethed.

I hurried down the hall before Arthur did something we would both regret. Suddenly, I remembered Tasha’s journal. Scrambling to her room, I lifted her pillow, revealing a pink book with gold trim hiding beneath. I grabbed it and ran out the door to my car. I opened the journal as I walked, and a piece of paper fell out. I caught it and held it under the book.

Her last entry ended with, “I don’t know who I am anymore, but I’ll find out in Vegas. Dimitri promised me answers. I need the truth.”

I found my car and locked myself inside. Quickly, I unfolded the paper on my lap and skimmed it. In my hands, I held a copy of an old DNA test. The first few lines were boilerplate language—and then the results.

Oh, God. We don't have the same father ... I slid the paper into my pocket. *When did she find out? Why wouldn't she tell me?* My head was spinning.

A beep on my phone brought me out of my thoughts. A new email popped up. *That was quick.* It was Cadie from Orion Protection Services. She asked about my resources, location, and if I could meet her tomorrow morning for an emergency meeting about Tasha. San Diego was a twelve-hour drive but only an hour and a half flight. The airlines flew multiple times a day between bigger West Coast cities. I could easily grab a one-way ticket with my emergency cash. The email included a list of recommendations for restaurants and hotels.

I checked the last few flights from San Diego to Reno. An eight o'clock flight still had availability. I answered her email:

Cadie,

Thank you for your sense of urgency in responding to my situation. There is a flight from San Diego to Reno this evening. I will make the morning meeting and appreciate the added hotel/restaurant info. I'll stay at the hotel closest to Orion Protection Services.

Sincerely,

Mia

With typical traffic congestion, I could take Interstate 5 to the San Diego International Airport and leave my car in a paid garage. The eight o'clock flight would work out fine.

I left my work clothes in the car and took the toiletries and a few things I always carried for easy changing. I had a pencil skirt and a blouse from my last interview and some casual clothes. It would have to do.

I boarded the plane without issue and spent the short trip wrapped in my own anxious thoughts about what I would and

wouldn't say to Cadie. I would have to tread carefully.

An hour and a half later, the plane descended on the biggest little city in the world. The bright lights from the Casinos clustered in one area. The map had shown Orion Protection Services located closer to the mountains and west of the city.

Once off the plane, I took a taxi to the hotel that Cadie recommended. My hotel room was small, but I didn't need much. I sat on the bed and re-read Cadie's message.

I couldn't help but feel like this was all my fault. I called a car for a ride to the restaurant Cadie had recommended. O'Sullivan's was a couple miles away and open twenty-four hours. A drink and some food might take my mind off this shitty scenario for a few minutes. Being with people was a terrible idea but being alone in this little room with my own thoughts would be even worse.

ALEX

NOT THAT LUCKY

The unmistakable smell of my aunt's lasagna made my stomach rumble before I stepped on the porch. I unlocked the door with my key and knocked as I pushed the door open.

"Aunt June, I'm here!" Bopper, an adorable pit and boxer mix we rescued a few months ago, ran through the back doggy door. I knelt and held his square chin while I scratched behind his ear. "You're such a good boy. Are you keeping June safe? Are you?" He licked my hand and I let him kiss my jaw before I stood up.

June threw a dish towel on the counter and walked towards me, "You made it back in one piece."

"With no help from my last client. If it wasn't for that kid's dad being one of our biggest contracts, I would've left his spoiled ass in that nightclub in Thailand." I wrapped my arms around June and squeezed her tight.

"Come sit down. I want to hear all about it." June held onto my arm as we walked to the table.

I passed my seat and headed to the kitchen. "Let me help you with the food."

June pointed at the table. "Don't you dare. You're sweet for offering, but if you get up I'm going to swat you. Sit."

"Okay, Okay. Well, the food smells amazing." I sat down and Bopper laid his head on my lap. I scratched behind his ear as he wiggled.

“Thank you, Alex.” June put the lasagna and the garlic bread on the table. “I know it’s your favorite. Let’s go Bopper.” June put Bopper outside with a bone and came back to the table. “Now, what happened with the Bellford kid?”

I took a sip of water and put the glass down. “Apparently, he has been gambling with Daddy’s money. On our way back to the hotel, four guys cornered us on a back street and tried to jump him for skipping out on his debt.”

June put her fork down. “Oh my gosh!”

I served myself a generous helping of lasagna. “He thought he could just walk out on the debt. I left the guys in pretty bad shape and we took the next flight out of Thailand. I don’t think we can go back without risking arrest and Daddy is going to have to pay up if he wants to do business there again.”

“Does John know? I hate when you guys have to protect these spoiled rich kids.”

“It’s my least favorite part of the job. John knows now, but these are the big contracts that pay the bills, so we can run the Freedom Foundation. I never thought I would spend most of my spare time shutting down human trafficking rings, but I’m obsessed with it. And the OPS team is good at bringing those girls home. I’ll suffer through a few idiots with deep pockets to do the work that counts.”

June reached over and put her hand on mine, “Your mom and dad would be so proud of you, John, and Cadie.”

“Thanks, Aunt June. I wish they could see how the Freedom Foundation pulled us all together.” I swallowed a bite of food and pointed at June with my fork, “Even you. Cadie runs the books, you run the front desk, John’s the boss, and I do all the hard work.” I laughed and June rolled her eyes at me.

“You have a team of OPS specialists underneath you to take the contracts you don’t want.”

I swiped my garlic bread through my lasagna, “I know. But John wants me, Logan, and Greyson to personally take care of the biggest contracts. It’s good business. I get it.”

June put her fork down and drank from her glass, “He has the most loyal clients. You boys and Cadie are why they stay.”

“I’m pretty sure they stay so they can get a hand on your cinnamon rolls at client meetings.”

“Oh, Alex.” Aunt June blushed. We talked a bit more while June gave me the rundown on the neighborhood gossip. I listened to every detail as I filled my belly with food that tasted just like my mother’s home cooking.

“I’ll pack up the leftovers for you.” She busied herself looking for a container. I gathered the dishes from the table, rinsed them, and slid the plates into the dishwasher.

She swatted at my hands. “Stop doing that. I’ll clean up.”

“Too late. Already done.” I pushed the dishwasher door closed. Aunt June looked at me sideways. I circled my arms around her in a giant hug.

With one hand still holding the container, she squeezed me back. “I can clean up myself. It makes me happy to feed you.” Her words muffled against my chest. “You know, it’s about time you settle down a bit. Get some home cooking on a regular basis.”

“Any more home cooking than what you give me is going to have me living at the gym.” I released her and rubbed the hard-earned abs beneath my shirt.

June scowled. “I never get to meet any of the lovely ladies you date. What about Jill? She was a sweet girl.”

I picked up the condiments from the table and walked toward the refrigerator. “Jill was nice, but we only dated a short time. It’s too weird dating Cadie’s best friend.” I closed the refrigerator door. “When I find someone special who can keep up with my lifestyle, you’ll be the first to know. I promise.”

June followed me to the door. “I thought I worried a lot when you boys deployed. Now that Cadie is running the Freedom Foundation, I’ve added two nightly tums to my bedtime routine.”

I laughed, “Is that why you took the job as our receptionist? To keep a close eye on us?”

June handed me the container of food. “As a matter of fact, yes. To keep an eye on you and to make sure you eat. Now that Cadie is there, I’ll never leave. That, and I don’t think I’ve ever been able to say no to John.”

“John is by far the most persuasive man I know.” Whether you loved or hated Big John, it was never fun to tell him no. “How is Bopper doing? I know it was taking him a long time to adjust from his abusive owners.”

“He’s doing great. He barks when people approach the property and sleeps at the foot of the bed. I had a hard time sleeping after Cadie was abducted. Now, I just cuddle him and we calm each other down. He’s very protective and doesn’t like strangers.” Bopper wiggled to June for love and then circled back to me for another butt rub before I left.

I rubbed his back. “That’s exactly what we wanted for you. Now that we’re actively running rescue missions, we’re bound to piss people off. None of these sadistic assholes want their stolen women freed from under their noses.”

“Bopper is perfect.” June turned to go back to the kitchen. “Maybe I should send you home with some pie.”

“No, no. This is enough. I’ll fix the fence where Bopper keeps chewing when I come for dinner next week.” I pointed a finger at Bopper as I grabbed my keys from the hook. “And you quit chewing boards.”

Bopper continued to wag his body, panting heavily with constant excitement. I gave him one more ear scratch and kissed Aunt June on the cheek.

“I’ll see you at OPS tomorrow.”

“Have a safe night. Tell the boys I said hello.” She smiled and closed the door.

Sliding into the driver’s seat of my Corvette, I glanced in the mirror, rolled the sleeves of my button-up and gave the front a tight pull to smooth out a few wrinkles. A decent five o’clock shadow had me feeling scruffy, but I didn’t care. I ran

my fingers through my dark hair and started my car. The team was meeting at O'Sullivan's around 10 PM for a drink. I could make it from the North Valley in about thirty minutes if I didn't go home to change.

O'Sullivan's was loud and there wasn't an open seat at the bar. The bartenders hurried back and forth, serving drinks to an endlessly thirsty crowd. Two women at the end of the bar, one blonde and one brunette, smiled at me from behind their cosmos.

Greyson was easy to spot. He wore his blond hair slicked back in a Mohawk and Japanese-styled coy fish made up most of the tattoo sleeve on his right arm. His ice-blue eyes were practically bright enough to see from across the room. Most days he wore black-framed glasses, giving him a distinct look as the toughest nerd around. Logan sat next to him in a flannel and jeans pulling off the rugged look with his dark messy hair, blue eyes, and generally unapproachable personality. A popular guy with women back in the day, now he only had eyes for my sister.

Greyson came from old money but hated his family business. As a kid, he was skinny, smart, and wore glasses. Apparently, even rich people get picked on and Greyson had it hard in private school as an awkward teenager. A real onslaught of old school jock-style hazing. Now he was twice the size he was at sixteen, tattooed, and one of the best hand-to-hand fighters I knew. There was no other man in the world that hated bullies as much as Greyson. He knew how to fight enemies face to face and where it hurt most, hacking bank accounts, private information, and family secrets. Nothing was safe from him. Once a target was in his sights, they were obliterated. He was calm, precise, and a damn IT genius.

We went from fighting terrorists overseas to fighting human trafficking on our home turf. Not for money or notoriety, but because we loved hunting evil and there was plenty of it to go around. Hell, Greyson even loved bodyguard

work. He was one of the OPS Team Leaders, but more than that, he was family.

I settled into my chair at the table. After finishing three weeks of back-to-back contracts, I was looking forward to time with the OPS family over shots of whiskey. Already, we had caught the attention of more than just the two ladies with cosmos. O'Sullivan's tables weren't small, but when Greyson, Logan, and I sat, the furniture shrank compared to our colossal frames. The runt in our pack was 6'1", making us the biggest men in almost any room we walked into.

Greyson motioned for a waitress to take our order. "Tell me why we're not at the Tavern again?" he grunted as the waitress shimmied through the crowd in our direction.

"Alex pissed Liv off. It doesn't matter how many bail jumpers Devin cuffs and drags through the doors, Liv runs the show. You gotta make things right with her." Logan growled.

Greyson raised his eyebrows. "The Tavern is more than a bar, it's a second home. Liv loves you, she won't be mad long, but you should probably ignore her girls."

I put my hands in the air. "I try to. Her waitresses are persistent and I'm single. They want to hear the deployment stories and Devin has our pictures from Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq hanging next to the bar and in his office. I'm honest about my intentions, every woman I date knows I'm not interested in a relationship. It's practically the first thing I say. I can't help that they get jealous." I shrugged and Greyson looked to the ceiling shaking his head. "I'll behave. I promi ..." I trailed off.

Greyson said something, but I barely heard him. The smell of sweet apples caught my attention as a slender, dark-haired beauty walked by on her way to the bar. Hips swaying beneath a cascade of jet-black hair. My eyes swallowed her up. *That is a woman men go to war over.*

Greyson kicked me under the table. "What?"

"Just pick one and leave it at that." He repeated.

“So I can be miserable like this fool?” I elbowed Logan and shook my head in mocking disapproval.

Logan adjusted in the chair. “You like that Cadie and I are together. No need to lie about it.”

I never missed a chance to give Logan a hard time, but he was right. I was happy to see my sister with him. John and I had spent years trying to convince Cadie to work for OPS. But it wasn't until she had her own run-in with a ruthless cartel that she decided to take up the family fight. As luck would have it, Logan was the key to bringing her home. We had already bled for each other on the battlefield. There was no other man I trusted more than him with my sister's heart. Since Logan and Cadie had moved in together, she wore a kind of happiness I had never seen on her before. Logan treated her like a queen, and John and I wholeheartedly approved.

“That's true. She's done a great job organizing our rescue missions. Not to mention she keeps OPS fully booked.” I wiped a pretend tear from my eyes. “I'm so proud.”

Greyson nodded in agreement. “Since Cadie joined the team, local agencies have recognized the Freedom Foundation three times for our fight against global human trafficking. It's a small dent in the forty million people who go missing worldwide, but it's a fight worth fighting. I'm here for it.”

“I'm proud of our work, and crazy about your Cadie, but done with business talk.” Logan looked over his shoulder. “Where's the damn waitress?”

Greyson straightened his glasses and scanned the bar. “I see her over there now.” He gestured again to her as she finished her orders at a table of loud college kids. The waitress nodded and raised a finger to signal she was coming.

“If we were at the Tavern, we would be on round two,” Greyson murmured under his breath.

A bubbly blonde, about twenty-five, wearing daisy dukes, furry boots, and a tight blue V-neck shirt bounced over with her tray. “What can I get you guys?”

Her eyes narrowed as she moved them from chest to chest at the table. At the Tavern we blended in with our fellow Marines. Here, we stuck out like hulks in a room full of children.

The bubbly waitress scrunched her nose. “You guys cops?”

“No, ma’am. We’re Hollywood stuntmen.” Quick to the draw with a lie, I flashed a big bad wolf smile. We hated talking about bodyguard work in public, plus most of it was confidential, anyway. “Except for him.” I pointed at Logan, “He’s a lumberjack. And he hasn’t showered today, so there’s that.”

“I’m not a fucking lumberjack. I’m dressed comfortably.” Logan growled.

The waitress touched my arm, running a finger across my tattooed forearm to my rolled cuff. “Oh, wow. I love your tattoos.”

I sat perfectly still, watching her finger follow the ink.

She pulled her hand back, noticing the others watching her wandering finger. The flirty waitress cleared her throat, “Uh hum. Sorry, what can I get you?” She wiggled her hips a bit and smiled. Logan laughed under his breath and Greyson arched an eyebrow in disbelief.

“We’ll take three double Jameson on the rocks,” I looked at her name tag, “Molly. Thank you.”

“Sure thing, Sugar.” She bumped my chair with her hip, smiling over her shoulder as she walked away.

Greyson sat back in his chair and laughed. “Every fucking time.”

“Easy, brother.” I put my hands over my chest. “This is not my fault. It’s just a thing.”

Logan leaned forward on his elbows with his fingers interlocked. “Let’s have a little fun with Prince Charming.”

“What do you have in mind?” Greyson’s interest had peaked.

“Whatever you’re about to say—no.” I folded my arms across my chest.

Logan scanned the bar. “Choose any girl. I won’t even pick this time. Even the two giddy ones over there.” He pointed at two pretty ladies laughing over cosmopolitans at the corner of the bar. “I bet drinks for the night that you can’t get a girl’s phone number in less than fifteen minutes.”

A large half-circle bar took up the center of the room with several tables in the surrounding restaurant area. About twenty feet from us, leaning against the bar, was the stunner who took my breath away earlier. She wore a black pencil skirt, and stilettos and rested against the bar on her elbow. She wasn’t smiling, though—usually an immediate turnoff. But hell, this woman ... she was breathtaking.

“If you’re up for a challenge, you could try the brunette with the ‘fuck off’ face. She looks like a real ball buster.” Logan nodded towards the bar.

Logan and Greyson continued to talk, but my attention was now on a man, maybe early forties and wearing a cowboy hat. He had left his friends and staggered over to talk to the dark-haired beauty. She shook her head no to whatever he said and twirled a piece of her dark hair around her dainty finger. He called the bartender over and attempted to order her a drink. Again, she shook her head no.

Logan kicked me under the table. “I said, ‘or maybe you’re too old’?” He followed my line of sight to the beauty. “Dude. I was kidding. No one is getting that woman’s phone number. Talk to the happy ones in the corner. It’s only fun if you have a chance at actually winning the bet.”

Greyson squinted at the beauty. “Do the giggly ones. You’re lucky—not that lucky.”

“Uh-huh.” I tapped my finger on the table, unable to concentrate on anything but the mesmerizing beauty at the bar.

ALEX

Fuck it. Any excuse to walk in her direction seemed like a good one. “I’ll do this, but only to shut the two of you up.” I stood and pushed my chair in. The women giggled as I walked toward the bar.

I stopped midway between the black-haired beauty and the two ladies.

The intrusive cowboy had raised his voice at the beauty, catching my attention. “I just want to buy you a drink, pretty lady. Be grateful and say, ‘Yes’.”

Instinctively, I veered in their direction, stopping between the beauty and the cowboy. Facing her, I interrupted, “Hi, sorry I’m late. Traffic was terrible.” I pulled my credit card out and waved to the bartender. He nodded in my direction. The man stepped backward, making room for my abrupt arrival.

Speechless, the cowboy’s blotchy face reddened with embarrassment. I stood nearly three inches taller than his stocky frame, effectively becoming a human blockade.

I faced the cowboy, “I’m sorry, we haven’t met. Are you joining us for a drink?”

“Uh, no. No, I’m not. She didn’t tell me she was waiting for someone.”

“I don’t have to tell you anything. Fuck off.” She never looked up from her drink.

Stunned at her sharp tongue, I looked away and tried to hide my amusement. The cowboy stumbled backward again,

mumbling profanity, and went back to his friends at the table.

Before I introduced myself, the bartender placed two napkins in front of us. “What can I get for you?”

Fragments of tension still lingered in the air. “Jameson on the rocks, please.” The beauty didn’t smile at me. “I’m not sure if the lady would like another.”

“Anything for you, Ma’am?”

“Mandarin vodka soda, with a cherry and an orange slice, please.”

The bartender nodded and left. The tension shifted to an awkward silence. She sat statuesque as we watched the bartender make our drinks, surely wondering if she had moved from one asshole to another. A moment later he pushed our order to us.

“Open a tab, please.” He tapped my credit card on the bar and took it to the register.

I faced the beauty, catching her unapologetic look from the floor to my shoulders. Her pearly teeth gleamed as she pulled her cherry-red lower lip in, nipping it. Her eyes casually met mine, and her perfect lips parted in a sliver of a smile.

“Who are you?” She practically purred when she spoke.

I put my hand out in a gentlemanly gesture. “I’m Alex.”

“Mia,” she replied, gripping my hand with an unexpected firmness. I got the feeling this beauty was full of surprises.

“Thank you for the drink. You’re much better company.”

“He was clearly being disrespectful. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“I can handle myself,” Mia grinned. *Not quite a smile.*

“It doesn’t mean you have to.”

Mia tapped her finger on the bar. “Ahhh, a regular Captain-Save-A-Hoe.”

I laughed. “I was thinking more around the lines of chivalry not being dead.”

Mia picked up her glass. “Here’s to the dying art of chivalry.”

“I’ll drink to that, ma’am.” Our glasses chimed as we bumped them together. I couldn’t stop staring at her. “If we’re being honest, I’m fairly certain I saved that man from you, not the other way around.”

“Hmm ... charming and perceptive.” Mia took another sip, her eyes slowly moving over my chest before settling back in my gaze. “I still appreciate you shooin’ him off.”

A moment of silence fell between us. Caught in her gaze, she picked the cherry from her drink and slowly sucked the fruit from the stem. She held the firm fruit between her front teeth before biting it in half. Then she chewed it purposefully, slowly, and swallowed it—watching me, watching her.

I cleared my throat. “That was one lucky cherry.” I swallowed a gulp of whiskey and reminded myself to breathe. “You can’t be from around here?”

“No. This is my first time in Reno.”

“Do you need a guide?” I leaned into the bar.

“Why? Would you like to show me the town?” She sucked the vodka through her straw. Somehow, I found myself jealous of a piece of plastic.

I pointed at my chest. “Me? Oh, no. But I think the cowboy would take you around.” I teased.

“Ahh, you have jokes, a big smile, and ...” Mia squeezed my bicep through my shirt, “and big muscles ...”

I blushed. I never blush. And, I realized the blood wasn’t just flowing to my face. My glass tumbler hit the bar with a thud as I tried to clear my throat and regain my composure. “You can’t just go around squeezing a man’s muscles, Princess.”

Mia put her arms up. “So sorry.”

“No problem, ma’am. Just warn me next time.” I chuckled.

The conversation paused briefly and I couldn't have cared less. She was fun.

Mia put her glass down. "Are you the kind of guy who thinks he can get everything he wants with his pretty smile and big muscles?"

"I don't get everything I want."

"Like what? What is on Alex's most wanted list?" Her eyebrows raised in wonder.

"For starters, I'd like to know what you look like when you laugh. Do those cherry-biting lips ever smile wildly?"

"I don't have a lot to smile about right now." Sadness washed over her face before she fake-smiled at me.

"Let's change that."

Caught up in my conversation with Mia, I completely forgot about the bet. I saw Logan raise his hand. Then he pointed at his watch and counted down one finger at a time. Five, four, three, two, and one. Mia turned around, but she caught only the explosion of hurrahs and laughter as I lost the bet.

"What was that about?" She raised her eyebrows.

"There was a bet ..."

Mia folded her arms over her chest. "You made a bet on me? What are you, a middle-aged frat boy?"

I straightened up. "No ... no, that's not what I meant. It wasn't about you. It was really about them." I nodded at the ladies, and they quickly looked away. "And what is 'middle aged' supposed to mean?"

She saw the girls from the corner of the bar. "Were you just making your way around the bar?"

The bartender, with impeccable timing, leaned across the bar. "Your table said to put the rest of the drinks on your tab."

"Yes, that's fine."

Mia rolled her eyes. “I’m not interested in being part of your bet.”

I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. “I can see how this looks bad. But I wasn’t talking to you because of a bet.”

“You were going to talk to them because of a wager?” She nodded toward the two ladies.

I raised a finger. “Yes. But we’re getting away from the point. I’m really only interested in your smile.” I tried to bring her back with a spark of charm and humor.

“Right.” she said, thoroughly unamused, “The fact that you guys are making bets about any women at this bar is childish. And maybe I’m having a bad day, but I’m not into it.”

As if on cue, as a walking cock blocker, the waitress from our table shimmied by the bar and winked at me. Mia shook her head with disapproval.

“I don’t know why she did that.” But I had a suspicion. *I cannot believe I’m explaining myself to this woman.* “The bet was harmless, and you distracted me from doing it, anyway. Unfortunately, you’re hot-headed, and a little stuck on yourself.” I motioned to the bartender. “Put her drinks on my tab as well.” I emptied my glass and set it on the bar. The bartender quickly poured me a new one. “I’ll be back at the table with the rest of my ‘frat’ boys.” Grabbing my drink from the bar, I took a step and turned around. “For the record, a little childish fun can fix any bad day.”

The short walk to my table had me feeling like she had kicked me in the balls.

A roar of laughter welcomed me back.

“Bravo,” Logan said between claps. “Why would you pick the one girl with a grade ‘A’ stone-cold resting bitch face? I almost feel bad sending the waitress to wink at you.”

I twisted my lips and bobbed my head. “I knew that had to be you.”

“I don’t think anyone saw you crashing and burning quite that gloriously. She even gave you a cold shoulder at the end. What did you say? You know what? Never mind. Thank you for that little piece of entertainment.” Greyson held his glass up in salute.

“Enough,” I said, eager to put the last twenty minutes behind me.

Logan couldn’t wipe the huge, annoying smile from his face. “Did you tell her you’re a bodyguard, but you also moonlight as a vigilante saving missing women?”

“You know I never talk about work.” I swallowed a gulp of ice water from a glass on the table, hoping to wash the unfamiliar taste of rejection from my mouth.

“I know, I know. Could’ve been your ace in the hole.” Logan teased.

Greyson elbowed Logan. “He should have shown her his war scars.”

Logan played along. “Which one? The bullet hole or the shrapnel?”

“Neither. Are you done?” I interlocked my fingers behind my head and sighed.

“Sure thing.” Logan raised his glass. “After you buy us one more round.” Logan whistled with two fingers in his mouth, and the overly friendly waitress smiled and waved from across the bar.

We spent the next hour drinking and laughing. The three of us had been working through long contracts and had some catching up to do. We laughed at Greyson’s awkward attempt at flirting. Logan and I fought over who saved whose ass in battle. I promised to make amends with Liv so she would allow us back at the Tavern. She couldn’t stay mad at me for very long anyway—we were like family.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Mia stand up, draping her coat over her arm. Her perfectly shaped ass wrapped tightly in that black pencil skirt was hypnotic. She left money on the bar and walked towards the side door. The

beat of a drum sounded off in my head as she sauntered across the room. *Holy hell.*

She left through the side door leading to the alley. As soon as the door closed, the cowboy and his friends left their table. Two guys went out the front and the cowboy left through the side door.

“I’ll be right back,” I mumbled.

“Wait, grab the waitress for another round.” We could drink any man under the table and Logan was living proof. The man could drink whiskey like water. The guys carried on the conversation, assuming I was just ordering shots. I found the waitress at the cash register and asked her for another round. Then I went to the side exit to see if the cowboy was up to no good.

I pushed open the door. The wall of the building formed an alley with the next building over. To the right, a dumpster sat close to the wall. The faint sound of a car driving by echoed lightly between the brick walls.

A guy stood at each end of the alley, facing the street. They never saw me walk out of the bar. The unmistakable sound of a muffled cry and a struggle echoed off the walls of the buildings. I rushed to the other side of the dumpster. The cowboy had his hand over Mia’s mouth, pinning her to the wall. “You won’t disrespect me again, will you, bitch?”

Mia couldn’t have answered if she wanted to. Grabbing him by the back of the collar, I pulled him off her and swept his legs. His body slammed into the concrete with a hard thud and his head bounced back, almost knocking him out. She put her hands to her chest and gasped desperately for air.

“You like to beat up on women?” I held him to the ground by the throat, pulled my fist back, and struck him in the face twice. His nose bled heavily, and he cried out for help. Hearing the commotion, his friends turned around. I hit him again in the jaw, knocking him out. The two other guys approached.

I stood above the unconscious cowboy, ready for his buddies. Mia took two steps backwards and pressed her back against the wall. The taller guy pulled a knife out and lunged wild and reckless at me. I pivoted out of the way, catching his knife-holding hand in mine. Keeping his wrist locked tightly, I turned and stripped the knife from his grip while breaking his wrist. The loud crack made even me cringe. He would regret this life choice until the day he died. The guy doubled over, holding his severely injured hand.

I turned to the shorter guy, now having second thoughts about attacking me. “Take your friend and get the fuck out of here. If I see you again, you won’t be able to walk away. Do you understand?”

The cowboy rolled to his side, probably struggling to remember the last five minutes. Before I knew what was happening, Mia kicked the cowboy hard in the ribs. “Don’t. Ever. Touch me. Again.” With every word, she kicked him again, balancing on her heels.

“Mia,” I whispered, “It’s okay. He’s fucked up.”

His two buddies rushed to help him up before Mia unleashed another round of kicks. The one with the broken wrist whined in pain as held onto his friend with his good arm. I watched as they hurried out of the alley.

“Are you okay?” I did my best to hide my smile. She kicked the shit out of that cowboy. This woman was all fire.

With her fists clenched by her side, Mia heaved breaths of air. She whipped her head around. For a moment, I thought I might be next in line for a beating.

“Easy killer.” I put a hand out and picked her jacket up from the ground with the other. “You weren’t kidding about having a bad day.”

Mia smoothed out her skirt as she mumbled, “You have no fucking clue.” She rubbed the back of her head. “Ow, this hurts.”

“Did he hit you in the head? Let me take a look.”

“I’m fine. Really. I don’t think it’s bleeding.”

“Just let me look. You could have a concussion.” I waved her forward. “Come on. I won’t bite. I just want to make sure you’re okay. Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“No, I called for a car earlier. It should be here any minute. I’m really okay.” She winced in pain as she held the back of her head.

“I’m sensing some serious trust issues here.” I shook the debris off her coat. “Here. It’s freezing. At least put this back on.” I held it open, trying to coax her into it like a wild animal into a cage.

She looked at me sideways and slowly slipped the jacket on.

“There. That’s better.” I brushed her shoulders off and smiled at her. “Now, can I please look at your head before you leave? It will make me feel better.”

“Fine.” She stepped forward and tilted her head down. I wasn’t prepared for the electricity between us when she came close. Being next to this woman made the blood rush to all the wrong places. I did my best to ignore it, moved her hair, and felt her head gently.

“You have a pretty big knot there, but it’s not bleeding.”

“I told you, I’m fine. I can take care of myself.”

“Clearly,” I mumbled.

“What did you say?” She snapped.

“I’m only trying to help and you’re ...” I struggled to find the right word.

“A bitch?”

“No! That’s not what I was going to say.” *This woman is crazy.*

“I’ve had a really rotten day and since I met you, it’s steadily declined.” She looked on the ground for her purse. Found it and looped it onto her shoulder. A car pulled up at the end of the alley and she waved.

“Are you always this unstable, or is it from the head injury?” I put a hand in my pocket and ran the other through my hair. This woman was giving me a headache.

Mia pointed a finger at me. “That guy was pissed because you embarrassed him. I didn’t ask to be saved by you, and I don’t need your help.”

“You are unfucking real.” I shook my head.

“Oh, I’m real. I’m really leaving. Goodbye.” She turned around and waved at the driver as she walked toward the main street.

I watched her leave, speechless. No witty comeback—nothing. Just confused and listening to the sound of her heels clinking and echoing between the two buildings. The driver got out and opened her door. Mia never looked back.

The car pulled away, leaving me in a lingering cloud of her addictive scent. I took a deep breath and looked down at my hard-on. “Damn it.” I said out loud. Why do I feel like she kicked me in the balls again? I mumbled a variety of cuss words and rearranged my package. *That’s a fucking first.*

The bar door swung open. Logan looked left and right. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“I needed some air.”

“Get your ass back in here. We need one more round before we go.”

“Right.” Logan slapped me on the back as we returned to the bar. It would take more than one drink to get my head straight.

I could go my whole life without ever seeing that chick again.

MIA

A TERRIBLE PLAN

Staring at the hotel room's ceiling, I blinked, remembering the pieces of last night. Alex. He was arrogant, charismatic, and had these twinkling deep blue eyes that promised only trouble. My temper had got the best of me. I'd never tell him but pummeling that asshole in the alley was the truest gesture of chivalry I'd ever seen. It was hot. He was hot. And he made my head hurt, more than it already did. The entire night was a gigantic headache I was happy to put behind me.

A hot shower washed the lingering haze from my brain. Before I went to bed, I gave my skirt a quick sink wash. I patted it. *Dry enough*. I chose a collared rose blouse and black heels. After packing up, I placed my bag near the door. It could be days before I made it home. Everything depended on Orion Protection Services taking my case. I pulled my hair into a bun and applied a touch of mascara and lipstick.

The light on my phone signaled a text.

Unknown: I know where Tasha is.

Me: Who is this?

Unknown: A friend. Just trying to help.

Come to the Wild Rose. Ask to dance here.

I'll find you. I can't say anything else.

What the hell was Tasha doing at a strip club? I texted back several times, hoping for more information—nothing. I called—voice mailbox not set up. I had no choice. I would

have to go to the Wild Rose to find out what they knew about Tasha. It wasn't much, but it was a something. First, I needed to keep my appointment. I e-mailed Cadie a screenshot of the new information before leaving the hotel.

Arriving a few minutes early, I found the parking lot surprisingly full. The name "Orion Protection Service" hung in the center of the two-story building. Big white letters spelled out the word "Orion" with the "O" in the shape of a rifle scope. Large rectangle windows made up the corner and first level of the building, most of which seemed to be a training facility or gym. I took a deep breath and pushed the heavy glass door open.

The smell of blueberry muffins filled my lungs upon entering the reception area. A sweet older lady with curly silver hair that was pinned up, greeted me with a warm smile. She wore a thick pearl necklace, long flowing skirt, and a lacey blouse.

"Hello, dear! You must be Ms. Denali!"

"I am. Please, call me Mia." She walked around the desk and stretched out her hand, adorned with a matching pearl bracelet. I clasped it, and she covered our interlocked palms with her other hand. My tension eased instantly from her sweet greeting.

Letting go, she asked, "Would you like a cup of coffee or water? I have muffins and fruit, as well."

"Coffee would be great. Thank you."

"Cream and sugar?"

"No, Ma'am. Just black."

"Oh, call me June, darling." June hurried over to the coffee and poured a cup for me. "I'll take you back to the conference room to meet Cadie."

"Thank you," I said, as June carried the coffee and guided me down the hallway. We passed a large training room filled with weights and various workout equipment.

June caught me staring at the back of a man, and woman as they sparred. “That’s where the OPS team trains.” She stopped and lightly gripped my elbow to get my attention. “Dear, these are the most highly qualified bodyguards you can find. My nephews started this business. They are real-life war heroes.”

I smiled at how she bragged, “You must be proud.”

“Oh, I am.” Her eyes brightened. “Here they come now.”

I stood, staring with my mouth open in shock. The cocky charmer, who had smashed in the face of my attacker just hours earlier, walked through the door. Another man I recognized from last night followed close behind.

“Morning, Aunt June!” Alex picked an apple from the basket on June’s desk and bit into it as he continued down the hall. His eyes met mine and his smile grew in size with every step.

“You can meet them for yourself. This is my nephew, Alex.” June said, oblivious to my horror.

Alex stopped mere inches from us. He towered over me, took another bite from his apple, chewed, and swallowed. “Well, hello.” His larger-than-life blond companion with the black-framed glasses chuckled briefly as he clearly realized I was the woman from last night. He patted Alex on the shoulder, grinning like a big kid as he walked by.

June introduced me. “Alex, this is Mia Denali. She has a case for the Freedom Foundation this morning.”

I inhaled and straightened up. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said, refusing to let my shock show.

“The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Denali.”

Alex wore jeans and a crisp white button-up shirt with thin blue pinstripes. The top two buttons of his shirt were open, revealing a bit of dark chest hair. I salivated a little and hated myself for it.

“I look forward to hearing about your case. I hope we can help.” He kissed June on the cheek as she brushed a bit of invisible lint off his shoulder like a doting aunt. I forced a half

smile as he basked in my awkwardness, taking another bite of his apple before continuing down the hallway.

June put a reassuring hand on my back and gently pushed me forward. “Don’t be afraid, dear. They’re all very nice. The conference room is on the left. That’s Cadie with Logan at the punching bag.”

The training facility was impressive. Several groups of men trained with weights and fight gear. In the back, Cadie, a tall blonde with defined arms, took short, quick jabs while her training partner held the bag. I recognized her partner from the previous night. Cadie saw us through the large rectangle window and waved. Then she peeled the Velcro from her gloves and wiped the sweat off her face with a towel. She smiled at me as she walked towards the door.

Cadie’s training partner, Logan, held the door while she walked through, still flushed from her workout. “Sorry about the sweat, but I had to schedule the meeting during our training session. It’s good to meet you. I wish it were under different circumstances.”

Logan sported a 5 o’clock shadow and deep blue eyes. He wrapped an arm around Cadie’s sweaty shoulder. “Remember what I told you about last night? The bet and the girl who lit up Alex?”

Cadie looked up at who I assumed, now, was her boyfriend. “What about it?”

He smirked. “This is her.”

Immediately, I attempted damage control. “It’s possible that I did not make the best impression.” Treading delicately, I continued, “I’ve been a mess since my sister’s disappearance.” I swallowed, grimacing at what Alex may have told his friends.

“Oh!” Cadie threw her hands up in exasperation. “That’s completely my fault! I gave Mia recommendations on where to stay and eat.” She turned her attention back to me. “O’Sullivan’s is the best bar outside of the Tavern. Everyone in town goes there.”

Logan was a bear of a man. His kind disposition contradicted his rough, mountain-man appearance. He put his arm out and a tattoo peaked from beneath his shirt. “I’m Logan.”

Though his hand dwarfed mine, I shook it firmly and with confidence. “Nice to meet you.”

“And there’s no need to apologize. We thoroughly enjoyed watching Alex come back with his tail between his legs.”

Cadie smiled despite my uneasiness, “It’s actually hilarious. Where were you when I was a kid and all of my friends wanted to sleep with my brother?” Cadie squished her nose. “So gross.”

I faked a chuckle. “Right?”

Logan shrugged. “Eh, don’t worry about it. Alex will get over it. Although I’m sure Cadie is regretting not going out for drinks last night.”

Cadie covered her mouth and whispered, “I’m a bit of a workaholic.” June handed her a stack of files. Cadie thanked her and flipped through them quickly. “Looks like I have everything I need. Shall we go in?”

I forced a smile and trailed behind Cadie and Logan. The team took seats at a large rectangular table in the center of the room. The OPS men sat on each side with one seated at the head of the table. My eyes widened at the biggest, toughest-looking men I had ever seen up close. They hadn’t seemed quite so intimidating from my seat at the bar. Cadie pointed at a seat next to hers. I took my place and folded my hands on my lap.

Skimming the room, I recognized the other man from O’Sullivan’s. The one with blond hair and dark glasses grabbed a pitcher from the center of the table, poured himself a glass of water, and opened a laptop he pulled from a backpack on the floor. His tattoos were more colorful than the other OPS men. The coy fish seemed to glide gently over the ripples in his muscular arms. His glasses softened his look,

hinting there was more to him than just toughness. “I’m Greyson. Nice to meet you, Ma’am.”

I shook his hand from across the table, noticing the intricate details of his traditional Japanese ink.

“And you know Alex,” I shifted uncomfortably. His dark hair and bright eyes brought back a wave of tingles from my neck to my panties.

Alex smiled as if he knew everything in the whole damn world. “Ma’am.”

“Please,” I addressed everyone, “Call me Mia.”

A burly man with a shaved head and thick forearms sat at the head of the table. Clearly the man in charge, he was the only unfamiliar face. “I’m John. I run Orion Protection Services. These are my team leads. These men, and Cadie, are the finest in the industry. We are the absolute best at finding missing people. We’d like to hear about your sister and see how we can help you.”

I shook his calloused hand, hoping desperately I hadn’t ruined every chance of the Foundation taking my case. “Thank you. I truly appreciate your time.”

Smoothing my skirt behind me, I sat back in the chair. While John examined the files and opened his laptop, I whispered to Cadie, “This one is your brother?” I motioned at Alex. “What about the others?”

“Alex and John are my older brothers; Logan is my boyfriend and Greyson is our family by choice. They served together in the Marine Corps. Now we all operate Orion Protection Services, helping locate missing persons through our Freedom Foundation. We use donated money, take cases that others won’t, and use our unique skill set to bring home as many missing people as we can.”

Medals, awards, and pictures decorated the surrounding walls. Shadow boxes and framed newspaper clippings displayed snippets of military service from some of the most notorious places in recent history. How they smiled, dressed in full gear in the middle of the Arabian Desert was beyond

me. Across the room hung a family picture. Cadie might have been nine years old. Her brothers were twice their size now.

John's booming voice snapped me back to reality, "Alright gentlemen," he cleared his throat, "and ladies," he nodded towards us, "Cadie has a case she thinks we should take."

Cadie addressed John, "Let me preface this by saying that the guys coincidentally met Mia when they were out last night."

Heat rushed to my face, surely changing it to a deep shade of red.

"Not guys, just Alex." Greyson clarified, never looking up from his computer.

"Seriously?" John asked.

"No, no, no." Alex defended. "It was a completely innocent conversation."

Greyson pretended his hand was a plane, flying it through the air and into the table with a make-believe crash landing, explosion, and matching sound effects.

Alex shook his head at Greyson's pantomime. "You're a dick."

Hoping to help, I offered. I didn't know who he was, or the others at the table. I looked directly at Alex. "My apologies if I offended you."

"No need to apologize. It was my pleasure to entertain you."

Logan laughed and rubbed Alex's back in condolence. "You're like a dancing monkey."

Alex pushed his hand off, playing along, "Get off me."

"Please, can we continue now?" John seemed unamused by their antics.

All laughter stopped, and the guys straightened up.

Cadie continued, "Mia's sister has been missing for almost a week. It seems she disappeared after a trip to Las Vegas. All

the details are in the brief I passed around.”

“Wild Rose. Sound familiar, Greyson?” Alex asked.

“Cadie forwarded me information regarding the Wild Rose before the meeting. I have some interesting information to add to this situation when we’re finished hearing Mia’s case. Luka Koltsov runs that club with his son Dimitri.”

“Dimitri!” I blurted out. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy. “That’s the name. I found in her journal. She said she was going to Vegas, and that Dimitri promised her answers.”

“Answers to what?” John asked. “What other information was in her journal?”

“Only that she was going with Dimitri and that he promised her answers.” I considered telling them about the DNA test, but I panicked. If my father knew, he would surely cut Tasha off from her inheritance. Maybe it’s a forgery? There were too many unanswered questions to admit to anything.

Alex quietly mouthed something to Greyson. Greyson jotted quickly in his notes before speaking, “I’ve had a few run-ins with Luka’s thugs in Vegas. Dimitri is like his dad, but more of a hothead. It’s rumored they are involved in drugs and human trafficking through Moscow.”

The Russians again. What did it mean?

Alex leaned over the table to look at him. “I remember those run-ins. They definitely don’t like you.”

John rubbed his chin. “What about your parents? Have they called the police?”

“My mother ran out on us when we were kids. Our father is Tony Chen.”

Alex tilted his face in confusion. “As in the guy running for District Attorney in San Diego? We know him, right?”

Logan nodded. “Yeah. His face was plastered everywhere in San Diego when we went down to play at Ocean Beach a few weeks ago. I wouldn’t have placed him as your pops, though.”

“I get that a lot. I resemble my mother. My father is half-Chinese my mother is Italian. I took my mother’s maiden name when I left home. My father and I don’t see eye to eye. He won’t help me look for Tasha until after the primary elections. He considers her a burden.”

“Why does he consider her a burden? And why wait until after the election?” Alex asked.

“He told me she left with friends for Vegas. However, she has completely disappeared, and that is highly uncharacteristic of my sister.”

John sat with perfect posture. “You don’t think your father would use his resources to locate your sister if he genuinely believed her to be in trouble?”

I sighed. “Just the opposite. My father is abusive, controlling, and manipulative. He expected Tasha and I to marry into families of his choosing. I left home to pursue my own goals, but Tasha stayed. She has refused to marry to increase the wealth of the family and therefore has nothing left to offer him. Once she lost her value to my father, he wanted nothing to do with her. He does not care about her or what happens to her but can’t afford any bad publicity associated with her disappearance, though he would adamantly deny that to the press.” I wanted to tell them about Tasha’s addiction issues. But who would go looking for a runaway drug addict? *No one.*

Cadie finished writing a note before speaking. “What’s your mother’s full name?”

“Giada Maria Denali. She went by Gia.”

Alex crossed his arms over his broad chest and settled in his chair. “I’m not trying to be an asshole, but what if she doesn’t want to be found?”

“My father is only thinking about his career. I know Tasha and I know she would never leave like this. She’s in trouble.”

John interjected, “The last time you spoke was a week ago?”

“Yes. And we usually talk or text every day.” Logan looked through a file Greyson passed around the table.

Greyson poured another glass of water from the pitcher in the center of the table. He stopped to mumble, “Dimitri is clearly trouble, but she seems to have gone willingly and she is an adult.”

“She’s walked away from her job and none of her friends have heard from her,” I persisted. “Someone in that club knows what happened to her.”

John squinted, wrinkling his forehead in thought. “Can you think of anyone who may have sent that message?”

“I can’t.” I took a deep breath before speaking. “But I’m willing to work at the Wild Rose to find Tasha. I’ll pretend to want to be a dancer there.”

Alex put the brief down, sat back in his chair, and shook his head. “No way. That’s a terrible idea. That could be Luka, hoping to lure you into the club to snag you both.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I don’t have a choice.”

Greyson peered from over the top of his glasses. “What do you do for a living?”

“I recently graduated from law school. I take the bar in three months.”

“And you’re comfortable pretending to be a stripper?” he pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose.

“I would do anything to find my sister.”

Logan shook his head at John. “This feels like a death mission. We would need at least a month to prep for something like this. Suicide isn’t a viable option. The Russian syndicate is ruthless.”

John sighed. “Mia, we don’t have a Russian connection to get us inside information. I’m not sure if we can help before the clock runs out. Every day our chances of finding her diminish. Do you understand that?”

“I do, but I have a plan. If your services can provide me with a form of discrete protection, I’ll go undercover as a stripper. Get into the club, find who sent the message, and get Tasha out.”

“That won’t work. You’d never be able to pull off being a stripper.” Alex scoffed.

“Do not underestimate me. I am one hundred percent capable of pulling this off. I might surprise you if you let go of your ego for a minute.”

Greyson’s eyes widened as he looked at the others and tried to hide a smile. I was sure women rarely spoke to Alex as I did—I was good with that.

Greyson studied a picture of Tasha. “She’s your only sister?”

“Yes.”

Greyson took a drink of water. “This is crazy.” He crunched a piece of ice, “I’m just not sure. There’s more risk than you understand. We usually have more information on the syndicate.”

“I understand exactly what’s at risk. Are you saying you can’t protect me?” I challenged, hoping to ignite his pride.

Greyson pushed his chair back on two legs. “That’s not what we’re saying. I don’t think it’s a terrible plan. In fact, you could get closer to Luka than us without being detected. But that’s only if a real person is trying to help. If this is a trap—you’re dead. Your plan is dangerous. We can’t protect you properly.”

John interlocked his hands on his bald head, displaying the eagle globe and anchor tattoo on his tan forearm. “Here’s the thing. I know Luka Koltsov is a bad dude. That’s not news. But this is the next level. We’ve never included a client as part of a mission in this capacity. It’s dicey at best.”

“I’m fully willing to take that chance. Tasha is everything to me.” Pausing, I made direct eye contact with John, “Our mother walked out on us when we were kids. Tasha is all I have. Can you understand doing anything to save your sister?”

A heavy silence blanketed the room.

“So, that’s me. I would do anything for her.”

Cadie put her hand on mine. “Do you think you could get in and pretend to be a stripper? I mean, you would have to actually dance or they’ll know.”

Inhaling deeply, I let my secret out. “There’s something I haven’t told you.” My mouth dried up like cotton balls. “I dance at a club in L.A.” I quickly added, “I wasn’t lying. I finished law school, but I paid for it by dancing. My father doesn’t know I dance. No one at the club knows my family. Tasha is the only person in my life who knows ... besides you all.”

John’s face straightened. “You’re living two separate lives. That was bound to cause you trouble at some point.”

“That’s a possibility,” I agreed, “but Tasha’s disappearance doesn’t seem to have anything to do with me. I had to find a job that could pay for school without leaving me buried in student debt. Taking my father’s money, even for law school, was not an option for me.”

John went on, “I find it odd you wouldn’t want to be associated with your dad, seeing as how you’ll be an attorney.”

“My father offered to pay for law school, but I refused his help. This strengthened my disassociation with his name, which has been my primary goal since starting my career.” The skeptical look on their faces told me I needed to explain further. “As a criminal defense attorney, my father cared more about winning the case than justice. As an Assistant District Attorney, he kept the same philosophy. Running for D.A. is not about protecting the city, it’s about putting himself in a position of power. Our mother left us when we were young. We spent the rest of our childhood at private schools and with nannies. I don’t remember a time I looked up to him. My heart belongs to non-profits and working with women’s shelters. He and I are not the same.

Greyson stopped typing and looked up from his laptop. “Just to clarify. You are a law student during the day and a

stripper at night?”

Alex choked on a mouthful of water. Cadie shot daggers at him.

“Technically, I finished law school,” I replied curtly.

Alex hit his chest with a fist. “Wrong hole,” he said between coughs. He cleared his throat. “There’s no other useful information?”

“Yes, that’s everything I know.” I lied. Revealing too much could end the search before it starts. In reality, we were the daughters of a bad guy. My father was a criminal. No one in their right mind would get involved with us.

Greyson turned to John. “I have an F.B.I. connection, Agent Kelly, and she’s been looking into missing girls at the Wild Rose. She believes Luka’s reach has chilled all of her attempts to investigate these cases. I planned to have a discussion with you about it later.” He turned the computer towards us and started clicking through pictures of young women. “This morning, I briefly mentioned the situation, leaving out details for Mia’s confidentiality. Agent Kelly cannot officially be part of the mission but has offered to share the information on the other missing women. We could potentially shut down an entire human trafficking ring while searching for Tasha.”

Logan rubbed his forehead. “What do you think, Cadie?”

Cadie put a hand over mine. “I think we take it, especially considering these other open cases.”

The room was quiet. All eyes were on John. “No case is ideal. We’ll do our best to find your sister, Mia.” He interlocked his fingers and straightened his posture. “We’re taking the case, gentlemen.”

“Yes, sir.” Logan, Greyson, and Alex spoke in unison.

There was a moment of silence while everyone digested John’s order. I sat there—afraid to move, wondering what they were thinking.

Alex folded his arms across his chest, his face void of emotion. John leaned forward on his elbows. “We have to act fast. Mia needs a home base and a bodyguard, possibly two.” John exhaled roughly and sat back in his chair. “And we need to discuss that this is probably a trap.”

“I’m willing to take that risk. I insist on going.”

Leaning back, Alex cracked his neck. “For the record, I think this mission is highly unpredictable. We don’t take missions that are traps.”

John rubbed his square jaw as he sighed. “It’s a tough one, I hear you. A lot is at risk here. But that’s never stopped us before, has it? Gentlemen—thoughts? Who wants it?”

Anyone but Alex. Please don’t say Alex. I slipped a finger around a strand of hair, pulled it from my bun, and whizzed it around my finger.

“A few Russians actually know my face,” Greyson admitted. “I helped Devin take a mid-level guy in for a bounty. We interrupted a poker game with some of the biggest Russian players on the West Coast. I know he’s got two key guys who do his light work. They’re big dudes with heavy Slovak accents and knuckle tattoos.” Greyson stopped talking as his eyes narrowed with thought, “They’d I.D. me for sure.”

“They had a name for you, didn’t they?” Logan looked up in thought.

“Mudak. It’s Russian for asshole. Bunch of fucking bullies. I hate bullies. Now they’re hardcore.” Greyson looked unamused.

“Yeah, Greyson should be on the outside for tech support. We’re going to need intel, spyware, lots of fancy shit. He’s needed in the background for this one. Alex should take it.”

Oh, God.

“Alex? In Vegas? At a strip club?” Cadie wrinkled her nose.

Logan arched an eyebrow. “You want me to go? I have back-to-back contracts.”

“He’s right.” Cadie twisted her lips as she thought, “We can’t run the foundation from the money Luis left forever. The cost of missions and the funds used to rehabilitate the girls and return them to their families is substantial. We can only take these cases if business stays consistent.”

Anyone but him.

A pause in conversation seemed to linger for minutes.

John broke the silence. “Alex, you’ve been quieter than usual about this one, but I need you to take it.”

Alex’s head snapped up, “I don’t think ...”

John cut him off. “You’re taking this. Partner with Greyson. We need Devin in, too. I doubt you’ll have to twist his arm.”

Alex clenched and unclenched his jaw. John turned his attention to Greyson. “Brief me on Agent Kelly’s info at 1400.”

“Yes, sir.” Greyson piled his files and papers into a neat stack, folded his computer, and slid everything into a black backpack beside his chair.

“I’ll add the number from the anonymous text to the brief going around the table.” Cadie interjected,

Greyson grabbed John’s files while he spoke to Alex. “I’ll do all the preliminary research and brief you and John as soon as I get the first round of intel.”

“Thanks, brother,” Alex said.

Cadie placed her hand over mine. “I’ll work the logistics. Give me an hour to make the arrangements for you two in Las Vegas. Can you leave tonight?”

“Yes. I have everything with me now.”

“Mia, where are you staying right now?” John asked.

“Nowhere. I wasn’t sure what would happen today. I planned on leaving for Vegas, whether or not I had help.”

Greyson shook his head. “That’s crazy.”

“I’m desperate, not crazy.”

Greyson pressed his lips together in a sympathetic grin. “I understand. Going alone would have been a terrible idea. Trust me.”

Cadie gently patted my back. I found her friendly pats oddly comforting. “You have help now. We’re in this together. We’ll bring you to the Tavern.”

“The Tavern?” I asked.

“It’s a clubhouse and bar run by our friends Devin and Liv. You’ll be our guest. I’ll call Devin and let him know.”

John shouted out as he stood up, “Don’t forget to grab one of June’s muffins on your way out.”

“I’m on it.” Greyson swung his backpack over his shoulder and eagerly walked toward the smell of delicious blueberries.

Cadie smiled softly. “Give me a few minutes and we’ll leave together.”

“Thank you,” I said to everyone. “Thank you so much.”

Logan smiled politely as he walked out of the conference room.

John paused as he walked by me. “You’re welcome. We take the Freedom Foundation cases seriously. Around 87,000 people go missing in the U.S. every year. Human trafficking is a global epidemic that we have promised to fight on U.S. soil until our last breath. Trust me when I tell you, we’ll do all that we can to bring Tasha home.” John followed Logan out of the room.

Fighting nausea at the very mention of human trafficking, I put my face in my hands. The door closed. In the rush of emotion, I hadn’t noticed Alex and I were alone in the room. With a quick breath, I composed myself. He stood, towering above me.

Refusing to feel small, I stood up.

“I understand you are the type of woman who likes to be in charge. But this is a dangerous mission. Real lives are at stake

and people I care about very much are risking everything to locate your sister. If you hesitate to follow my direction, then people I love could die. We are dealing with a syndicate that could not care less about our lives or American law. Is that clear?”

I narrowed my eyes, “Crystal.”

“Now that I’ve got that off my chest. Is there anything you would like to tell me?”

Everything about this guy scrambled my brain. “I appreciate your help and I won’t apologize for last night, but if I would have known ...” I fumbled for the right words.

“That I was the key to saving your sister? Wait ... there was a specific name you called me.” he rubbed his broad chin, looking at the ceiling, “Captain ... captain something. Remind me?”

Rolling my eyes briefly, I admitted, “I should not have called you ‘Captain-Save-A-Ho’. If I would have known who you were,” I motioned at him with my hand, “Well ... I would have behaved differently.”

“It’s okay.” He shrugged. “Now it all makes sense. It can be our secret.” Alex turned towards the door.

“Wait,” my temper flared, “I appreciate your discretion, but what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Alex shrugged. “You’re an expert at pretending to be someone you’re not. Classic stripper honesty and attachment issues. Also, explains why you left so fast.”

I gasped, “I am hardly a ‘classic’ anything. I don’t owe you an explanation for why I didn’t stay to get to know you.”

With two slow, purposeful steps, Alex closed the space between us. I straightened my posture and narrowed my eyes. My frustration seemed to offer him pleasure, so I hid it as best I could.

Staring directly at me for a moment, he growled. “Mmhm.” Then he bent to my ear and whispered harshly, “I know you’re not telling us everything, but I’m going to protect

you anyway because that's what I do. I save you, Mia. I've been saving you since the moment I met you." He looked at his watch. "And it's only been ten hours."

My jaw clenched with anger. No man could get under my skin as quickly as Alex McCallister. Without waiting for a response, he turned around and walked out the door. I stood speechless, questioning if I would survive a road trip to Vegas with this man. I remembered to breathe, smoothed out my skirt, and collected myself before walking to the hallway.

As I approached the front desk, Alex shrugged at Cadie. "She can't get enough of me."

"That is a lie." My eyes widened in exasperation. "Is everything a joke to you?"

"When it's game time, I'm dead serious. Trust me."

"Alex! Where are your manners?" Cadie scowled at him.

"He's not usually this mouthy." Cadie gritted her teeth at Alex as she talked, "He'll be on better behavior. Right, Alex?"

"Sure. But we'll never get through this if you don't have a sense of humor." He picked a muffin from the plate June had left on her desk.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I have a sense of humor. When you say something funny, I'll let you know."

"Yes, ma'am." And after pushing every button I had, he strolled out the front door.

"Ugh," I groaned. He made me want to throw something.

"Don't worry about Alex. He's not used to a woman who isn't pawing at him."

"Well, I don't paw," I replied.

"I get that about you." Cadie laughed and pushed her folders together on June's desk. "I need to leave my aunt a note and we've got to load up equipment. We'll meet up at the Tavern around 2 PM."

Through the tall glass windows, I watched Alex and Logan climb into a large black SUV parked in front of the building.

The brutal truth was inescapable—Alex was the only one who could help me. Trusting that cocky-gun-toting-tattooed bodyguard was my only real chance at finding my sister.

ALEX

THE VIKING AND LIV

Nothing about OPS was average, including the company vehicles we called “Tanks”. These beasts were bullet-resistant tactical SUVs with a few surprise bells and whistles, and they had saved our asses more times than I could count.

I drove up the mountain to the Tavern while Logan busied himself texting Devin about the equipment we would need for the mission.

“Devin recently ordered new bluetooth ear sets, including a tiny one more likely to fit Mia’s ear.” Logan slid his phone into his back pocket.

“Perfect. Our new shipment arrived earlier this week. It’s in the back. Devin will be excited to see it.”

The usually relaxing drive up the mountain did little to clear my mind. A slow car struggled up the incline in the fast lane—my biggest pet peeve. I passed it on a tight curve, mumbling about tourists under my breath.

“You’re thinking about something else. What’s up?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “It’s Mia. I can’t get my head around her motivation. Who leaves her wealthy San Diego family to pay for an overpriced education in L.A. by stripping?”

“Seems like she wanted money on her own terms. Daughters have done worse to renounce their fathers. Maybe she enjoys dancing, and it’s a way to get back at him.” Logan

stretched out, shifting in the seat. “But she claims he doesn’t know, so ...”

“Trust me. She’s hiding something. That woman is fucked up in the head.”

“You mean as fucked up as us? You’ve got to be broken somewhere to spend your free time chasing world-class gangsters and criminals.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Logan chuckled.

“Try to make her—like us. You know damn well there’s something off about her story.”

Logan smirked. “Maybe your ego is just bruised.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? I know when I’m being lied to. She’s hiding something.”

“How many clients tell us everything up front? They all hide something. Every family has secrets.” Logan adjusted in the seat. “What I’m saying is maybe she’s a little more like you than you care to admit and it’s pissing you off.” Logan relaxed his head on the seat rest. “Prince Charming finally met his match.”

“She is not my match.” I twisted my head, irritated he was so damn relaxed. “Mia is gasoline and this whole thing is going to blow up if she gets herself in trouble at Luka’s club.”

“No doubt. We’re the only assholes crazy enough to take these cases. She’s lucky you said yes.”

“Ha!” I laughed. “You know I didn’t have a choice.”

Logan closed his eyes—the man could take a cat nap anywhere. “True. Saying ‘no’ to John is never fun.”

I clenched my jaw. Mia lying to me made my blood boil, but disappointing my older brother was not an option. He had been my hero since I was a kid. I checked the rearview mirror, making sure Cadie still followed.

“Listen, regardless of how you feel about Mia personally, her sister is still missing. According to Greyson, this is a lot

bigger than Mia and Tasha. John knows she's bullshitting us somewhere, but she's volunteering to go in and that's on her now. If it works out, she could potentially save more lives."

Letting go of a deep breath, I tried to keep things in perspective. "You're right, brother."

Logan folded his arms across his chest. "Tasha could be dead or already out of the country. We know that better than anyone. But there are others who need our help. This mission could save lives and shut down the Russian syndicate."

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. "I don't trust Mia. But the thought of Luka Koltsov trafficking humans makes me want to rain gunfire down on his club."

Logan knew my temper too well. "Agreed. But you've got to be discreet. We don't have the support we did hunting jihadists in the Middle East."

"It's a damn shame," I murmured.

"I know. But if you run into a building and kill ten bad guys, like you did in Baghdad, you're probably going to prison."

Logan didn't lose his head often. Besides Greyson, he was the most level-headed one in our group. Nothing riled him. But John and I had McCallister tempers.

"Each one of those terrorists deserved to die. The jihadists took that woman and her daughter, kicking and screaming, into the building." I shrugged. "It was a simple extraction." The scar on my left side ached at their mention, and I rubbed it out of habit. A bullet had gone clean through me that day, reminding me I was not invincible.

"Brother, you know I get it. All I'm saying is watch your temper. Be chill."

Signaling my exit, I moved off the freeway and onto the side street. Cadie knew the way, but we traveled together, and I always had a big brother eye on her. The Tavern was visible, nestled in a thick forest area off the highway. A gravel parking lot separated the large one-story wooden building from the road. A pole to the right of the main entrance flew an

American flag, Marine Corps flag, and a black P.O.W. flag. To the left was a row of motorcycles, mostly Harleys. The Tavern was our home away from home. When we weren't working or at OPS headquarters, we were there.

Cadie and I parked behind the Tavern next to Devin's bounty-hunting SUVs. I pulled the lock box with borrowed equipment from the back and sat it on the gravel. Mia emerged from the car with the sleekness of a cat, her lean legs appearing before the rest of her, wearing her thick black hair rolled tightly into a bun and an icy straight face. You would never know her sister was missing from her unshakable demeanor.

Devin came from the Tavern's back door in a grey T-shirt and jeans—dirty, sweaty, and still strapped with a Glock and cuffs from the morning's bounty hunt. He waved us over, smoothing out his strawberry-blond beard as we approached.

"You must be Mia." Devin offered his hand. Thick silver rings glinted over his knuckles. His palm practically swallowed up Mia's dainty fingers. She hesitated, retracting her hand. Devin noticed a smudge of blood on the top of his thumb. He wiped it quickly on his jeans. "No worries, Princess. It's not mine."

"Nice to meet you," Mia replied.

"I heard y'all were coming. Come on in and meet my better half, Liv."

Devin stepped past the ladies and clasped hands with Logan and me, bumping shoulders with us in a firm embrace.

"Hey, brother. Let me get my paws on you." We squeezed each other briefly. "You know, some clean up after they bathe in the blood of their enemies." I slapped Devin on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir!" Devin roared, "Had a guy miss court, so I scooped him up. Unfortunately, he struggled and now has a broken nose to match the one he gave his ol' lady."

"We have some logistics to figure out for Mia's case and I brought the Glocks and vests we borrowed. Want to help with

this OP?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah, I do.” Devin motioned for us all to follow him, “I’ll have Liv get a table ready and send someone to bring the box to our table. Let’s get to work.” We walked up a small set of stairs and over a wooden deck.

“Deck is holding up well.” Logan ran a hand over the railing.

“Thanks to your craftsmanship. Everyone comments on the carpentry. Truly amazing work.” Devin praised Logan as we walked over the sturdy deck that jutted out the back of the Tavern approximately twenty feet. Cadie wrapped her arm around Logan’s elbow, briefly snuggling him as we walked across the perfectly aligned cedar planks. A moment later, Cadie was walking with Mia and Devin’s security guard held the door open as we filed through the entrance.

The smell of chicken and mashed potatoes flooded the hallway. Cadie rubbed her belly. “I hope you’re hungry. Liv makes the best food.”

Mia inhaled deeply and smiled her approval. “It smells incredible.”

Cadie gave Mia a brief tour as we walked through the building. “Devin’s office is on the right and lodging for OPS and certain VIP members are on the left.” A heavy door marked the end of the hallway. Devin pushed it open and a low roar from the afternoon crowd filled the once-quiet hallway.

We walked through the opening in the horseshoe-shaped bar. The afternoon crowd was less rowdy than the night, but they were getting there. We greeted old friends as we walked. At the end of the bar, a short staircase led to a large round table set close to the far wall. The table provided an ideal vantage point, and the loud atmosphere hid our conversation from the rest of the patrons.

In case of an in-house emergency, a secret pullout compartment under the table hid two Glockes. We never needed them, though. The respect level at the Tavern was next level, and no one fucked with Devin. He was a 6’3” Viking with a 4-

inch greying strawberry beard and too many tattoos to count. Devin was one intimidating Nordic motherfucker.

We circled the table and took our seats. Cadie and I left a seat between us for Mia. I pulled the chair out for our new client and took my own. Logan and Devin settled into their seats around the table. A waitress had preemptively set glasses of water and silverware at the table.

The kitchen door swung open. Liv appeared with a carafe of coffee and mugs, surely for the OPS team. She acknowledged us with a smile, stopping momentarily to talk to a customer as she pointed at specials on the menu before greeting our newcomer with a sparkling smile. “You must be Mia. Nice to meet you.”

Liv poured a cup of coffee for Devin. “You’re filthy.”

He slapped her firmly on the ass as payment. Liv swatted at his hand, scolding him with a quick glare. “Heathens. All of you.” she teased.

I laughed at the loud pop of Devin’s slap.

Liv spun her head sharply and shot me daggers. “You.” Her eyes narrowed as she approached me.

Expecting her next words, I raised my arms and stood. With one fist on her hip, Liv pointed a finger at me with each word. “I am still mad at you.”

I tugged at her arm. “Liv ... don’t be mad.” She squirmed, resisting my brotherly bear hug.

“I’m serious, Alex. No more messing around with my girls.”

Letting her go, I straightened her cute little half apron with deep pockets. “From now on, I will adhere to a strict no-fraternization policy.” I flashed an over-enthusiastic smile. “I promise.”

Liv rolled her eyes. “You can talk to them, but they get all crazy about you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Liv scrunched her nose up and scowled. “I’m serious.”

“She’s serious.” Devin shrugged. “I can’t help you with this one.”

“Can we put this behind us, please? You’re looking lovely today. All playing aside, did you do something different with your hair?”

“Oh, my gosh. Yes, I cut it a little. Sit down.” Liv pushed me back towards my chair with a smile as she made her way back to Mia.

“Sorry about all that. I have to keep these guys in line or they run around here like wild animals.”

“Understandable.” Mia looked at me sideways.

Liv laughed, “She knows you already! You’ll be fine if you’re immune to this guy’s charm.”

“Can we please be done with the verbal lashings and get to business?” I pleaded.

Devin made room for Liv to sit on his lap. She rolled her eyes. “No, sir. You need to change.” Liv sat in the chair next to him.

Devin linked his hands behind his head, expanding his chest as he took a colossal breath of air. “I haven’t spoken with Liv about this situation. Someone want to fill her in?”

I summarized quickly, “Mia’s sister went with Dimitri Koltsov to the Wild Rose strip club in Vegas. Now she’s disappeared. Mia received a text early this morning. Logan sent it to Devin earlier.”

“This one, right?” Devin asked as he showed the picture to Mia.

“That’s correct,” Mia replied.

Devin showed the text to Liv. “It’s possible that Dimitri and Luka are responsible for her disappearance. Alex will accompany Mia to Vegas while she goes undercover to find her sister.”

Liv sighed. “I’m sorry to hear about your sister.”

“Miss Mia is a law student and a stripper.” Devin couldn’t say the word stripper without a big goofy grin on his face.

Liv perked up and crossed her legs. “That’s intriguing.”

Mia cleared her throat. “I’m finished with law school and studying for the bar exam. Honestly, I didn’t plan on dancing for much longer.” She took a sip from a glass of water at her table setting.

Devin settled into his chair, “This mission is ...”

“Insane,” I said, pouring myself some coffee.

“I was going to say suicide, but sure, insane.” Devin cocked an eyebrow. “Mia, I’m not one to sugarcoat things. What makes you think you can pull this off? If Luka finds out who you are, he’ll slit your throat just to make a point ... that’s if he’s not the one who sent the text.”

As soon as Mia opened her mouth, Devin cut her off. “Or he’s baiting you to blackmail your pops.”

Liv watched Mia intently; her face resting on interlocked fingers. If Devin and Liv were out—we would reevaluate taking the case. This mission required all hands on deck. Devin was testing her, but the real thumbs up had to come from Liv. Devin wouldn’t agree without her approval. Everyone here knew that, including Mia, if she was smart.

Mia met Devin’s intensity. “I appreciate a straightforward approach. My father is not a good man. He’s abusive and coldhearted. I watched him physically and emotionally abuse my mother until the day she disappeared. The rest of the world sees him as the immigrant rags-to-riches, single father of the year, but I know the dangerous truth. He still holds out hope that I will marry someone he approves of and join his business endeavors, but the only safe place for us is a place far from him. I know, in my heart, Tasha is being held against her will. And I know, for a fact, our father could not care less. There is no one—no one—to help her but Orion Protection Services. You are all I have. I need your help because I would die before leaving her in the vile hands of some strip club gangster.”

Devin stroked his beard. “What if Luka doesn’t let you dance at his club? What’s plan B?”

“I know what I’m doing. Trust me—the club will want me.”

Liv tapped her foot, studying Mia as if she were an actual Kandinsky painting. “How did you end up with two completely different jobs?” She tilted her head at an angle, “The dichotomy is interesting. Tell me more.”

“There’s not much to tell. I have no other family. I don’t want nor do I need my father’s dirty money. He has profited from fixing juries, tampering with evidence, and intimidating witnesses. Growing up, I saw more backroom deals and slick handshakes than I care to talk about. I’ve witnessed my father’s fury and understood more than anyone that being in debt to him is a dangerous game. Stripping gave me independence and paid for school.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, “Corrupt figures running for office isn’t new. But it seems like he would have made enemies along the way. How has no one outed him?”

“As an Assistant District Attorney, my father has become a pillar in the community. Recently, my father and his brother Arthur have been strengthening their ties to certain popular charity organizations. Essentially, using a parade of good deeds to hide their indiscretions. Last August, my father led a police task force that stopped a group of drug smugglers with one hundred kilos of cocaine from entering a port just south of San Diego. The people love him, but they know only what he feeds them.”

“He won’t help you look for Tasha. He would let her die?” Liv scooped up Devin’s coffee cup and sipped from it.

“Everything my father and Arthur do is for power and money. Greed pumps through their veins, not blood. He thinks he can keep a lid on Tasha’s disappearance until the election is over. Then he hopes she self-destructs. My father wanted us to marry into wealthy families to strengthen his position. We have both refused. He feels her lifestyle is a liability. He cannot control us and it infuriates him.”

Liv put the cup down. “What do you mean by ‘liability’?”

Mia twirled a piece of hair around her finger nervously. “My father still has hope that I will benefit him. Tasha has been a public embarrassment with her social outings. She’s a wild child, and he is ready to wash his hands of her.”

Greyson would discover if Mia was lying. He was vetting her as we spoke.

Devin turned the ring on his middle finger with his thumb, “Alright. You’ve got some fire in you. I dig it. You understand, we need to hear a commitment to this mission before we approve of you taking some expensive equipment, and our brother Alex, to Vegas. Liv and I don’t particularly like to feed the lions.”

Devin pushed his chin out. “Alex is your professional. Guaranteed, he’s your only chance at finding your sister and making it out alive. It takes a lot of heart to do these missions.” He rubbed his chest as he stretched out. “I don’t have that kind of heart. I’m the guy on the end that hauls these dickholes in for outstanding warrants and bounties. Alex is your lifeline.”

“I understand that,” Mia replied. Cadie patted Mia’s knee, though she didn’t seem to need comforting.

Devin continued, “Alex, I’ve got a few Bluetooth earpieces. I think anything else is too risky to be worn. I can give you tracking devices and I’ll partner with Greyson on your surveillance. We know a few guys in the security scene in Vegas. I use them on the side when I have business down South. I’ll make some phone calls.”

“Thanks, brother.”

“Of course,” Devin whispered something in Liv’s ear. She smiled and whispered back while Devin briefly stroked her arm.

Cadie’s phone beeped. Without looking, she excused herself from the conversation. “Just a minute, please. I have to make a few calls.”

Devin pulled two boxes from under the table. He placed four sets of earpieces and the corresponding auditory equipment on the table for examination. We assessed the equipment while Cadie typed into her phone. “Thanks for lending us the Glock and extra vests for the Columbia trip. I was happy to get out of there with no trouble.”

“Of course. Adding more OPS guys was smart. Keeping your clients safe in South America requires bigger numbers every year.” Devin shook his head. Kidnapping rates had recently skyrocketed in specific areas and we had to be on our A game.

“It keeps us busy, that’s for sure.” I pushed the lockbox containing the gun and vests to the side and turned my attention to Devin’s new gadgets. Spyware excited me, like a kid about to eat a big slice of birthday cake.

Logan leaned forward and squinted. “These are top-of-the-line. Are they new?” He opened a silver box and examined the small devices inside.

“They are. The mini microphone is practically undetectable—audio, but no video.” He motioned toward the silver box. “Liv, do you think you could sew this into that tiny black dress you have?”

“Absolutely,” Liv said without hesitation.

“Low profile. Nice. Use this one.” I held the piece, about the size of a thumbnail, between my thumb and forefinger. Liv held her hand out, and I placed its twin in her palm.

“Mia, I have a dress we can use for this. Would you like to come with me?”

“Of course.” Mia stood from the table.

The girls walked away, and I focused on the mission, confident Liv would seamlessly place the mic.

Logan examined another earpiece, “She’s dead if they find this.”

“Agreed.” Logan handed it to me.

I squinted to compare the sizes. “This one is bigger.” I fit it in my ear and adjusted the placement before removing it.

Devin sat back in his chair and crossed his arms across his wide chest. “I’m surprised John is sending you on this mission.”

“Why?” I pulled out a small gold and black taser shaped like a perfume spritzer—perfect for a woman’s purse. Raising my face, I met his annoying smirk. “What? I’m a professional.”

Devin let out a belly laugh. “You’re one of the best shooters and bodyguards—Hell, one of the best Marines I have ever known. But you think with your dick. Can you keep your hands off that woman?”

“Alex had the distinct pleasure of meeting her at the bar last night.” Logan smiled.

“What?” Devin popped a piece of gum into his mouth, grinning ear to ear.

“Oh, yeah. She completely shut Prince Charming down. Greyson and I had front-row seats. It was almost painful.” Logan took a sip of water as Devin enjoyed the news.

I ran my hand over my face and groaned. “No one was ‘shut down’. I wasn’t really flirting ...”

“You’re lying!” Logan chuckled. “You threw your best game at her. Then crashed and burned.” He leaned back and stretched his arms above his head. “It. Was. Awesome.”

Fuck me. Mia wasn’t even here, and she was giving me a headache. “You guys suck. I’ll help Mia find her sister. But that’s it. I’m not interested in anything else.”

Devin interjected, “You’re not interested now, you mean? Rejection is a real buzz kill.”

“Are you done? Can we get back to work?”

“Don’t get all sensitive. You’re still the most charming prince of them all.” Logan rubbed my back.

I jerked away. “Get off me. You’re an ass, too. Can we please move forward?”

“God, I’m glad you told me that.” Devin wiped a tear of laughter from his eye. “Sure. Back to business.” He cleared his throat. “These have a range of approximately one mile. Anything over and it will pick up interference or cut out completely.” Devin pulled out his phone and examined a map of the area surrounding the Wild Rose. “Ideally, you’d be in the same building. However, you could easily monitor the conversations from this diner across the street.”

“That’s a decent location.” I tapped a finger on the Wild Rose, noting the surrounding streets and businesses. “The first night I’ll walk in as a paying customer. I want an accurate look at the layout, exits, and security.”

“Agreed. If it’s a trap, Luka is likely to expect Mia to come alone, making you a fun surprise if she needs help.” Devin rubbed his palms together.

“When she needs help,” Logan corrected.

“Indeed. What weapons are you bringing down there?” Devin asked.

“A rifle, two side arms, extra ammo, ultra-light Kevlar, and a vest,” I said.

“Perfect. Have you had a run-in with Luka’s men before?”

“Nah, man. I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“I have,” Logan growled. “They’re ruthless SOBs. They’ll slit your throat in a second and bury you in the desert for looking at them wrong. Tread carefully. What Luka’s men lack in intelligence they make up for in brutality. Keep your covers—no matter what happens.”

My phone vibrated. “Greyson will be here shortly and has solid intel to share.” I slid the phone back into my pocket, curious about what he dug up.

Devin made a sweeping motion with his arm. “Let’s stage all this in my office. We’ll make adjustments after Greyson’s brief.”

The thud of Devin's hand slapped the breath straight out of me. Logan grinned at my discomfort, knowing damn well how it felt to be at the receiving end of Devin's Viking slap on the back. "I'll come down early and get your six if you stir shit up. I know for a fact a few of Luka's thugs have bounties on their heads."

"Thanks, man. Take care of your business tomorrow. We could use the extra hands on deck with this one."

"That's a plan." A waitress hurried over to clear the table. We pushed our chairs back to give her space.

"Where did Liv take the girls?" I reached my arms above my head and stretched my back. Years of training had plagued me with daily aches and pains. A seven-hour car ride to Vegas would be hell on my back.

"Well, I imagine Mia is trying on Liv's stripper clothes."

"Why am I not surprised that Liv has stripper clothes?" Thanking the waitress, I stood to get a better stretch.

A mischievous smile brightened Devin's face. "Liv loves to dress up for me."

"Thanks, Princess." I tossed a twenty-dollar bill on the table. Logan threw another ten down. We never paid for food or drinks, so we always tipped well. Logan, Devin, and I walked through the bar towards the back rooms.

Devin continued talking about the love of his life. "Liv is a different woman than most. We married, and I settled down, but marriage ignited her wild side." Devin stopped at his office, pulled his keys from his pocket, and unlocked the door.

"There isn't a woman alive who could make me settle down."

Logan chimed in from behind me. "I thought the same thing before I met Cadie."

Devin came to an abrupt halt. I looked over his shoulder to see why we had stopped.

Mia stood half-naked in the middle of Devin's office. A goddess among women, pieces of her black thick hair,

previously pinned high on her head, fell to her sun-kissed bare shoulders. She wore a tiny black strapless satin dress that barely covered the curve of her hips. Mia shot me an icy glare with one hand on her hip as she stood tall and slender in devastatingly sexy stilettos.

Liv was on her knees, holding a long pin pressed firmly between her lips as she adjusted the seam of the little dress where, I assumed, she had sewn the mic.

My chest tightened. Logan placed a firm hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Breathe, brother."

MIA

The Tavern was unlike any bar I had ever seen. Inked-up men and women who laughed loud and drank louder filled the room. Beer steins clanked, shot glasses slammed, and a roar of laughter came from a nearby table.

Cadie, Liv, and I made our way through the busy bar towards the center door. My thoughts wandered to the conversation I overheard between my father and uncle. Clearly, they wanted the Russians out of business. But neither knew that Dimitri and Luka Koltsov had Tasha. *What good is a kidnapping if you don't tell anyone?*

As we walked, heads turned and the unruliest of the men smacked their lips at me. Being ogled outside of a strip club was an unusual feeling. I ignored the urge to snap at a few who needed a manners check.

Liv paused briefly to hug a guy at the bar and Cadie kept walking, looking at her phone. An anchor tattoo peaked from beneath his sleeve. Printed on the back of his T-shirt, above a faded American flag, were the words "Freedom isn't free". Liv finished speaking with him and hugged him a second time. Something silver glinting near the ground caught my eye. The man sported a bionic metal apparatus as a replacement for his lower leg.

"There's no shortage of heroes here." Liv grabbed my hand, pulling me through the last few patrons near the bar. She opened the center door to the hallway and found Cadie leaning against the wall, still working from her phone. Cadie

acknowledged us with a head bob and followed us down the hall.

We stopped at the door to Devin's office. Liv unlocked it and held the door open. "I'll be right back."

Cadie settled into a chair across from a large cherry oak desk, continuing to type. Pictures of all the OPS men I recently met hung on the walls. Devin decorated his office proudly with ornate Thor hammers, swords, plaques, shadow boxes, and military awards.

Cadie put her phone away and smiled at me, "Sorry. I'm working on details for the next few days."

I peered closely at a picture of the men, filthy, looking exhausted, sitting on a tank in a desert.

"I can see why they are so close," I mumbled.

Cadie examined the pictures with me. "They've lived through a hell the rest of the world will never understand. I'm proud of their work during their military service and after." Cadie touched one frame. "This picture is from their last Marine Corps Ball together. Alex has a Bronze Star and a Purple heart—though he won't talk about it."

"Last night, when I met Alex, I thought he was showing off. I never would have guessed he was ... a war hero." I chose my words carefully. "He seemed like ..."

"A cocky asshole?" Cadie interjected, raising her eyebrows with a grin.

"Actually, yeah." I chuckled.

"Alex has a certain way with women. And he loses interest fast. He's always been like that." Cadie nudged me with her elbow, "Don't let him fool you. He's got a heart of gold." She straightened her face. "Don't tell him I told you that. He enjoys being the tough guy."

I laughed, "That I can see. I just thought he was not what he seemed."

"No, ma'am. Not Alex—or any OPS guys. My brother has been blown up, shot, and terribly burned during his

deployment time. I think the bond between the OPS team and their ability to laugh through anything has eased the pain of what they've lived through."

"He suffered burns? How?" I asked. Of all the injuries a person could endure, I imagined burns to be the worst.

"A small terrorist group in Somalia tried to burn a family alive within their own home."

"Oh, my God. Why?"

"Because the family gave Alex's team information leading to the capture of two top-ranking members of a nearby terrorist regime hiding in their village." Cadie looked to the ground, "I can't even imagine ...". She cleared her throat, "The terrorists tied the father, mother, and three children to furniture and set the home on fire. Alex reached the home before the rest of the team. He found most of the family unconscious and bound inside. But couldn't find the youngest boy and the mother. Logan, Greyson, and Devin arrived just as Alex went back into the fire. They ran in after him."

"Did the boy and mother survive?" I bit my lip uncomfortably.

"A support beam had fallen and trapped Alex. They found him shielding the boy from the flames with his body. Devin lifted the heavy beam, Greyson carried the boy and Logan found the mother. The entire structure collapsed within seconds of them exiting the building. Alex barely made it out."

"He saved their lives," I whispered.

"Yes. ma'am. I could tell you about ten more. I'm a proud sister and I enjoy hearing them re-tell war stories now that they're home. When they were active-duty Marines, I didn't want to know a thing. It was too stressful."

I nodded, looking at the pictures with a new perspective. "That makes sense."

Liv burst through the door, breaking the somber moment. "Here we go!" she said, holding the door with her dainty shoulder as she cradled a large sewing box with a folded black dress and a pair of stilettos on top. Her eyes were barely

visible over the heels. I hurried over to lighten her load. Liv smiled her thanks, and I placed the box on the desk.

“I brought this dress and these size 7 shoes.” Two black strappy stilettos dangled from Liv’s fingers by the toe strap. “Think they’ll fit?”

“Actually, yes. They’re like what I usually wear.”

“Perfect.” Liv handed me the shoes and held the outfit in front of her. Basically, a tube dress that stopped halfway down the ass and slipped off in one quick pull over the head.

“That’s a dress?” Cadie’s mouth hung open.

“Have you ever been to a strip club?” I asked.

Liv shook her head, mouthing the word ‘No’ before Cadie answered.

“I guess I’m a bit of a homebody.” Cadie shrugged.

“It’s a pretty typical dress. Usually, I wear sparkly jewelry, simple outfits, and anything dark. I have that specific dress in black and red.” I thought for a moment, spinning a piece of hair around my finger. “Why do you have a stripper outfit, Liv?”

“I like to dress up for Devin. It drives him wild.” Liv was already digging intently through her sewing box. “Let me get a couple of things and I’ll have you put the dress on. I want to see how it sits in the seam as I sew. I’ll do this by hand.” Liv pointed at a chair. “You can put your clothes there.”

Liv handed me the dress. I placed my folded clothes on the arm of the chair and slipped the black satin dress over my head.

Liv clapped three times fast, “It fits perfect! You’re a little taller than me but we have the same size hips.” She gave me a hard look up and down. “Girl, your body is phenomenal.”

“It sure is,” Cadie said, pushing herself up on the desk for a seat.

“Thank you.” My cheeks flushed, surprising even me.

Liv pointed to the stilettos. “Try the shoes on.”

Sitting in the chair, I slipped my foot into the straps, buckled the top strap around my ankle, and wiggled my toes. The shoes were clearly new. “It doesn’t look like you’ve worn these. Are you sure you want me to take them to Vegas?”

“Actually, I’ve worn them several times. I’m just not usually walking around when I wear them.” Liv wiggled her shoulders. Cadie giggled and I couldn’t help but smile. For a moment, it felt like I was with old friends, trying on clothes, and my world wasn’t crashing down around me.

“Are you ok?” Cadie noticed my daydream, “Yes. I just ...” they stared, waiting for a response, “It’s abnormal for me to share the details of my life with anyone, much less those I’ve just met. My two worlds have never collided. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

Liv tucked a wild curl behind her ear as she spoke. “It makes perfect sense. You protect the people you love by keeping them in the dark. What a lonely life. It can’t be easy.”

“I’ve never felt lonely. Only determined. Once our mother left, I knew it was up to me to get us away from our father. I hoped we could get away once I took the bar. Stripping got me through law school, but I never planned to keep dancing.”

Cadie gripped the desk as she shifted forward with interest. “I’ve had so many questions since you told us.”

“Like what?” I sat in the chair and crossed one leg over the other.

“You even sit sexy!” Cadie exclaimed.

“It’s not me, it’s the shoes. Stilettos make everything look sexy. What questions do you have?”

“What’s it like to be a stripper? Are there any other strippers you hang out with—and what’s that like? Do you meet any cool guys ever? Or all weirdos?” Cadie swung her legs from the desk. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to bombard you with questions, but I’ve never met a stripper before.”

“I don’t mind answering your questions. Lots of strippers hang out together and live a particular type of lifestyle. But, like I said, no one knew I was in law school. No one at school

knew I danced. I don't hang out with anyone from the club outside of the club. None of the other girls pressed me for information. There was a level of privacy expected and given. You'd be surprised how many women dance at night and no one in their life knows. Every dancer was hiding something. I suppose I'm no different."

"I can't imagine hiding something like that from Devin." Liv talked as she dug through her sewing box.

I shrugged. "I don't get involved with anyone, so it's not an issue."

"Oh, girl, you must be frustrated." Liv pointed at the dress. "Now that we know it fits. Take it off and I'll sew the device in the seam. Then I'll have you put it back on to make the final adjustments." Liv threw a soft blanket at me. "Stay warm with this so you don't have to keep changing."

I handed the dress to Liv and wrapped the cozy blanket around me before sitting back down. Liv worked on the alterations at Devin's desk. She held the dress up, squinted, and continued sewing. "You must feel strongly about your father to leave all his money to fend for yourself. I mean, I'm assuming you have a trust fund." Liv said, never looking up from the dress.

"I do. But I've never used it. I worry about Tasha though. It's up to me to get her away from my father. None of this would have happened if I would have figured out a way to bring her with me to L.A." I exhaled. "Tasha just recently turned eighteen. She's still figuring out what to do with her life. She's always been a bit of a wild child."

Cadie perked up. "She's the wild one?"

"I don't party, I don't date playboys, and I'm always in control."

"Not what I expected," Cadie mumbled.

"Sounds boring." Liv handed me the dress. "Here you go."

I slid the dress back over my head and smoothed it out.

Liv squinted, assessing her work. “I don’t want the mic to move at all. Also, we should scatter a few rhinestones to hide the slight bump. I’ll fix them on quick.” Liv pulled a little drawer from inside the sewing box and placed several shiny rhinestones in her hand. “I’ll use fabric glue when we’re done.”

“You are so good with a needle and thread. I’ve never learned to sew anything more than a button.” I stood motionless with my hands on my hips as Liv worked her sewing magic.

“These days, I put more stitches in the OPS team than I do in dresses.” Liv grinned.

“It’s true. Even I have some of Liv’s handy work. Though the scar has practically disappeared.” Cadie raised her shirt to show a faint scar on her toned oblique.

Wrapped up in our conversation, I never heard the door open.

“We’re here,” Devin announced.

Alex was the second to step through the doorway, his eyes immediately locked on my body. From behind, Logan looked over Alex’s shoulder, then back at Alex, grinning from ear to ear before whispering to Alex.

The rumble of a vibrating phone broke the awkward pause in the room. Alex muttered something about taking a call outside, leaving as abruptly as he arrived.

“Where’s he going?” I asked after the door closed behind him.

Logan crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. “The man needs some fresh air.”

“I’m almost done with the Vegas arrangements,” Cadie said, thumbing through a document on her phone.

“Excellent work, Cadie.” Devin stepped towards me, “How’s it look?”

“I think it’s finished. The mic is in the top seam and the bluetooth piece is in the bottom.” Liv put a hand on her hip

and tucked another unruly strand behind her ear.

“Perfect. Greyson arrives soon to brief us. Alex wants to leave tonight.” Devin grabbed Liv by the waist. She let out a squeal of surprise. He spoke low and soft to her, “You did good, baby. Alex damn near had a heart attack when we walked in.” Devin winked at me and bent down to kiss Liv on her neck, nuzzling into her raven curls.

“Okay, okay, go take a shower now. We’ll be out in a minute.” Liv shoved Devin in his chest. He put up a small fight before obliging with a polite smile, “Alright, ladies. Great job.”

Liv cleaned up and closed the lid to the box. “We can wait at our table in the bar if you like?”

“Sure,” I said before remembering I was half-naked. “I need to change first.”

“Yeah, you do.” Cadie smiled and hopped down from the desk.

“We’ll give you some privacy,” Logan followed Devin out of the office.

I dressed as Liv cleaned up. “I’ll put my sewing box away and meet up with you in a bit.” Liv put a hand on the doorknob and pushed through the door with her hip.

Cadie held her hands out. “I’ll take the dress. The guys put your things in an extra room.”

I followed Cadie into the hallway. Halfway down the hall, she opened a door and placed the dress and shoes on my bag sitting just inside. “You can use this room while you’re here. Make sure both doors are closed. You share a bathroom with the adjoining room.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Cadie’s phone rang as we entered the bar area. “I have to take this call somewhere quiet. Go in and I’ll catch up with you in a minute.”

Cadie hurried away from the noise, and I walked into the rowdy bar alone.

ALEX

BLOOD AND CHOSEN

Nothing could prepare me for the sight of Mia, wearing only a tiny piece of shiny fabric and high heels. It was ... breathtaking. *Calm the fuck down, Alex.*

My phone vibrated, breaking this woman's momentary hold on all of my senses. Greyson was almost here. *Thank God*—something to take my mind off the ache that accompanied Mia every time we met.

Eager to put distance between me and Mia, I walked outside and around the building, entering through the front door. The Tavern filled quickly. I greeted and laughed my way through the thick crowd. 'Hellos' and 'how are you's' were at every table, making my pace equivalent to humping through mud. Devin stood at the end of the bar, finally cleaned up and wiping beer froth from his beard with the back of his arm between drinks and bursts of roaring laughter.

Finally arriving at the table, I scanned the floor from my seat. Mia was at the bar, attempting to order. The weekend bartender, Leah, had passed her by twice without taking her order. Liv and Cadie were nowhere to be seen. The cool mountain air rushed in as the front door opened. Greyson was here. I waved at him, motioning to the seat next to me.

Greyson wasn't one for small talk. He made a straight line through the tables. A kind of light-haired shark who could navigate any crowd. He threw a small folder on the table and sat down. People-watching was a favorite of ours. His perceptive and witty comments never failed to brighten my evening.

“Good crowd tonight.” He surveyed the evening crowd. “How long has Mia been trying to get a drink from Leah?”

I chuckled. “It’s been a few minutes.”

“How long you plan on letting her stand down there?” He crossed his ankle over his knee and relaxed into his chair.

“You want to go save her?”

“Fuck no, dude. That’s all you brother.” Greyson turned away from the bar and busied himself with the files in his backpack. “But I’d go down there before Jake tells her she has a nice ass. He has that look in his eye.”

Jake was infamous for poor decisions after a few beers, and he was staring directly at Mia. “That’s sweet that you’re worried about Mia.” I chided.

“Hell no, I’m worried about Jake. He’s walking towards Mia and that chick seems like the type to kick a guy in the nuts for saying the wrong thing. I’m not sure Jake is ready for that surprise.”

I laughed. Then the truthfulness of Greyson’s statement sank in. I could tell from Jake’s gait and that stupid grin across his face he was well into his fifth beer. I got up and hurriedly moved through the crowd of people arriving just in time to see Mia whip around with a clenched jaw. Jake was teetering on his feet, surely proud of whatever pickup line he had sprung on her.

“Jake! Brother! How are you?” I moved between the two of them, using my body to shield Mia from the next words to come out of Jake’s mouth and Jake from what could be the last time his balls hung normally.

“Alex, hi. I was just going—”

I interrupted, “Order the house appetizer. The special is amazing. You gotta try it.” I waved to the closest waitress, and she shuffled over. “A house special on me.” I guided Jake to a nearby chair.

“Thanks, Alex.” Free food had quickly replaced Jake’s appetite for women.

“It was great seeing you, friend. Enjoy the grub.” I slapped him on the shoulder and turned around. Mia had given up on being served and was standing with her arms folded, staring me down from the bar.

“I can handle myself. What I can’t manage is to get a glass of water at this bar.” She said through gritted teeth.

“I got it.” I flashed two fingers at Leah and pointed at the pitcher of lemon water.

“Trust me. I have no doubts about your capabilities. But you have got to get used to me handling things, Princess.” I motioned for the water to go to our table. Mia rolled her eyes as Leah did as I asked. Her ‘I don’t give a fuck face’ was legitimately the best I had seen on a woman. I only hoped it wouldn’t get us killed in Vegas.

“Greyson is here to brief us. Come with me. We should be on the same page.”

Mia followed me to the table where everyone had arrived and was waiting on us to begin. We settled into our seats and Greyson and Cadie passed around the files and intel.

“I’ll go first.” Cadie picked up a piece of paper with a familiar house printed at the top. She showed it to everyone. “We’re using Devin’s Vegas rental for a home base. It’s safer to be off the strip.”

“Good call. But what if we get action near the club?” I asked, searching for the address on my GPS. I had never actually stayed at Devin’s rental property before.

“I have a suite reserved at the Moon Bay under your cover name. Use it if you need to.”

Greyson straightened his glasses. “I have security connections at the Moon Bay, as well. We have extra support in the area. I’ve put their contact info in an email and put them on alert. You’ll know who I’m talking about when you see the names.” Greyson continued. “I’ve called in a few favors from old friends.”

“Are you from Vegas?” Mia asked, looking through the information in her designated folder.

“No. However, I have strong connections in the area.” Greyson picked a file from his stack. “My family has VIP status at most of the casinos. Money goes a long way in Vegas.”

Devin interjected, “Exactly brother. Don’t let people know we have something going on down there. Keep it on a need-to-know basis.”

“I’ve handled everything on a strict, need-to-know basis.” Greyson peered at Devin over his dark-rimmed frames. “I always cover our asses.”

“Yes, you do. I’m thinking out loud. You’re a damn IT god. I know better than to second guess you.” Devin hit his chest with his fist, “You’ve saved my ass more times than I can count.”

“Anything for you, Devin. Alex, you’ll have a clean checking account with five hundred grand available immediately.”

Mia’s head popped up. “That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s necessary. Nothing in Vegas is free. On that note, I’ll be working closely with my FBI contact, Agent Kelly. John wants intel on the other missing women. The priority is to bring Tasha home. But we will leverage our position to gather information on the open missing person cases connected to Luka and Dimitri. This mission isn’t just about Tasha anymore.”

Greyson pulled a copy of an old photo from a file. In the picture, Luka Koltsov stood next to another man with a similar height and build, but blond and older. Greyson held the picture between his finger and thumb. “Luka came from Moscow twenty years ago with this guy. His name is Meret Orlov.”

He handed me the picture. Luka wore a suit. The other man was dressed in dusty work clothes, and they both leaned against an old Chevy work truck.

“Are they family?” I asked.

“I don’t think so, but they emigrated together and were close. Luka eventually moved to Vegas and made his name in

the nightclub business. Later, he opened strip clubs as a front to traffic women and drugs through Nevada and California. Luka Koltsov has grown to run the strongest Russian syndicate on the West Coast. His friend, Meret, stayed in San Diego, where they originally emigrated, and started a landscaping business.”

Greyson leaned over the table and pushed the picture across to Mia, watching her closely. “Does this man look familiar to you?”

She looked at it for a second and pushed it back to him. “No, I don’t know him.”

I took the photo and examined it carefully. “Is there a more recent picture?”

Greyson shook his head. “Nope. Meret died in a freak accident. A drunk driver hit him, killing him instantly.” Greyson motioned for us to keep the picture. “Mia, please let us know if anything comes to mind.”

“Okay,” she sipped water from her glass, avoiding direct eye contact with him.

Greyson and I exchanged looks. He took his glasses off, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and slid them back over his ears. When we interrogated informants in Afghanistan, that was our signal that the informant was lying. He didn’t know why she was lying, or he’d call her out at the table. For now, all we had was our gut, and our intuition was never wrong. It’s the reason we were still alive.

“You’ll find all the intel from Agent Kelly in the briefs. Luka won’t hesitate to take an experienced dancer. Our success is contingent on Mia smoothly moving into the new lineup of girls at Luka’s club. I’m going through backgrounds, bank info, and property now. I have a few more things to finish. When I get to Vegas, I’ll look at security systems, closed circuit cameras, and computers and see what I can hack into.” Greyson stacked the rest of his papers and placed them in the file.

“Excellent. We’ll work on inside surveillance once Mia and I go undercover.” I made a few notes. Greyson nudged my elbow and motioned towards Mia. The file with details about Luka’s club had caught her attention. The color faded from her face as she flipped through pictures of the missing girls and read the atrocious details of their disappearances.

“I need to get some air.” Mia pushed her chair back and stood.

“I’ll go with you.” Cadie handed her file to Logan.

“No, it’s okay. I just need a minute alone.” She was up and pushing her way through the crowd before Cadie could reply. Devin’s head of security, Trey, opened the door for her once Devin nodded from the table.

“That’s not the best place for her to be alone,” I mumbled, still looking at the front door. Suddenly, I realized everyone heard me. “What?”

“Go see if she’s ok.” Cadie stared, piercing my heart with her sisterly daggers of guilt.

“Fine. But you know she doesn’t want me following her out there, right? Mia is not a damsel in distress.”

“Just see if she needs anything.” Cadie pleaded.

My face twisted in annoyance. Logan motioned with his head for me to go after her. I groaned my frustration with this whole situation and left the table. Once at the door, Trey and I clasped hands, greeting each other with a firm embrace. I looked to the left then right. He smiled. “She’s on the side. That-a-way.”

I walked around the corner and found Mia leaning against the wall, looking up at the first few stars to show in the early evening sky. She looked over her shoulder at me, “I’m okay. I just need a minute.”

“I know that, but they don’t.” I took a cautionary step forward. “These guys will only get more bold and annoying as the night goes on.” I joined her against the Tavern wall.

“The mountains are pretty.” She rubbed the outside of her arms to warm them.

“You’re freezing out here to look at the mountains? This isn’t L.A. When the sun goes down it gets chilly up here.” A few unfamiliar faces walked from the gravel lot up to the entrance. I wouldn’t be going inside without her.

“I needed some space,” she nodded towards the bar, “from all that.” She rubbed her arms a little more, “The pictures were hard to look at—what could happen to Tasha and all those missing young women ...”

I turned toward her, leaning my shoulder against the wall. A brief gust of wind brought a crisp chill, and she shivered. I looked at my chest, though I knew I had nothing to give her. “I’d give you a jacket, but I don’t have one.”

“It’s okay. I really just needed some fresh air.” She shivered again and took a deep breath. “The air up here smells like campfire and evergreen.”

“This is my favorite place. The mountains feel like home.”

“I didn’t take you for a mountain kind of guy.” She said, staring at the stars.

“I think it’s safe to say that you judged me wrong altogether.”

“You’re not a cocky pretty boy who gets everything he wants?” She teased.

“You know what I mean.” I leaned in closer to her ear. “And that’s the second time you called me pretty.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “Ugh. Okay, sure. I wouldn’t have imagined you running down to Vegas with guns, bullet-proof vests, and a Batmobile on steroids to help find my sister.”

“I am a literal dream come true.” I teased.

Mia laughed a little and made a half circle in the gravel with the toe of her shoe.

I bent down to make eye contact with her lowered face. “Besides being a terrible judge of character. What else is going

on with you?”

“I can’t stop thinking about Tasha ... and if she’s all right.” She sucked in a lung full of cool air, “I failed her. I should have been there to stop her. If they’ve hurt her ...” her shoulders trembled, “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” I asked.

Her head falls back against the wall, and she wrapped her arms around her body. “How do you compartmentalize this? It’s all terrible and you act like it’s just another day.”

“I suppose there’s desensitization that evolves. Luka is a criminal and has to be stopped. But he isn’t the worst guy I’ve taken down.”

“Oh ... it’s hard to think of something more terrible right now.” She closed her eyes.

“And you shouldn’t.”

“Every time my eyes shut, I see Tasha. Scared and alone. Do you see things like that?”

I rubbed my neck. “I see a lot of things.”

“How do you cope with it?” Mia’s eyes glossed with sadness.

“I find meaning in my pain. My experience and training make me the perfect person to hunt these cold-hearted bastards, and I have vowed to do precisely that until my last breath.”

“It never gets to be too much? The pain or sadness?” her voice broke slightly.

“I lean on my family—blood and chosen. We protect each other, and together, we protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

“Tasha is the only family I have left,” she whispered.

“You can lean on me.” Against my better judgment, I put an arm around her shoulders. “Come here.”

Mia wiped her eyes quickly and pulled back from my embrace.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine,” she said.

“You are a stubborn woman, Mia Denali.”

“Why? Because I don’t need to fall apart in your masculine arms?”

“Because you’re freezing and you could clearly use a friend and a hug at the moment.” I furrowed my brow. “We’re on the same team now, remember?”

Mia sighed. “I’m not used to being on any team.”

“Listen.” I placed a finger under her chin, raising her face to mine. “I’m going to keep you safe and we’re going to find your sister. Understand?”

“Yes,” she murmured, shivering again.

This time I held my arms open and insisted, “Come here and let me warm you up.”

She stepped forward, barely committing to the hug. I wrapped my arms around her and felt her chest expand and body relax. My intentions were honorable, but the chemistry—the electricity between us when our bodies touched—was undeniable.

Mia tilted her face up with a vulnerability I hadn’t seen yet. Standing under the lights of the Tavern, I fell into the kaleidoscope of greens and browns under her dark lashes. Her full lips parted slightly and I couldn’t remember all the sassy things she had said; I saw only raw beauty and a woman who needed me more than she knew.

Pushing herself up on her toes, Mia placed one hand around my neck and the other on my ribcage. She made a small fist in my shirt, pulling her body firmly against me. Every muscle in my body tensed at her touch as blood rushed through every body part I had.

Her hand stopped at my waistline, resting over the buttons of my shirt as the heat grew between us. Our noses touched and a fire burned in her eyes. *Fuck*. I wanted to be nothing but

her arsonist. Lost in the moment, I imagined pinning her to the wall, ripping her panties off, and pretending nothing else mattered but her cumming, over and over again, between me and this brick wall.

“Thank you. For everything.” She whispered.

“Of course.” Realizing how lost I was in my own thoughts, I pushed her gently away and cleared my throat. “We should go back in. Do you feel better?”

Mia smoothed out her hair, looking anywhere but by my face. “I do. That helped.” She took a deep breath and when our eyes met again, a composed look replaced the vulnerability from a moment ago.

She stepped away, putting more space between us. “I can appear ...”

“Detached, sometimes cold?” I offered.

“Closed off. I was going to say closed off.”

I laughed, “Oh, right. That too.”

“It’s always a joke with you, isn’t it?” She shivered as the night breeze rushed past us. The intensity between us already a memory.

“Life is better when you laugh at yourself.” I put my arm out to direct her back to the Tavern, “Let’s get you inside. You’re going to freeze to death out here. We’ll go through the back.”

She didn’t budge. For a second, I thought she might tell me something.

“You want to go through the front door?” I pushed her gently on her lower back. “Come on. The day is slipping away and we need to get on the road.”

“Is this just a game to you?” she asked, walking to my side.

“If it’s a game, doll. It’s your game.” I laughed, and Mia rolled her eyes. We walked along the wall to the back entrance, and I unlocked the deck security system. “Gather

your things and get yourself ready. We'll try to make it to Vegas without many stops."

The door closed behind us. "I'd like to take a quick shower and dress comfortably," Mia said.

"That's fine. I'll gear up and let the team know we're good to go." I checked my watch. Things were taking longer than I expected. "Be ready to go in forty-five minutes."

Mia disappeared into a room down the hall. I rested against the wall, thinking about the last few hours. Mia recognized Meret or Luka from somewhere. But I couldn't push her. We would never find the missing women without Mia going undercover to retrieve the intel. This mission wasn't just about Mia and her sister anymore.

The OPS team needed Mia just as much as Mia needed us.

MIA

LONG RIDE

Once alone in my room, I contacted Sarah. She had access to state documents through her clerkship and could compare the DNA results I found in Tasha's journal to other documents during that time. It wouldn't be a hundred percent accurate, but she would know if it was an obvious forgery. Sarah received the picture of the test results and messaged me back right away.

Me: I can't answer questions right now, but will you compare it and let me know what you find?

Sarah: I absolutely can. I think I know a clerk who can help. Are you ok?

Me: No other clerks. Only you can see the names on the DNA results. I'm safe. I'll wait for your message.

Sarah: I'll figure it out and get back to you.

I tossed my phone in my bag. My room was spacious, with a knotted wood bedframe and matching dresser, giving it a rustic feel. The connecting bathroom was clean and stocked with comfortable, large towels and a tiny wicker basket with toiletries. I showered and slipped into yoga pants and a V-neck T-shirt—the only other outfit in my bag, and walked into the hallway, looking for Alex.

The next door was slightly cracked. I pushed it open, about to announce myself. Inside, Alex stood shirtless, facing the dresser. His wide back tapered into a narrow waist, creating an unmistakable vee shape. Scars on his lower back and side interrupted the smooth flow of his tan skin. I had never seen a

guy that pretty with so many scars. Some were jagged and circular and others were patchy and rough. He pulled a shirt over his head and broad chest. “Are you ready?” He asked without turning around.

“I am.” Immediately, I averted my eyes. “Are we driving through the night?”

Alex slid a gun off the top of the dresser and fastened the weapon to a holster at his waist. “Yes. We move with urgency from this point forward.” He turned around and pushed a set of keys into his pocket. Bright blue eyes sparkled under his dark, wet hair as he walked toward me.

Alex grabbed two duffel bags from the bedside. “Let’s go.” And he walked past me out the door.

Cadie and Liv hurried from the bar and down the hallway. Alex continued through the Tavern’s back deck door.

Cadie grabbed me, hugging me tighter than I expected. “Everything is in order. Alex will take care of you. Trust him. He knows what he’s doing.”

Liv squeezed me next. “You’re going to be fine. Greyson, Devin, and John will be down soon to assist. We’ve got to tie up a few things before we go.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.” I searched for the right words but couldn’t find them.

Cadie put a hand on my shoulder, “We’re happy to help you. We like chasing bad guys and saving people. It’s what we do.”

“I’m starting to get that about your family. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“Focus on finding your sister, but let’s get these other girls home safe. Agent Kelly will need as much intel as possible.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised. At that moment, I wanted to tell them about the DNA test and Tasha’s drug use, but I didn’t. I couldn’t risk delaying the mission.

“I know.” Cadie hugged me again, seemingly oblivious to my awkwardness with each embrace. She and Liv headed back

into the bar area of the Tavern. By the time I got to the Tank, Alex was in the driver's seat and the others were gone.

Using the handle and step, I hopped into a big and comfortable passenger seat. A touch screen on the dashboard lit up with fancy options. "So, this is the Tank, huh?"

"It's our OPS vehicle—bullet resistant, has an internal computer connected to our tracking system, and maneuvers well in sticky situations."

"It's big."

"Yeah. It is." Alex glanced over his shoulder and drove out of the gravel lot to the smooth road.

"Do you think we're easily recognizable by this?"

"There are lots of big trucks and SUVs in Nevada. I think we'll be okay as long as Luka isn't expecting us. I'll park the Tank and we'll use a driver to get around the strip." Alex turned on the XM Radio. A 90s Rock song played and for a second it felt like a normal road trip, except for the being escorted in a tactical vehicle by a hot bodyguard with a god complex and a duffel bag of guns.

Right, just like a normal road trip.

I spun a piece of hair around my finger, thinking about the picture of Meret and Luka. Clearly, my father was involved with the Russians, but could it be Luka? He can't be the only Russian gangster on the West Coast—*could he? What are the odds?* What would Meret have to do with any of this? He was just our gardener, but his death had to mean something. Surely it was no accident. I rubbed my temples from the stress. *Fuck* Luka probably thinks Arthur is responsible for Meret's death. *And he's not altogether wrong.* Could he have taken Tasha in retaliation? If he did, then we're walking into a feud, seeping with revenge, that's been bubbling for over a decade. Briefly, I considered saying something to Alex, but his response was predictable. He'd leave me in the dust. I was already too unstable for his taste. There's no way to tell the OPS team any of this without the whole thing blowing up in my face. If Alex found out my father was as bad as Luka, he'd leave me on the

side of the road. Besides, I couldn't prove anything. I only had suspicions and ideas. After some research on my end, I'd be able to put some facts together. Until then, I'd keep my mouth shut. Trusting people was the quickest way to get your heart ripped out. And that's a lesson I learned a long time ago.

Ignoring my endless anxiety, I crossed my legs and watched the Sierra Nevada landscape. Tall pine and fir trees grew thickly together on both sides of the gray highway. A river, picturesque and full, flowed to the right. The two-lane road followed the river all the way to the bottom of the Sierras. I understood why the OPS team loved this area. The mountains felt safe. The evergreen trees and thick forest faded to xeriscape and patches of greenery as we entered the valley cradling the biggest little city in the world.

The outer city limits of Reno spread farther than I expected. Businesses and homes stretched out through the valley as far as I could see. I busied myself reading the signs for local casinos and shows that lined the highway.

Alex broke the prolonged silence. "You don't look very relaxed."

"This is just how I sit. I have a lot on my mind."

Alex gave me a quick once-over. "You look stiff."

"I'm just like this, okay?"

"All I'm saying is, get comfortable. It's a long ride." He shook his head and popped a piece of gum in his mouth.

"I'm fine."

Alex shrugged his broad shoulders. "Suit yourself." He mumbled something else and turned the radio up.

I resisted the urge to bite back. The more relaxed he was, the crazier it made me. I leaned into the window, hoping to put as much distance between us as this vehicle would allow. The last thing I wanted was small talk.

The cushions in the seat were big enough to rest my head. I watched outside the window, thinking about my sister and how her laugh would make me laugh. How my face would ache

from smiling so much, about her hugs and late-night movies with gigantic bowls of ice cream ... and about the nights we held each other as we missed our mother. For a second, my eyes watered. I took a deep breath, tucked my sadness away, and pressed my lids tightly closed.

Somehow, I fell asleep. I woke to the sound of gas pouring into the Tank at a small gas station in the middle of the Nevada desert. Alex stood next to the pump with his arms stretched above his head, revealing abs practically etched from stone.

Good God. My mouth watered in response to my momentary wild thoughts. I shook the ideas away. Sure, his body was incredible, but he knew it. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as I tried to calm my physical reaction to him.

Alex leaned over and opened the door while the gas flowed. “Do you want to eat something? We can get some snacks.”

My stomach growled on cue. “I am hungry. That would be great.” I pointed at a hoodie draped over my lap. “Is this yours?”

He looked through his open window. “Yep.”

My face flushed at the sweet gesture. “Thank you.”

“You looked cold. It’s no big deal.”

I blinked, staring at his torso framed perfectly in the open window of the Tank. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. “It’s best if we don’t use electronic funds.” Reaching over the driver’s seat, he handed me a twenty-dollar bill. “Get whatever you like.”

“Thank you. Do you want something?” I stretched my legs out of the Tank onto the dusty cement.

The pump clicked. “I’ll eat whatever you bring me.”

I tucked the money in my pocket and hurried across the short parking lot through the cool desert air. The buzzing of desert nightlife surrounded the brightly lit gas station. The heavy clink of a bell announced my entrance to the store. I bought chips and drinks and thanked the cashier. A pair of

black sunglasses with tiny rhinestones caught my attention. I tried them on and smiled at the tiny rectangular mirror on the stand. They reminded me of the movie “Thelma and Louise”. A guy like Alex could have totally played the hitchhiker in that film. Smiling, I placed the glasses back on the rack.

A new car pulled in for gas behind the Tank as I exited the shop. Four large men in business suits emerged from a Mercedes SUV. The first two walked casually, laughing about something as they passed me and entered the shop.

The other two smoked cigarettes outside the car with no regard for an open flame around gasoline. One had a shaved head, the other sported a flat top with shaved sides. Both men wore similar knuckle tattoos. After a few drags, they flicked their cigarettes into the sand surrounding the concrete parking lot, following me with their eyes. Ignoring the urge to run to the Tank, I forced myself to keep a steady pace, trying not to look at them.

I opened the Tank door, slid into the safety of my seat, and locked the door. I knew bad news when I saw it. Preppy bad-boy-wanna-be’s were one thing. Gangsters with prison tattoos were a whole different level. My internal alarm was going off like the world was on fire.

Alex faced the Tank, leaning one forearm on the door and his other placed discreetly near his holstered gun. With his back to the men, he spoke to me calmly, “Put the bag on the floor and fasten your seatbelt.”

I buckled quickly, noticing the keys laying in the driver’s seat. One man shouted something I couldn’t make out. Alex didn’t turn around, but yelled back, “Nah, man, I don’t think so.”

Unsatisfied with Alex’s answer, the two men walked towards Alex, watching his every move intently. Alex faced the men as they approached.

“I know this guy! What the fuck are you doing here?” They had recognized Alex.

“Just driving through.” Alex said dismissively, “And we’re leaving now.” Alex turned back to the car door, shrugging them off. He barely pulled on the door handle when the bald guy grabbed his shoulder. The handle clicked as Alex released it.

Without hesitation, Alex turned and struck him with a hard right hook in the jaw. The other man pulled out a knife, waiting to get a stab at Alex. The bald guy retaliated with a low punch to the abdomen, but Alex moved fast and the guy hit air. Taking advantage of the missed strike, Alex kneed the guy in the chin and followed it with another right punch to the side of his head.

The man fell to the ground. Alex reached for his holstered gun, as the second guy attacked with a wide swipe of the knife. Boxed in between the car and gas pump, Alex couldn’t move out of the way. The knife sliced his shoulder, and a thin stream of blood flowed quickly down his bicep. Alex dodged another wild lunge from the knife, pulling his gun out as he jumped.

“Drop the knife,” Alex demanded. He dropped the knife on command, focusing on the gun aimed at his chest. Alex stepped forward, forcing the man to move back. I could now see him directly behind the Tank.

They would soon outnumber Alex four to one when the other two men came out of the store. I grabbed the keys and slid into the driver’s seat, and sitting on the edge of the seat, started the Tank.

Just as the engine turned on, the other two men walked out of the shop. It took only a second for one of them to pull out a gun.

His partner yelled loudly, “No, asshole! We’re at a gas station!” They started running across the lot towards us. I put the Tank in reverse, hitting the gas just enough to throw the vehicle back a fast ten feet. A loud thud reassured me I had hit my target. My abrupt move had also made it easier for Alex to jump around the front of the tank and into the passenger seat.

“Go, go, go!” He shouted.

I punched the gas, and the Tank ripped out of the driveway and onto the two-lane road.

“Put your seat belt on. Keep driving fast and don’t turn unless I say so.” Alex reached into the glove box and pulled out a first aid kit.

I moved the seat forward and buckled my seatbelt. “Your shoulder!” I said, watching the trail of blood run down his arm.

“It’s fine.” He wrapped a bandage around it and tied it off quickly before putting the kit away. “You did real good back there.”

Alex pressed a blue button on the dashboard. “Text Greyson,” he directed, “Ran into 4 knuckle tattoo goons at the gas station. One of them used to be an errand boy for that biker gang Devin brought down. He recognized me. Look for my location and I’ll check back in a few minutes.”

I gasped. “Like one of those big biker gangs from the news?”

“Yes.” Alex checked his rearview again. “Before we started fighting human trafficking, we were only a bodyguard service. We had a few run-ins with a biker gang when we were escorting clients. Afterward, we helped Devin serve enough warrants to take out the Southern California chapter of a very notorious biker gang.”

“Maybe I saw parts of that on the news?”

“Yeah, you probably did.”

“Wow.”

“Devin made a name for himself as the biggest bounty hunter in the U.S. He helps our business and we help him. We work together all the time, like two parts to a big family business. Since then, he’s even taken international contracts. The goon back there with the SUV keys was a former errand runner for that biker club.”

“What does this mean? Why would he care about you?”

Alex checked his mirror again. “If he’s working with Koltsov, and they’re smuggling people or drugs, then he won’t want an OPS guy heading in his boss’ direction.” Alex pulled a magazine clip out from under the seat and fastened it to his waist. “It’s best to avoid them, but there’s only one road out here. If they want to catch up with us, they will.”

My heart thumped heavily in my chest. We drove for ten more minutes with no sight of another car on the desolate road stretching through the Nevada desert.

“Pass this car.” He ordered.

I drove into the oncoming lane and sped up to pass a blue Honda going the speed limit. The slow car faded into the distance. Telephone poles passed like stripes against the beige hue of the desert landscape.

“Maybe they didn’t follow us.” No sooner did the words leave my mouth than another car sped around the Honda.

I wasn’t sure if it was the “knuckle tattoo” guys, but Alex was. “Keep driving. I’m getting in the back.”

“Wait. What?” Alex maneuvered through the middle of the Tank to the back third row.

“What do I do?” I asked.

Alex shouted over his shoulder, “Don’t take your hands off the wheel. Don’t stop driving. Keep us on the road and don’t slow down. There’s a dirt road next to a tall pine tree about three miles up the road. When you see it, go hard left. Your seat is bullet resistant. Keep your head exactly where it is.”

“Ok.” I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. *You can do this, Mia.*

The Mercedes SUV pulled close to our rear, and a guy leaned out, holding a gun in his hand. He fired at the Tank, causing the vehicle to shake on impact, and the steering wheel to vibrate. Alex aimed out the passenger window and returned fire, hitting the other car’s windshield.

Through the mirror I could see the driver, but the front passenger had disappeared or slumped over—I couldn’t be

sure. The driver was yelling as he closed the distance between our vehicles.

I slowed to make the turn at the tall pine tree, turning the wheel left as hard as I could.

“Speed up, Mia!” The Tank spun out wide, but I regained control and stepped on the gas. An immense cloud of dirt rose behind our tires as I sped down the dirt road.

“Where do I go, Alex?” I shouted.

“Keep straight. We’ll take them over the hill.”

The Mercedes fell behind after the turn but followed us over toward the incline. The thick cloud of dirt trailing behind the Tank created a smoke screen, preventing our pursuers from taking good aim.

Alex leaned over the console and peered through the windshield. We were headed down the back side of a hill on a dirt road barely wide enough for the Tank. A creek flowed approximately fifty feet below. He pointed, “There. See the little road to the right running parallel to the creek? Take that.”

“I see it.”

Alex reloaded and resumed his position in the back seat, gun out and ready. I made the sharp turn onto a narrow dirt road carved into the side of the hill.

“Go faster!”

“We’re barely hanging on to the side of the mountain!”

As the Mercedes turned, another guy hung out the window. The clinking of the bullets hitting the Tank had me saying small prayers as I focused on the narrow dirt road.

Alex waited for the Mercedes to speed up, then fired two more times, hitting the car in the left front wheel. The driver overcorrected and the SUV slipped down the hill.

I watched in horror as the vehicle flipped—one, two, three times before stopping. Alex fired two more times at the undercarriage of the inverted SUV. A moment later, it blew up

in a flash of fire. I gripped the wheel with white knuckles, terrified we might slip off this road at any moment.

“Are you ok?” Alex’s mouth moved, but I only heard a deafening ringing. He holstered his gun back to his hip, put the automatic window up, and the surrounding noise from the wind vanished. In the Tank’s silence, I could practically hear my heart beating between my heavy breathing.

“Are you ok?” He repeated.

My eyes darted from him to the road. “I, I think so. My ears are ringing. My heart is beating fast.”

“The ringing will go away. It looks like there may be a better road.”

“What other roads are there? There’s nothing out here, Alex.”

He placed an elbow on the center console, squinting as he surveyed our surroundings. “Just keep driving. Are you hurt?”

I did a sort of internal body scan. My muscles were tight, and my head hurt, but I was alive. “I’m fine. Let’s keep driving.” We drove until the path led down the side of the hill to a gravel road.

“Slow down.” He placed one hand on my arm. “You did great. One of our wheels is blown. They’re bullet resistant, but we shouldn’t keep driving like this unless we absolutely have to.” He motioned to the right with a straight hand. “Go West on the gravel road.” I nodded and drove the Tank over the top of the hill, following the gravel road. It handled incredibly well for having a bullet lodged in the tire.

“Drive to that big shed. We’ll park behind it until I figure things out.”

I drove a hundred feet and veered off the gravel road onto a flat desert area near an unkept, possibly abandoned shed. The hills were East of our spot and the main highway ran parallel far off to the West. A white farmhouse, perched below the hilltop, displayed an American flag jutting up high from a cement base. It seemed too far away to be part of the same land as the shed.

Alex got out and assessed the damage. I stood behind him, curious about what we would do next. He circled the Tank, assessing it for damage. "I'll make a few calls. Stay close and out of sight."

I paced behind the shed, kicking little pebbles and stealing periodic glimpses of the road, fearing another car of thugs might appear at any moment. After a while, I sat behind the trunk of an Evergreen in a nearby cluster of trees and held my knees close to my chest. The adrenaline coursing through my veins made my heart flutter. Had I killed a man back there? If I hadn't, then I contributed to the rollover and what was surely the death of all four men. I tried to make sense of my feelings. I had no guilt, only anger. They would have killed us and the leader of those maniacs had my sister.

Alex made phone calls to the OPS team, explaining the details of our escape and talking through changes to the mission. All around us, the night was alive with the hum and buzz of desert insects and wildlife. In the distance, coyotes yipped and howled in a high pitched orchestra of sounds, leaving me with an unsettled feeling of being exposed.

Alex finished his calls and sat in the driver's seat with the door open and one leg stretched out. He tossed his phone into the passenger seat, arched his back, and attempted to stretch, wincing in pain when he moved his arm up.

"Alex, your shoulder." I hurried to him, slightly embarrassed that I had forgotten about his wound during the chaos. I reached out to see how bad it was.

He pulled his arm away. "It's superficial."

"Drop your ego and let me look." A closer examination showed a blood-soaked bandage. "You may need stitches. At a minimum, we should clean and re-bandage it."

"It quit bleeding. Trust me. I've had worse. Are you still okay?"

"I'm fine." I rubbed the outside of my body for more warmth. "Just cold. So, what's the plan?"

Alex reached back inside the Tank, pulled out the hoodie from earlier, and offered it to me.

“Thank you.” I pulled it over my head and inhaled his unmistakable scent. I hadn’t smelled it earlier, but now that it was over my head, I was drowning in a sweet, earthy, and leathery smell that made me feel like a teenage girl in the football captain’s letterman jacket.

“What now?” I asked, ignoring the obnoxious butterflies in my stomach.

“Greyson has eyes and ears on Luka and Dimitri. It looks like their men didn’t check in before they started following us, which is good. It means that Luka won’t know who was involved or what exactly happened. He also talked with Agent Kelly and she’s going to join forces with local police over this incident. But ...”

“But what?” I asked.

“We have to find those other girls. We’re in deep now. Luka will come looking for his men. He’ll find the vehicle and the authorities will identify the remains.”

I cringed at the word ‘remains’.

“We have to act quick. And we need to give Agent Kelly something to help her. She wants the locations of Koltsov’s connections in his home country. Where he’s most likely to be stashing women and drugs on that end.”

“That’s the plan, then? Get Tasha and information on the others?”

“It sounds simple, doesn’t it?” Alex chuckled and interlocked his fingers behind his head, while he leaned against the Tank. “We’ve raised the stakes now.”

“Nothing about this has been simple. Two days ago I was studying for the bar exam. Now I’m hitting Russian gangsters with a Tank and being shot at by thugs on my way to strip for their boss. I don’t think the stakes can be any higher.”

“Gangster,” Alex smirked.

“What?”

“You only hit one gangster with the Tank.” He clarified.

“I’m just trying to keep you honest.” His cocky smile almost pushed me over the edge.

I crinkled my nose in frustration. “You know, I’m having some serious anxiety about all this. I may look fine, because admittedly I’m not great at displaying emotion, but I’m freaking out a little here.”

“I almost forgot. You’re kind of a nerd under that persistent RBF.” He smiled, leaning casually against the frame of the Tank.

“I’ll have you know that this look is my poker face.” I straightened up and pouted my full lips.

“You are predictable. Poker face and all.” Alex shrugged.

I gasped. “I am not the predictable one—that’s you!”

“No, ma’am. It is definitely you.” Alex pushed off from the Tank and took a step closer to me. Just one step—but it felt like he closed in on my world. “I make a remark about how uptight you are. Then you pretend you hate it.” He took another step, leaving practically no room between us. I bit my lip and my face flushed. The darkness offered little concealment. His gaze penetrated the night air straight into my soul.

I took a shallow breath and lied. “I do hate it.”

“But you don’t.” He said matter-of-factly. “You like to control everything—but it excites you when I take it from you. I’m guessing you only date men you can control. But then they totally bore you. And if you can’t control something you run from it.”

He was inches from me. The desert air had chilled my nose, but my body was on fire. I could play this game of chicken. I stood still, unwilling to break under his gaze.

“I don’t date. Very often, anyway. It’s not a productive use of my time at the moment.” I stuttered briefly and pulled my thoughts together. “I’m too busy. Control has nothing to do with it” There. I said it and that was the truth. Mostly.

“You’ve never met a real man. That’s the problem.”

“Ugh! Your ego! I don’t need a man to improve my life. I’m perfectly happy the way I am.”

“Shhhh!” Alex hushed me, grabbing my waist and pushing me hard against the Tank. He covered my mouth with his hand and whispered in my ear, “There’s a truck driving up here. Stay quiet. Don’t move.” His body pressed hard against me. He released my mouth, and I held still against the Tank, holding my breath in anticipation. Not from fear, but from the hard collision of his body over mine.

“Get down.” He whispered, and we crouched behind the wheel. Alex drew his gun, listening to the truck moving slowly on the gravel road. The vehicle stopped and a bright light swept over us.

The truck door opened, and someone loaded a shotgun. Alex kept pressing against me. If Luka’s men had found us, they’d kill us—that much was certain.

ALEX

KILL 'EM OR FEED 'EM

A man shouted from the truck. “Come on out. Hands in the air.”

I assessed the situation, gun in hand. Mia stayed frozen where I had pushed her against the Tank.

“I’ve been watching you. You’re out here fucking or stealing. So, which is it?”

Not Russian. I brought my gun down.

“What are you doing?” Mia whispered sharply.

“Shhh!” I hushed her again.

“We’re not stealing, Sir. I’ll stand with my hands up.” I holstered my gun. “Don’t shoot. I’m standing up now.” I raised my hands in the air and stood slowly.

“Where’s your lady friend?” The man yelled back.

“She’s right here—just scared.”

“On your feet, little lady!” He shouted.

I nodded for Mia to stand. She stretched her arms above her head and stood. Turning my face and squinting from the bright spotlight, I offered an explanation. “Sorry if we’ve caused any trouble. We had some bad luck and we’re stranded at the moment.”

“This is your tactical vehicle?” He asked.

“Yes, Sir. It is. Is that your flag by the house up top?”

“Yes, it is. You a military man?”

“03-11, 4 tours Somalia, Afghanistan twice, and Iraq. Rah, Sir.”

The old guy turned the light off. A moment later, my eyes adjusted to the darkness again. He looked to be about five foot eleven inches, in his mid-seventies, and wore faded overalls and work boots. White hair peaked from underneath a POW Vietnam ball cap with an Eagle, Globe, and Anchor patch. Behind him was an older model Chevy truck with the engine still running.

“Oorah, son. What are you doing here?”

“Can I put my hands down?”

“Go ahead, but if you try anything funny, I’ll shoot you.”

“Understood.” I put a hand on Mia’s shoulder. “This is Mia. I’m Alex. We busted a tire and are waiting for a friend to come get us.”

“This is an odd place to wait, isn’t it? You drove a busted vehicle a mile down a dirt road.” He pointed his rifle at the front tire. “You could’ve made it to the diner just up the highway.” He said, his rifle still pointed at us.

“I’m a bodyguard, Sir. I’m escorting Miss Mia to Las Vegas.”

“Uh-huh.” The grey-haired former Marine wasn’t the type to be fed bullshit. “Is this connected to the fire behind the hills?”

“It is. I’d prefer we weren’t in the area when their co-workers come looking for them.”

He put his rifle to the side. “I know those bastards run drugs through here. I’m not stupid. I know what they’re doing.” He looked up and down at us. “Come on up to the house. You can wait for your friend there. My wife Linda will make you some coffee and serve you up a slice of pie while you wait.”

“That’s unnecessary, Sir,” I replied.

“Call me Howard, and it sure is. I had precise orders to either shoot you or bring you home and feed you.” The man

motioned toward the Tank. “Get in your vehicle and follow me.”

I hesitated, not wanting to bring Howard and his wife any attention from Luka or his thugs.

“Let’s go, son. I really don’t want to shoot you now.” Howard didn’t wait for an answer, walked to his truck and got in.

“Looks like we’re headed up there.” I pointed at the farmhouse.

“Are you sure? He pulled a gun on us.” Mia’s eyes were wide with uncertainty.

“I’m sure. Trust me.”

Her lips tightened into a straight line. “Okay.” She hurried to the passenger door.

I started the Tank and followed the taillights of the Chevy over another dirt road leading to the farmhouse up top. Eventually, we drove to a paved road that led to a driveway behind the house. A round woman with dark hair piled on top of her head worked busily through the kitchen window. As we approached, she disappeared.

“We leave as soon as Greyson gets here.” I stopped behind the house and parked. “He has one of our guys bringing him down with a spare. We’re going to swap vehicles just to be safe.”

I was expecting Mia to follow me out the door. She didn’t budge. “What’s the problem?”

“We just met this guy. How are you sure we can trust him?”

I put my hand on the seat and leaned in. “I know my people when I meet them. And I can guarantee you, so does Howard. You only need to trust me.”

Mia stared silently at the house, wearing her nervousness like an uncomfortable outfit.

“So, do you? Do you trust me, Mia?”

She looked away from the house, bringing her eyes to mine as she nodded. "I do." For a moment, I almost believed her.

"Then trust me when I tell you that this guy is on our side. And smile."

"I'll smile if I feel like it." Mia flashed a bratty smirk.

Howard held the back door open. "You two coming in, or what?"

I chuckled. "Good. I can tell you already feel better. Now, jump out." Mia climbed out of the Tank.

I shouted back to Howard, "On our way, Sir." Mia and I walked toward a small set of stairs leading to the back door.

"I told you to call me Howard." He said, holding the screen door open as we walked through. "There's a first aid kit under the sink in the bathroom."

"Old habits die hard, Howard. And thank you."

"Ha! If that ain't the truest statement." He said, closing and locking the door behind us.

The smell of apple pie flooded me with nostalgia as we entered Howard's home. The lady of the house had black curls piled high on her head and mocha skin beneath a white apron decorated with small purple and yellow flowers. She untied it and hung it on a hook. "Hello, loves. We've been watching you down there. I thought you might need a warm house and a piece of pie." Her cinnamon eyes lit up as she smiled. "I'm Linda." I offered my hand. She scoffed, "Oh, no. If you're in my home, then we hug." She wrapped her plump arms around me and squeezed tight. "Oh, my!" she turned to Mia as she patted the outside of my shoulders. "This is quite a guy you got here. Don't let this one go."

Mia opened her mouth to reply, but Linda grabbed her with surprising speed. I held back a laugh as Mia's eyes widened at the older woman's strength. Linda had pinned Mia's arms momentarily, but she managed a light patting on Linda's back through her tight hug.

Linda held the outside of Mia's arms up. "Aren't you just a darling thing?"

"Thank you, ma'am," Mia said with a shy smile that softened her normally fierce look.

"No, no, no. You call me Linda." She turned around and grabbed a few white plates with a blue flower trim.

"Be a doll and put these out." Mia accepted the plates and put them on the table.

"Do you need to wash up?" Linda's eyes widened at the sight of my shoulder, "Oh, my! You're bleeding!"

"It's only a minor cut, Ma'am," I assured her.

"You have been so kind. May we use your bathroom to clean up?" Mia asked.

"Of course. Howard is in the back washing up. A stack of towels is under the sink in the bathroom. They aren't my good ones. Use them to tend to that cut. First door on the left."

"Alex, please let me look at the cut." Mia insisted again.

"Fine. If it makes you feel better." Arguing was clearly pointless.

"The pie will be here when you return. Go on," Linda shoed us towards the hallway, and we obliged.

I followed Mia out of the kitchen to a walkway that separated a formal dining room and living room, leading to a lone hallway. Framed pictures decorated the narrow walls. A photograph of a young, tall, and muscular Howard with Marine Corps buddies in a Vietnam village caught my eye.

Howard had been a grunt in Nam. The pictures of his ageing face in Saigon and various countrysides, proof he had spent a few years in that jungle hell. Howard was highly trained or very lucky. My intuition told me he was probably both.

Next, hung more recent pictures of a young man newly enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Mia noticed my pause. "You know him?"

“No. I’m just curious who he is and what he does.”

At the end of the hallway was a picture of Howard and Linda smiling ear to ear, each holding a young boy on their shoulders with the Golden Gate bridge in the background.

“Come on.” Mia waved me down towards the next door.

We entered the larger-than-expected bathroom, decorated in pink towels with white trim. I sat on the rim of the bathtub and unwrapped the old bandage from my arm. Mia washed and dried her hands. She gathered a few of the multi-colored washcloths from beneath the sink. Then she picked through the first aid kit, choosing a rectangular bandage, tape, and peroxide.

I pulled off my shirt, streaked with blood from my arm, and put it on the counter next to everything else.

Mia’s face flushed as her eyes darted away from my bare chest. She sat carefully on the side of the tub next to me, holding a damp cloth. “Here we go.” She dabbed the wound gently. “Does that hurt?”

“Nah, I told you—it’s not a big deal.” I held my arm out over the tub.

“This might sting a little.” Mia poured the peroxide and it bubbled and hissed over the cut as the liquid ran down my arm.

She dried my arm and put the bottle back in the kit.

“Alex, to be honest, it looks like it needs a few stitches.” She inspected the wound, shaking her head.

“It’s fine. I’ve had much worse. Just put a bandage on it.”

Mia rolled her eyes, grabbed a tube of antibacterial cream, and applied it to the length of the cut. “Can I ask you something?” She fit the gauze across the wound.

“Go ahead.”

“How did you get the scars on your back?”

I exhaled. “The last tour I had in Iraq, we got hit by an IED.”

“A bomb?” She asked.

“An improvised explosive device. It’s a type of homemade bomb. We were clearing houses in a village, searching for terrorists we knew were hiding there. I heard something across the street and turned to point my rifle at a possible shooter. My buddy, a few yards in front of me, stepped on the IED. It blew him up and knocked me down. The scars are from the shrapnel.”

I raised the arm Mia was bandaging to show her where the scars stretched around my body like rough polka dots.

“That must have been awful.”

“It didn’t hurt as much as the burn on my leg. But that’s another story.”

“I think Cadie told me about that.” She whispered.

“Did she? That’s not a story I share often.” I cleared my throat. “Really, I have nothing to complain about. The day this shrapnel hit me, I lost my brother. I wish it would have been me almost every day of my life since.”

“Why would you say that?” Mia tore off pieces of tape to fasten the bandage around my arm.

I looked at the tiled floor. “He had a wife and a kid. I had nothing. His family—the world—needed him more than anyone needed me. I can guarantee that.” I held the two silver partially melted dog tags I wore around my neck out in the palm of my hand. “These were the tags he wore when he died.” I moved my thumb and finger over them like I had a thousand times before. “I wear these to remind me to live a life worth living. One that would honor his sacrifice.” I dropped the tags on my chest. “OPS and the Freedom Foundation keep me faithful to that promise.”

“That’s terrible.” She finished taping the bandage to my arm.

“Terrible things happen in war.” I shrugged. This was only one of several events that changed my life forever. “It’s not something I care to talk about much.”

“No, I mean after suffering the loss of your friend—to feel unworthy of your own life. It’s heartbreaking.”

I cracked a smile to lighten the mood. “You have a heart?”

Mia rolled her eyes, and a smile forced its way to her lips. “Will you shut up and let me tell you something nice?” She placed her hand on my face. “I am thankful you are here, risking your life to help me find my sister. It means everything to me.” She let go. “And back there.” The little hairs on Mia’s arm stood on end as she shivered with goosebumps. “You saved us. You saved me.” Her eyes returned to mine, now clouded with lust. She pressed her soft, pouty lips against my cheek. “Thank you.” She whispered in my ear, taunting me with the slight brush of her lips.

She smiled. A perfect tease of a smile at an exactly wrong time. “You’re doing that on purpose.” I grabbed her jaw with my hand. Her lips parted, begging to be kissed, and she arched softly. “I want to kiss you.”

“You can’t.” She teased.

I loosened my grip but held her face still. Then she leaned in quickly and licked the outside of my lips with one swipe. I growled at her game, sliding my hand into her hair at the base of her neck. A noise outside the door startled us and we froze.

Knock, knock. “Do you need anything else?” Linda’s dainty grandma voice made our current predicament seem even more wrong than it was.

Howard’s voice shouted from some ways behind her. “I told you to give them a few more minutes. That’s a big cut.”

I cleared my throat, “No, ma’am. Mia’s almost done fixing me up. We’ll be right out.”

“Yep, almost done!” Mia chimed in.

“Ok, dears. Pie is ready when you’re finished.”

“Thank you.” We said in unison, using our best church voices.

Mia stood up and ran her fingers through her hair. “Oh, my god. We can’t do that again.”

I found my shirt on the counter and stood up. “You can’t resist me. I get it.”

Mia’s head whipped back. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I smirked, standing shirtless. “You almost kissed me this time.” I mocked her, enjoying her awkwardness with emotion.

“I was absolutely not going to kiss you. No offense, but I don’t kiss anyone.”

“Just lick? There’s no actual difference.” I moved forward. Mia didn’t budge. She stood inches from my bare tattooed chest, as I pulled my shirt over my head.

Mia rolled her eyes and crossed her arms across her chest. “There’s an enormous difference.”

“That’s a strange flex, but okay. Just for that, I’m going to make you beg the next time we’re alone and you need a dose of me.”

Mia made direct eye contact with me, all furry and fire. “Dose of you?”

“You heard me, doll.” My smile only stoked her flames.

“Do not call me ‘Doll’,” she snapped back, “And I hate to disappoint you, but I don’t beg. *And* I don’t need any future “doses” of you.” She exhaled sharply. “Let’s just stick to the plan.” Mia put the first aid box under the sink.

“Yes, ma’am.” Something about seeing her feathers get ruffled made my blood pump faster. She was so hot when she was angry.

“Ugh,” Mia growled, shooting daggers at me one more time before inhaling a breath for composure and opening the door.

Once outside the bathroom, the war pictures caught my attention again.

Mia stopped.

“Do you think he did terrible things in Vietnam?”

I examined the photos and ranks of the Marines. “Terrible things happen in war, it’s something we live with forever. It’s not something you ask a Marine about. Especially not Howard.”

“I ... I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.” I straightened up, finished with my close examination of the picture display.

Howard walked out of the back bedroom, paused, and squinted at us both. As he walked by, he patted my shoulder. “Just a bodyguard, huh?” He chuckled and continued towards the warm smell of pie.

Howard was a perceptive guy. *Definitely my people.*

“There they are!” Linda announced as we walked into the kitchen.

“Sit down. I’ve got a fresh pot of coffee.”

“The pie smells amazing. Thank you, Linda.” Mia pulled a chair out and sat at the white farm-style table.

“Yes, thank you, Ma’am.” I sat across from Mia.

“We’re happy to have you.” Linda pointed to the center of the table. “There’s cream and sugar if you like.”

“We really appreciate this.” Mia bit into a piece of apple crumble pie. I smiled at Mia, nodding at her sweet comments. As soon as Linda looked away, Mia peered sharply at me as she pulled the fork from her mouth, letting me know she was still upset.

“My grandson, Blake, is in Iraq,” Howard said, sipping a cup of coffee.

I swallowed a bite of pie. “He’s the young Marine in the picture?”

“Yes. Making us proud. He’s currently deployed and has seen his share of combat.” Howard sat back, cradling the warm cup in his hands. “There’s more action over there than the news is reporting.”

“There always is, Sir.” I took another bite. “Ms. Linda, the pie is delicious.”

Linda blushed. “I’m happy you like it.”

“When does he come back?” Mia asked.

Howard straightened with pride. “Blake will be back in a few months. He works with Explosive Ordnance Disposal. I think he’s ready to do something else, though.”

Linda interjected, “Our Blake is worried he won’t find a job in the civilian world. He’s such a good kid. We’re eager to have him home.”

“He’ll find a job, dear,” Howard said, attempting to ease Linda’s worry.

“An EOD guy, huh? I can leave you my card. Maybe he’d be interested in private security. I work for Orion Protection Services. The work is dangerous, but not as bad as what he’s doing now. And the pay is quadruple what he’s currently making.”

“That’d be great, thank you.”

Linda reached for a glass of water. “It sounds too dangerous.”

I raised my hands a little in retreat. “It’s just an option. He has a skill set my company would find useful, that’s all.”

Linda quieted. Howard stared at his plate and nodded his agreement. “It’s good to have options.”

“Yes, Sir. It is.”

We continued eating and Mia asked questions about their quiet life here. Linda talked about loving the desert, and how she was grateful to have her husband home. Military life was hectic, and they enjoyed a quiet retirement in the valley.

Howard told a few war stories. I listened intently. Vietnam vets had a perspective on war that was unique to their lives and I never tired of hearing them speak.

Howard was indeed a hero. I had a feeling his grandson was of the same caliber Marine. I made a mental note to

contact him when he got out. He would be a good fit for OPS—I'd bet on it.

“Another cup of coffee?” Linda stood, reaching for my empty cup.

“Yes, ma'am. Please.” I leaned back, needing the coffee to counteract the hefty pieces of pie served earlier.

“I'll take one more cup too, dear.” Howard pushed his cup forward.

“You'll be up all night if you have another. I'll make you some tea.”

“You're the boss.” Howard pulled his shoulders back as he stretched out in his chair.

I smiled at how well they knew each other.

“I'll help clear the table.” Mia took the remaining pie to the counter. When she reached for my plate, I sat back to give her room.

“Do not get used to this,” Mia whispered. She put all the silverware on my plate and took everything to the sink.

“She's a spitfire.” Howard smiled.

“Yes, Sir. She is.”

“Are you looking to leave sooner than later?” Howard folded his hands on the table and lowered his voice as he talked. “I have a Harley you can take into Vegas. You'd have to fit everything on the bike, though. I'll keep your vehicle in the garage.”

“I can't borrow that from you, Howard.”

“It's ok. I don't use it very often anymore. It deserves to be on the road.”

Howard put a hand on my shoulder. “I want you to take it.”

Definitely my people.

“I'll get it back to you. I appreciate your perception of our urgency.”

“It’s my pleasure, son. We don’t get much adventure up here. You’ve been the highlight of my year.” Howard slapped me on the back. “Let’s go look.”

Mia looked over her shoulder as she dried the dishes Linda handed her. I held a finger up, signaling that I would be right back. She nodded.

Howard led me out to the garage and turned the lights on. On the wall above a long tool bench hung a POW flag, American flag, and Marine Corps flag. Near the flags, parked next to the bench was a covered motorcycle.

Howard pulled the cover off.

“Oh, shit. That’s a 2012 Street Glide.” I ran my hand over the seat. “We can’t borrow this.”

Howard grinned as I admired his baby. “I insist.” He grabbed the keys from a nearby hook and tossed them to me. “Bring her back and we’ll talk about my grandson.”

“It’s a deal. I’ll do my best to keep her safe.”

“I understand the risk.” Howard pointed to a hook with gear. “Take the leather and helmets. When your friend gets here. He can fix your tactical vehicle in my garage and take off from there.”

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this, Howard.” I walked to the hooks and pulled the helmets off. “There’s one more thing. The number on that card—call it if you run into any trouble from that explosion.”

“I appreciate your concern, but we’ll be just fine.”

I knew he would be. “Understood, Sir.”

“Thanks for making an old man feel a little excitement.” Howard walked back to the house door. “I’ll tell Miss Mia you’re out here.”

“Thanks, again.”

Howard waved my thank you away as he walked through the door, opening the garage on his way back into the house.

I opened the Tank and took out the necessities. Our equipment, laptop, and the few clothes we carried. I could fit the essentials into one bag. I squeezed Mia's bag into another backpack. She had packed surprisingly light. I sent Greyson a detailed message with a pin drop to where we were. He'd arrive in about three hours.

Mia walked into the garage just as I finished packing our things. I tossed her a leather jacket. "What is this?" She asked, confused.

"We're borrowing Howard's Harley."

"We're doing what?" She asked, mouth agape.

"Here." I held out the leather jacket, helped her put it on, and handed her the helmet.

"I don't understand." She pulled the helmet over her head.

"Luka or the police won't be looking for two people on a motorcycle. Great idea—and generous of Howard. Have you ever ridden on a Harley?"

"No."

"You're in for a treat." I started the Harley and put my helmet on. "You coming?"

Mia approached the Harley as if it would reach out and grab her. She stopped next to it and stared at the seat and then at me. I couldn't help but laugh at her apprehension. "It's ok. Just get on. Trust me."

Mia threw her leg over the seat. She wiggled, leaving too much space between us. I reached around, put my palm on her lower back, and pulled her hips firmly against my back.

"Hang on tight!" I revved the engine. "And don't fall off."

Howard and Linda waved from the door. I waved back and sped up briefly down the driveway. Mia's grip tightened quickly with the first burst of speed. We traveled slowly over the gravel, but once we hit the two-lane highway, I gave the Harley gas. Mia squealed, holding me tightly with her knees and arms. I patted the outside of her leg to reassure her and she tightened her grip.

After a few minutes, her body relaxed, and she held on like a pro. Nothing shook Mia for long. *Damnit*. It made me crazy about her.

MIA

HEAVEN OR HELL

Riding to Vegas with a massive vibrating piece of steel between my legs was hell. I had no choice but to keep my arms wrapped around his obnoxiously ripped abs. Alex was chipping away at the walls I spent years building and every bone in my body was telling me to run.

The desert was unusually chilly for this time of year and the leather jacket didn't stop the wind from chilling me to the bone. Midway through the ride, Alex put my cold hands under his shirt. A few minutes later, his body heat had thawed my stiff fingers. The rest of the trip, I rode with my hands wrapped around his waist. The vibration of the Harley coupled with his body heat turned me into a puddle. Had I died and gone to heaven or hell?

Hoping to take my mind off Alex, I thought about Howard and Linda. How could Alex meet someone and immediately know that they are "his people"? What was this brotherhood? These people wrapped their arms around strangers because of common ties. I trusted two people in my entire life—Tasha and Sarah. Everyone could turn on me at any moment. Life had taught me that hard lesson.

But here I was, trusting Alex. Putting my life in his hands. Escaping from Russian thugs and watching Alex fight and fire his weapon—*Jesus*. I could have ripped his clothes off in the bathroom at Howard's house. All the adrenaline somehow translated to a deep desire to have him—ruined promptly by his innate talent to be an asshole.

Highway billboards and neon lights signaled the outer limits of Las Vegas. We passed downtown and exited off the freeway into a residential area. The Harley stuck out in the quiet neighborhood with wide streets, large homes, and manicured lawns. We stopped at a big house with large pillars accenting a front door. Waist-height long rectangle bushes flanked the entryway. Yellow roses lined the front of the perfect suburban house.

Alex pulled into the driveway and drove the Harley close to the garage door. The engine stopped, but the vibration continued down my thighs, heightening my frustration and irritation. I swung my leg over off the back, trying desperately to ignore the pulsing in my panties from the growling Harley.

Seemingly oblivious to my current plight, Alex walked to the side garage door and found a small security box. The garage door opened, and he walked back, stopping in front of me while I shifted uneasily.

He arched a brow. “You ok?”

“I’m fine.” *Except for the fact that my panties are still vibrating.* I faked a smile.

He tilted his head and squinted. “You sure?”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat, approaching my maximum level of frustration at an alarming rate.

“Good.” He flashed his devilishly charming smile. “Did you like the ride?”

Ugh, he knew.

“It was fine.” I took a deep breath and refocused out of spite. “This is a nice place. Much better than a hotel room.” Alex McCallister would not beat me at his childish games.

“We have the hotel room, too. It’s good to have options. Koltsov has eyes all over. We’ve got a few friends in the Casino, but when we’re on the strip, we’re on his home turf. Out here, he’d have to physically show up and leave his base of operations.”

“That would be awful. Him coming out here.” I cringed, remembering the panic I felt earlier.

“For him, yes. You would be fine.” Alex pushed the Harley into the garage. His confidence was suddenly not aggravating, but reassuring. He brought the door down. “Let’s go in. I’ll get the bags, set the alarm, and do a perimeter walk.”

Alex brought in everything from the compartments. I opened the door to a laundry room that led to a spacious kitchen with a dark granite island surrounded by high matching countertops. A large circular white table sat in the breakfast area next to the kitchen. The open living room had a fireplace and one wall with floor-to-ceiling windows. Across the hall, a brushed bronze chandelier hung above a rustic pine wood dining room table in a formal dining room.

French doors in the breakfast nook led to the backyard. Bright lawn lights followed a 7-foot wood fence bordering a small green lawn surrounded by a larger xeriscape of white and grey rocks. *Beautiful house. One floor and cozy. I bet Liv decorated this house.*

I peered into the darkness of the yard. A section of rock to the right stopped at the lawn. A small waterfall fell into a swimming pool. The garage door closed with a thud. Alex talked as he walked through the attached garage door, setting the alarm. “While we’re inside, the security system will be on. Let me know if you need to go out. When we’re gone, the alarm will stay on. I’ll add a few cameras so I can see what’s happening if the perimeter is breached.”

I nodded, turning my attention to the kitchen. Large white cups hung below the cupboard next to a fancy espresso machine. *Oh, yes.* Large amounts of caffeine would have to get me through the next few days. I hadn’t slept well in over a week.

“The neighbors have dogs that probably sleep outside. Pay attention to any odd barking when we’re here. I’ll take our bags back to the rooms.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I followed him through the hallway. He stopped at a tall cabinet and pulled out a toolbox

from the top shelf before continuing to another set of French doors that led to the master bedroom. He opened the doors. “Here you go.”

The master bedroom had a queen size bed with a soft grey comforter, big fluffy pillows, and two oak nightstands. A matching long dresser with a large oval mirror faced the bed. In the corner, a beachy picture of a hammock and palm tree hung above a stack of books and a lounge chair. Thick floor-to-ceiling curtains covered a large window.

Exploring the room, I walked towards a short hallway that led to an open bathroom with a built-in vanity, a glass shower, and a roomy walk-in closet.

“This place is nice. Probably not as fancy as you’re used to, though.” Alex dropped my bag by the bed.

“It’s perfect. I haven’t lived in luxury since I left my dad. Are you sure you don’t want the master bedroom?”

“I won’t sleep much, especially on a mission like this. And I don’t care where I keep my stuff. I’ll be in the room down the hall.”

“This could be a stupid question, but should we talk about what happened earlier?” I sat on the bed and rubbed my temples. “I didn’t mean to take it that far. The adrenaline from what happened ...”

“It was exciting.” He set the toolbox down and stretched one arm up on the doorframe. “Did it scare you?”

“Yes, but not the way you think.”

Alex looked me directly in the eyes. “Stop making assumptions about what I think.”

The intensity in his voice set shivers rippling down my spine. I hoped he hadn’t noticed the tiny bumps popping up all over my skin.

“I’ll finish setting up the cameras inside and then you can get some rest.”

I quit breathing until he looked away from me, then inhaled quietly.

Alex picked the drill from the box and began attaching the camera to the top of the hallway between our rooms. “Hold these.” He placed a few screws in my open palms.

“Why are you doing this?”

Alex held a screw between his teeth. “I need a better view of the hallways at all times.”

He reached into the corner with the drill and camera. With his arms outstretched, his shirt moved up his back, exposing his boxer briefs just above his jeans. I swallowed hard and spun to the other wall to keep from staring. “Not that, I mean helping me. I know Cadie wanted to help me, but when we met, I was ...”

“A bitch?” he said, still holding the screw in his mouth.

“Sure.” I crinkled my forehead. “And you could have taken another case, still fighting the same cause. I was kind of terrible to you and you still agreed to help me.”

Alex took the screws from me and attached the other side of the mount. “I guess I have a thing for tough, pretty girls who look unbreakable.”

I laughed. He wasn’t wrong. I didn’t break easily.

“And Cadie fought hard for you. That counts for a lot on our team.” He picked up the tool bag and the drill.

“You’re more forgiving than I expected.” I stepped to the side. A heavy exhaustion swept across my body, urging me to crawl into bed.

“I’m a lot of things you didn’t expect.” He smiled and stepped past me, talking as he walked down the hallway. “I have some work to do. You get some rest and we’ll talk in the morning.”

Alex disappeared around the corner. The heaviness of my body stopped me from overthinking the conversation. Moving like a zombie, I went straight for the bed. I laid down on the soft comforter just to see if felt as cozy as it looked. I needed a shower and a change of clothes, but my body was turning off.

My eyelids quickly felt too heavy to lift, and I drifted off to a deep sleep I couldn't fight.

ALEX

DRESS UP

I closed the laptop and rubbed my eyes. Greyson flooded me with intel all night. Everything was coming together. Blueprints of Luka's estate, intel on his security team, and an inside look at Luka and Dimitri's personal accounts had given us the critical information for the mission. I stretched my arms to get the blood flowing through my body. A shower started in Mia's room. It was almost 10 AM, and I was sure she got some much-needed rest. A few minutes later, a wet-haired Mia walked around the corner in Yoga pants and an oversized USMC sweatshirt I left in her room last night.

"Morning." I focused on the papers in front of me to distract myself from Mia's dreamy morning appearance.

She sat down, tucked one leg under the other, and leaned over to examine the documents spread out over the table. "Thank you for the sweatshirt. I'm out of clothes."

"I figured, and you're welcome. You can keep it if it's comfortable. I probably have ten just like it."

"Thank you. It is. Did you sleep last night?" She asked, eyeballing a copied blueprint of the Koltsov Estate.

"I took a nap on the couch. I had a lot to do."

"You covered me with an extra blanket. I appreciate that."

I went to the coffeepot. "You fell asleep on top of the bed. I figured you were too tired to make it under the covers."

I picked a white mug hanging from beneath the cupboard and held it up. "Coffee?"

She nodded, “Please.”

I placed a black cup of coffee in front of Mia.

“Thank you. For the coffee and for keeping an eye on me.”

“It’s my job.” I smiled, ignoring her delicate bare shoulder peeking from under the huge USMC sweatshirt. I cleared my throat. “Greyson’s on his way. He’s been researching all night.”

“Is there new information?”

“Yes. Luka has the strip club and a group of dancers he uses as escorts.” I slid pictures of the women across the table. “On the record, they accompany high rollers and VIPs to dinner, poker games, nightclubs, and shows.”

“And off the record?”

“They’re high-end strippers who do private shows and operate as call girls. Time with one of these ladies costs between 10-50K, depending on how long she’s kept and services.”

Mia sighed. “Is it legal? I mean, it’s Nevada. Prostitution is legal here, right?”

“There are a few outside counties that allow brothels, but prostitution is not legal within Vegas city limits or Clark County.”

“And Vegas is in Clark County?”

“Correct. And if Luka wants to hire his girls out, he has to do it under the guise of friendly escorts, using the club to cover it all up. The whole thing is probably a larger cover-up for sex trafficking. Most of these women are trapped. They feel like they can’t leave, don’t know how to leave, or are simply too terrified to do anything but what they’re told.”

Mia fanned the pictures out, examining each woman’s face. “These are the call girls?”

“Yes.” She looked up, finding my eyes locked on her. “And these girls?” Mia held up the less glamorous pictures of young women.

“They’re a few of the unsolved disappearances that Agent Kelly and Greyson are working on.”

“How can I help if I’m on a date as a call girl? I can’t get information if I’m separated from the other girls and unable to ask about Tasha.”

“There’s an annual party in four days on one of Luka’s properties. His best girls attend the parties. We both need to be there.”

Mia pulled a leg up and rested her chin on her knee. “Any idea how to get an invite?”

I rubbed my jaw, thinking about everything I learned the past few hours. “I’m working on it.”

“Do you have an evening dress?” I asked, knowing she didn’t. Spoiling her a little today would be fun.

She laughed, almost spitting out her coffee. “In that little bag we brought on the Harley? No. Do I look like Stripper Poppins?” She could barely catch her breath, giggling at her own joke.

I kept a straight face, loving her smile even more than I thought I would. “Oh, you have jokes now?”

“I have precisely three changes of clothes in there, and you’ve seen almost everything.”

I took her empty coffee cup to the kitchen. “Then, get ready. I’m taking you dress shopping.”

She stopped laughing. “Really? We’re going shopping? She scrunched her nose. “That’s not what I expected us to be doing today?”

“What did you expect?” I folded my arms across my chest, wondering what type of ideas she had in her head.

Mia put her knee down and picked up the blueprint of the Koltsov Estate, “I don’t know, maybe sneaking into where my sister might be and finding clues.”

I squinted, envisioning what a mess that would be. “You want to sneak into a guarded estate and snoop around in the

middle of the day?”

Mia tilted her head. “Yes. Exactly.”

God, she was every bit of stubborn. I leaned my elbows on the kitchen counter separating us. “When Greyson gets here, we’ll put surveillance on the estate and hack into his computer and closed circuit systems. For now, you need to get ready for your audition tonight and prepare to dance or go out on the town with a client, depending on what Luka asks you to do. And I’m sure you need more than what’s in that bag to pull this off for four days.”

“It doesn’t feel like enough. I want to do more.” She huffed, crossing her arms and legs.

“You have to have patience. There’s more than you and I working on this mission. Trust me, we are doing exactly what we need to do.” I took a deep breath. The heat in her eyes made my heart skip beats. “We leave for Soleil in one hour.”

“Playing dress up doesn’t sound like finding my sister.” She rolled her eyes.

“Look, Mia. You playing dress up is precisely what is going to save your sister. It’s not always kicking doors down like in the old west.”

“I know.” She sighed. “But I came here to help and I want to do more.”

“And you are. You’re looking at it the wrong way. You are the piece that makes saving these women possible—remember?”

She looked at the pictures of the women, moving a finger over one of the faces. When her eyes returned to me, her face had softened. “I’ll be ready in an hour.”

Mia emerged from the back bedroom in the unmistakable outfit she had worn when we met, but this time with her hair

pinned tightly in a bun. I called a car service and had us dropped off in front of a swanky boutique called Soleil.

Mia scanned the dresses in the window and nodded her approval. “This place is nice.”

“I know.” I put my hand on Mia’s lower back and pushed her gently forward.

As we opened the door, a tiny woman with red hair and a pixie cut greeted us. She wore an all-black outfit and a heavily jeweled necklace, “Mr. McCallister?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I’m Penelope. I’m here to assist you with your shopping needs today. Please follow me.”

Except for us, the shop was empty. Penelope led us to a room with a cream-colored loveseat and couch facing a large changing room with matching floor-to-ceiling cream curtains.

“Mr. Aldridge called before your arrival. I prepared several dresses and dinnerwear per his request. Please, let me know if you would like to see a different size or style.” She smiled. “I’ll be back with mimosas.”

I took a seat on the couch and rested my ankle on my knee, watching Mia finger through the dresses on the rack.

“Who is Mr. Aldridge?” Mia asked, running a hand across a sparkly long red evening dress.

“She’s referring to Greyson. This shop is owned by an old friend of Greyson’s. He called ahead to have dresses waiting once he found out about the party.”

Penelope appeared with a tray of champagne, poured two glasses of chilled Bollinger with orange juice, and left the room.

Mia picked a black evening dress with a square neckline. It shimmered in the light as she held the hanger to her chest. She turned toward me with a puzzled look. “It’s the right size.”

“I guessed.” I shrugged. She shifted her weight and twirled a piece of hair. “You’re uncomfortable? I figured growing up,

you shopped at places like this all the time.”

Mia put the dress back on the rack and bit her lower lip. “I’m not uncomfortable.”

I arched an eyebrow and switched legs, settling onto the couch while I waited for the truth.

“It’s just that I never wore brand names or went on shopping sprees. I hated the girls that picked friends based on brands or labels—and I hated spending my dad’s money. When he spent money on me, it was to pay me off for not actually being present in my life or to apologize for something terrible. In my family, money was used as control. If you take the money away, most people are just assholes. It’s the people with the money that make me uncomfortable.”

“I thought your night job was the craziest thing about you.” I stood up, swiping a glass of champagne as I stepped towards Mia. “Most people would buy into it all.”

“I’m not most people,” she said through barely parted lips. Flecks of dark green and amber twinkled in her eyes. Preparing for an undercover mission was never easy. Undoubtedly, we had to be a dirtier, uglier version of ourselves. Mia could do it, but she would need my help.

I handed a flute to Mia. “What will you go by in Vegas?”

“You mean my stage name? I use Jade.”

I rubbed my chin. “Jade, huh?”

“You like it?” She brought the flute to her mouth and sipped with her tigress eyes peering above the curved glass. A loose piece of hair next to her jaw softened her gaze.

“It’s perfect.” I cleared my throat. “You already go undercover every night that you work. The only difference now is that you can’t break your cover. Relax and let it come naturally. If you’re nervous, you’ll look out of place. You’re Jade until this mission is over, and that means saying and doing things you would normally never do.” I tucked the strand of hair behind her ear. “If Luka or Dimitri sees through you, it’s all over. Commit to the cover and let me do my job. I’ll keep you safe.”

She teared up. “What if I have to do something ... I don’t want to do?”

“I promise you I won’t let that happen.”

She wiped a renegade tear from her eye. “You can’t promise that.”

“I can—and I just did. I’m the best in the world at protection and, lucky for you, I always get the bad guy.”

She tilted her head. “And the girl?”

I chuckled, “Verdicts still out on that one.” I raised the glass of champagne I was still holding in my hand. “More champagne?”

“Yes.” She smiled and downed the entire glass. “I feel better,” she said, taking a breath of air.

“Ha, good.” I placed it back on the tray, sat down, and settled into the comfortable couch. “Now, let’s see how these dresses fit.”

MIA

'A' GAME

We spent two hours going through dresses and accessories. Alex paid for everything and had a car waiting as we exited the boutique. The new outfits and dresses hung on garment hooks. I felt like a stripper barbie. Stripper Theresa. I grinned at my stupid joke.

“You’re smiling,” Alex said, still looking forward.

“How did you know I was smiling? You weren’t even looking at me?”

Alex turned, looking over the top of his dark sunglasses, “I’m always looking at you. It’s my job now.”

“That sounds creepy.”

“It is what it is.” He took his glasses off and his brilliant blue eyes immediately stopped my breath. “Tell me about something.”

Please don’t ask about Meret.

“How does an intelligent girl from an affluent family end up taking her clothes off for money?” He raised a finger quickly. “And don’t tell me you hate student loans. You and I both know that no one wants school loans, but not everyone becomes a stripper. Don’t bullshit me.”

He was asking for truth and trust—the two things I gave no man. I wanted to give it to him more than ever. This was a good start, I suppose. I straightened and crossed my hands in my lap. “After I completed my bachelor’s degree, I came to a crossroads in my life. I had a trust fund. But that was the trap.

My father wanted complacency and the trust fund was essentially a bribe, and like I said earlier, a way to control me. Other girls I knew spent their daddy's money and eventually married some rich prick. My father had already presented several lucrative marriage offers."

"Like an arranged marriage?"

"Yes. He wanted me to be educated, but not too educated. The goal was to be attractive for a prosperous union. All of this disgusted me. My entire life I felt expendable—like an expensive piece of property my father owned." I pulled a piece of my hair down and twirled it around my finger. "I didn't know what I wanted from life. But I didn't want—that."

"Makes perfect sense." His eyes said he understood more than I thought he ever would.

I looked away and traced circles over my knee with my fingers as I grappled with my words. "Alex, my father has never been a 'good' guy. He taught me I am disposable, the world is selfish, and people will leave you as their trash."

"Mia, your family does not define you—your actions do. You made your life your own. You're risking everything to save not only Tasha but countless other women you've never met. That says a lot." Alex adjusted in his seat to see my face. I continued to look down, knowing I should say something about Meret. *Maybe he would understand that too. But maybe he wouldn't.*

Alex touched my thigh. "I want to hear the rest of this story. The things you don't share with everyone."

"I was shopping at a small store in Los Angeles. As I picked through bathing suits on a rack, a woman—in her fifties, but in great shape and stunningly beautiful—thumbed through the hangers on the opposite side. She asked if I had ever modeled. I blushed and told her no. She said she was the General Manager at The Stardust Club, was looking for new talent, and discreetly handed me a business card. Her name was Jean. She said if I came by, she'd buy me a drink and we could talk."

“And you went?”

“Not right away. That night, I researched the club and burst out laughing. But ... then I started thinking about it. My whole life, I felt like my physical appearance had a price tag. If it did, I wanted to set the price. Stripping seemed like a way to take control of my life.”

“It makes more sense when you explain it like that, though I don’t think you should feel like property—ever.” He pushed his jaw out in thought. “Are you an exhibitionist?” he asked, his eyebrows slightly arching.

I paused, feeling exposed. “Every stripper is an exhibitionist. That’s no secret.” I continued, “I had a drink with her while I watched the girls give table dances. She asked about my education. Jean said that a girl like me could make tons of money at The Stardust. A win for both of us. If I didn’t snort or drink the money away, I could pay for grad school and buy a house with cash. I related to the business aspect of it all. I wanted to cut all ties to my father and go to law school.”

“Is that when you changed your last name?”

“Yes. It felt right. I didn’t want anyone knowing who my father and uncle were when I applied to law school. They ruined everything.”

Alex rested his arm against the car window. “You changed your name because you were showing your father that you didn’t belong to him anymore.”

I nodded. “And maybe I’m still seen as property, but it’s on my terms and I write the contract. Does that make sense?”

“Sure. But people should be happy just to be in your presence. When you let your guard down, you’re a spectacular woman, Mia Denali.” He seemed so confident in his words. I, however, didn’t share his beliefs.

I looked out the window at the passing trees. “That’s sweet, but for all you know, I could be a terrible person.” I bit my lower lip, feeling more vulnerable than I intended.

“Princess, you are a terrible judge of character. Lucky for you—I am not. Neither is Cadie.” He paused. “Do you enjoy

stripping? Is it fun for you?"

"I enjoy being the center of a man's world. The naked part doesn't bother me. I'm naturally fearless. The whole thing feels more like an escape." I shrugged.

Alex laughed. "You're an exhibitionist with daddy issues."

I wrinkled my forehead. "I'm aware I have some issues."

He laughed at my admission, and the low and honest roll of thunder that came from his chest made my hips squirm. I clenched my jaw and shifted uncomfortably, feeling trapped by my own confessions.

"For what it's worth, I'm happy you told me all that."

I folded my arms across my chest. "You're the only one I've ever told that story to. Even Tasha hasn't heard it. She only found out I was dancing because she dug through my work bag one day ..." I paused and looked at my lap, "looking for money to buy drugs."

"Tasha has a drug problem? Why wouldn't you tell me that sooner? Do you think she's using now?"

"She could be. I didn't think you would look for her if you thought she was somewhere high on heroin."

Alex rubbed his temples. "You're going to have to trust me a little faster, Mia."

"I do. I do trust you. That's why I told you." *I'm trying.*

Alex put a hand on my knee and tingles flew up my thigh straight to my panties. "Is there anything else you need to tell me?"

I thought about telling him about the DNA test and about Meret. Just as I opened my mouth, Alex's phone vibrated.

"Hang on. It's Cadie. I have to take this."

The driver slowed as he pulled in to the driveway of the house. He stopped the car and put it in park. Alex finished his conversation with Cadie and slid the phone back into his pocket.

“I briefed Cadie about Tasha’s drug history. She’s ensuring we have the right services for Tasha when we find her. Things are moving fast now. Shall we go in? Are you ready for this?”

“I am.”

“Well, Jade, it’s time for you to turn into a Vegas stripper. I’ll be getting down to business on my end.” The driver opened my door and my moment to come clean had dissipated.

He held his hand out, and helped me from the car. I thanked him. He nodded, and he handed me the wrapped dresses.

“I’m not sure you can handle me in stripper mode.” I teased Alex.

“Doll, I can handle anything. Haven’t you realized that yet?” He put a hand on my back, slid the dresses from my arm and carried my things like a gentleman.

“You could never handle all of me.” I smiled slyly.

Alex turned around. “You know what your problem is?”

He didn’t wait for my answer.

“Men never tell you ‘no’.” He flashed his McCallister smile.

“Not even you, as I recall.” I teased. He was crazy if he thought he could win at this game between us.

The car left, and we walked up the pathway to the front door of our suburban home—a stripper and her bodyguard planning to infiltrate the nightclub of a Vegas gangster. A tinge of excitement ran down my spine.

Alex disarmed the alarm at the panel. He pushed the door open, and I immediately noticed a new black backpack next to the entryway closet. I kicked off my shoes and looked into the kitchen. The nonstop clicking of computer keys filled the quiet house. A second computer sat to the side and several stacks of papers and files circled his work area.

“What’s up, brother. Give me just a minute.” Greyson spoke without ever looking up. Several stacks of papers sat

next to him as he feverishly typed, stopped momentarily, ran his hand through his hair, and returned to typing.

“I’m going to hang these up. Thank you for carrying them.” I took the dresses from Alex.

“Of course. Get ready for the club. We’ll go over a few things when you’re finished.”

I nodded and walked towards the hallway.

“And Mia?”

I turned around, “Yes?”

“We need your ‘A’ game tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I got this.” I continued down the hallway to my bedroom, adrenaline coursing through my body. I put my clothes in a pile on the bed and hung a few dresses in the bathroom.

This one. Tonight, I would rock the little black dress with a low square neckline. I picked a black lace bra and matching panties from my bag and placed them next to the sink. The open bathroom and large tub were perfect for putting myself together.

A bath, sexy clothes, the perfect amount of makeup, and an hour later I’d be “Jade”—a dangerous stripper, willing to do anything to get my sister back. Tonight, I would push my boundaries like I had never done before. Saying yes to things I never dreamt I’d do if it meant finding Tasha.

The bathwater roared into the pearl-white roman tub. I poured the bubble bath under the hot stream after finding it under the sink. The vanity mirrors steamed over as the water filled the tub.

I took a deep breath and put one toe in the hot water. Tingles rushed over my skin as I sank into the bubbles. My tight bun from the morning kept my hair dry and my breath escaped with a deep sigh. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

The water slowly turned from hot to tepid. I rinsed the soap off with the detachable shower head and slid my arms

into a white bathrobe hanging next to the tub.

Taking a seat at the vanity chair, I settled in comfortably as I leaned on the counter. Makeup was a ritual like war paint. Looking closely at my face, I meticulously applied black thin winged eyeliner, smoky eyeshadow, and a touch of glitter in the corner of my eye.

Being a stripper wasn't difficult. Something about the disassociation, the danger, the cat-and-mouse game of it all—I enjoyed stripping more than I'd ever admit to anyone—and damn, was I good at it. I'd use these sinister skills to take down every one of those bastards who took my sister from me.

A little contour on my cheekbones, a swipe of strawberry rouge lip color, and I was almost ready. After removing the hairpins from the bun, my thick black strands fell in waves to my shoulders. A dusting of hairspray and I had the unrecognizable, wild, and unruly look of my alter-ego.

I slipped out of the robe and into the bra and panties I picked out earlier. A knock at the door brought me out of my deep thoughts. "Come in."

Alex opened the door, talking before it fully opened, "Would you like to ..." He stopped mid-sentence and looked up at the ceiling, "You're not dressed."

"I haven't got to that part yet." His sudden boyish charm made me smile. "You're being quite the gentleman."

"You're doing this on purpose." He shook his head, his eyes still locked on the ceiling.

"I'm in a bra and panties. It's practically a bathing suit." I teased.

"Fine." He brought his eyes to my face and clenched his jaw.

"What's up?" I asked, reaching for the black minidress he bought me earlier. My back to him, I pulled the dress off the hook and slid it over my shoulders. "Do you mind?" I swept my hair to the side, exposing the open zipper down the back.

Alex did not budge. I glanced over my shoulder, holding my hair up. “Come on. I won’t bite you.”

He obliged and I smiled as he pulled the zipper, tightening the dress around my body. I adjusted my bra on the square neckline as I spun around.

Alex’s eyes widened at my jiggling breasts. “You’re definitely doing that on purpose.”

I looked up at his hungry aqua eyes. If this were any other day, he would have thrown me on the bed. I could see it in his eyes.

“Yes, yes, I am.” I ran my tongue across my teeth.

“Can you not do that? It’s terribly distracting.”

“No can do.” I patted him on the chest. “I’m Jade from here on out. Don’t mess with my vibe.”

I found my stilettos and slid each foot into the spikey heels.

“God help me,” he murmured before clearing his throat, “Will you come out here so we can talk about the plan for tonight?”

“Of course.” Quickly, I put a few things in my bag. Alex took it before I had the chance to put my arm through the handle. Then he motioned toward the door, insisting I walk out first. I found my small purse quickly and obliged, enjoying the feeling of his eyes on my ass as I walked down the hallway.

Greyson looked up from his computer and nodded in approval. “You definitely look the part.”

“Thank you for your help with the dresses.” I placed my small purse on the counter next to Alex’s duffel bag as I sat at the table. I slipped my shoes off, hoping to save my feet from some of the pain I’d have by the night’s end. Alex went to the kitchen and poured three glasses of water.

Greyson closed the computer and sat back with his arms crossed over his chest. If he noticed my tits floating at the top of my dress, he never let on. “The owner of the store owed me a favor. Not to mention my mother has spent a grip of money

there over the years.” He tapped the arm of his glasses. “In fact, she probably put Penelope’s daughter through college.”

“Penelope was the owner?” I asked, crossing my legs in the chair next to him.

“Yes. I requested her discretion. She closed the shop while you were there.”

“Oh, wow.”

Alex put a glass of water in front of each of us. I thanked him as I pushed the papers around, reading bits and pieces of what was there.

“Thanks, brother.” Greyson stretched and pushed back from the table. “Step one was you acting and looking the part. I think we got that covered.”

“You have no idea,” Alex mumbled.

“So,” I interlocked my fingers, “What’s the plan?”

Alex finished a gulp of water and put the glass down. “You go to the club as an out-of-town dancer looking for work.”

“I’m familiar with this. Most clubs allow new girls to work for a few weeks. It’s the same at Stardust, but on a smaller scale.”

“Right. Same thing.” Greyson nodded.

Alex continued, “Once you get in, be aware of your surroundings. Ideally, the person who texted you will find you quickly. We know Luka likes to meet every girl who works in his club. We’re hoping he asks you to work at the next annual party. It is imperative that we get you an invite. That’s your priority.”

Greyson pushed his computer to the side and leaned forward on the table. “Here’s what I know about the party. It’s a masquerade theme where Luka celebrates with friends and business acquaintances. Wild Rose dancers escort the men—basically arm candy. It’s a private event where rich people can do anything in private. Drugs, girls—nothing is off the limits. Luka provides the fun. In return, he has dirt on almost every

public official and influential person in the Vegas and Southern California area.”

“Alex, where will you be while I’m in the club?”

“I’ll be across the street listening to your mic. At some point, I’ll come into the Wild Rose as a patron, but it’s important that you avoid me and not draw attention to me.”

“I understand.”

“And you?” I turned to Greyson.

“I’m going to the Koltsov Estate while he’s at the club to assess the security and put eyes on the inside. I want you to listen for any information on Dimitri. He’s been MIA, and I want to know what he’s up to.”

“I can do that.”

Greyson picked up his computer and slid it back in the bag on the side of his chair. A glimpse of the gun holstered at his hip reminded me that the OPS men were always ready for action. “I’m meeting with Agent Kelly. I’ll catch up with you both tonight.”

“Keep your head on a swivel.” Alex clapped Greyson’s shoulder as he walked him to the door.

Greyson looked back briefly. “Same brother. Be safe, Mia.”

Alex closed the door. Suddenly aware that it was only the two of us in the house, my eyes immediately recalled his scarred back. I wanted to run my fingers over the scars, and then his tattoos. *Hell, what is wrong with me?* All I thought about was his body. Was it the danger? The possibility that I might die?

My head tipped back and I stared at the hypnotic ceiling fan as it blew cool air on my flushed chest. Struggling to ignore the tension growing in my temples and the heat between my thighs, I inhaled slow and long.

“You ok?” Alex’s deep voice roused me from my trance.

I lied. “Yes.”

Alex opened the black duffel bag behind me on the kitchen bar. “Good. Do you want to see your new toys?”

ALEX

NEW TOYS

Mia raised her eyebrows. “Oh, boy.”
“You’re gonna love this.” I pointed at the little black bag. “Is that your purse for tonight?”

Mia nodded, “Yes.”

I pulled out a few tiny devices, trying to focus on the mission and not how incredible she looked in the black designer dress I bought her earlier that day.

She stared as I placed each device on the counter, completely unaware of my internal struggle.

“This is a tracker. It allows me to locate you at all times. Hand me your purse.”

She slid it over.

“I’m going to put it inside this little zipper part. Leave it in there and take your purse everywhere you go.”

Mia picked up a small lipstick case and inspected it.

“That’s a small taser. It goes in your purse as well.”

She admired its size and detail. “It looks like a real lipstick.”

“That little thing will stop a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man in his tracks. Use it for protection. But remember, it’s a last resort. Understand?” I took the taser from Mia and popped the cap off. “See this button here?”

“Yes.”

“Push this into their body. Anywhere you can.” I thrust the taser forward, demonstrating an assertive movement. She took the taser and mimicked the thrust. “Exactly.”

I spotted the little black dress she borrowed from Liv and picked it up with two fingers. “That’s a stretchy material, right? Can you slide it on so I can see something?”

“You want me to get naked?” she asked, a devilish smile sliding through her lips.

“No. I don’t want you to get naked.” She was up to something. “Just pull it over your top.”

Mia pulled the dress over her shoulders and down her narrow waist. I closely looked it over, trying to avoid staring at her perfect breasts. “I can’t see the device. Can you feel where it is?”

She ran her forefinger and thumb over the top hem and stopped about four inches from her arm. “It’s right here.”

“Be gentle with it. Can you feel the tiny switch through the fabric?”

She nodded, “I can.”

“Flick it on.” I inserted the earpiece and took several steps away from her. “Say something.”

“Testing, testing.”

“Perfect. Everything still works fine.” I removed the earpiece and tucked it into my pocket. “You can take that off now.”

Mia pulled the stretchy dress off with ease and folded it up.

“Now we need a phrase that signals you’re in immediate danger. If you are afraid for your life say ‘purple monkey’.”

“Seriously?” She tucked a piece of unruly hair behind her ear. “Purple Monkey? Sounds silly.”

“It is, but you won’t forget it, will you?”

“I don’t believe I will. Got it. Purple monkey.”

“That’s the last time you say it unless you’re in big trouble. Now, this is your earpiece.” I placed the tiniest device on the counter. “I’ll position it in your ear canal. You’ll need to keep your hair over it. Though it’s practically invisible, it’s best not to draw attention to it.” Mia held her hair up and tilted her head to the side, exposing the soft slope of her neck and delicate ear.

Pinching the device with two fingers, I slid it gently into her canal. The scent of roses and apples invaded my senses. My jeans tightened across my groin. Again, I lost focus.

Mia wiggled. “That tickles.”

“Fuck.” I growled. The device was crooked. I plucked it out for another attempt.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re fine. It’s just ...” I backed away for a breath of air. The corners of her mouth turned up and I recognized that sly smile from the bar. The one she flashed before she placed a very lucky cherry in her mouth.

“Are you ok, Alex?”

“Of course, I’m ok. This is just a tiny piece of equipment and it’s difficult to place.” I waved her closer. “One more time.”

Mia’s scent could drive a man insane. And how could her bare shoulder be this damn sexy?

She tilted her head to the side again. I placed my palm on the right side of her head so I could push the piece into her left ear once more.

“I don’t want to push it too far. Accurate placement is essential.”

Mia shifted her weight and her hip pressed against my zipper, wreaking havoc on my self-control.

“It’s in.” I stepped away quickly. “I need to see what it looks like as you move around. Flip your hair, shake your head or something.”

Mia threw her hair over and then back, shaking her head slowly as her fingers slipped up her neck and into her thick strands. Lifting her dark hair above her head, she moved her hips back and forth. The deep neckline threatened to release her lace cupped tits at any moment. For a second, I imagined running my tongue from her nipple to her collarbone.

“That’s not what I meant.”

But that’s all I could say. I stood there, blood rushing from my head to my dick, watching her slowly dance by herself. She ignored me, moving her hips and shoulders, dancing to her own steady beat. She let go of her soft hair and laughed, filling the room with a magical sound I had never quite heard before. For a moment, I was almost lost in her trance. I cocked an eyebrow. “You think this is funny?”

“I’m just practicing. When I’m Jade tonight, I’ll have to laugh and smile a lot.” She made a little circle with the shoulder I wanted to bite a minute ago. “Is it working?”

“Yes. You should smile more in real life.” I cleared my throat and adjusted myself discreetly.

“I’ll think about it.” She teased.

I shifted uncomfortably. “Does it feel like it will fall out?”

Mia shook her hair again, this time faster. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re good if you keep your hair down. I’ll put my piece in and test it.”

I pulled my T-shirt over my head and grabbed my collared black dress shirt off the chair. A small square attached to my belt with the spyware battery and another piece went in my ear, exactly like hers.

“Testing. Testing.” I repeated into the small microphone.

“I can hear you,” Mia replied.

“Good.” I turned it off.

“If we stay in range, I’ll hear everything you say and a lot of what’s going on—depending on how loud the music is.”

“We have one night to find whoever left that message. Get as much information as you can. Again, don’t be obvious. And Mia ...” I waited for her eyes to meet mine. “If you get into trouble, I will extract you—by any means necessary.”

“Thank you.” She whispered.

I pulled my holster and Glocks from inside the duffel bag. Adjusting my waistband, I fastened the holster inside the front of my jeans. Mia watched with wide eyes as I secured my weapons.

“Wow. I really can’t see the guns you’re carrying. That’s wild.”

I straightened my collar. “They conceal well. It helps that I’m a big guy, too.”

“You were an amazing shot last night. Are you better than the other guys at Orion?” Mia asked, sliding her feet back into her heels.

“Greyson and Devin have made shots from 2,000 meters with a Fifty Cal. We use them for long-range shots.” She stared blankly at me, so I further explained. “That makes them an excellent shot, better than almost anyone. They could give an actual sniper a run for his money.” Mia’s eyes swooped over my bare chest as I busied myself buttoning my shirt.

“And you?” She asked.

I left the top button of my shirt open. “John, Logan, and I can shoot a small group into a moving target at 200 yards when we’re training. In the heat of things, I’m a damn good shot.”

Mia picked up the sports jacket from the counter and held it open for me. “The other night when that Cowboy attacked me in the alley, did you have a gun on you?”

I hesitated briefly. “Thank you. And, yes. I always carry a weapon.” I slid my arm into the coat.

“But you chose to not use it?” Mia’s full red lips parted in another slight smile. She was inches from my chest and every part of me pulsed with curiosity. What would she do next?

“No. I knew I wouldn’t need it. When I walked up to the bar I knew who had a weapon, who was the better fighter, and who would run. I had assessed the situation before I introduced myself. The alley played out exactly as I expected once they made the decision to follow you.”

I towered over her, regardless of her stilettos. Mia touched a button halfway up my shirt and traced the edge with her fingertip. Tilting her face up, she locked into my gaze and bit her plump strawberry lower lip. My cock twitched.

Mia brushed off my shoulders and ran her thin fingers under my collar. Then she slid her palms over the lapels of my jacket, smoothing the fabric. She patted my chest twice and smiled with half-hooded eyes, “There you go. Perfect.”

This is bad. But Mia was about to learn a hard lesson. *I always win.*

I smiled, entertained by her little show. “Are you done?”

She blinked her obnoxiously beautiful hazel eyes and nodded ever so slightly. Her head tilted up to meet my gaze, exposing her throat and collarbone. My height gave me a heavenly view of her floating breasts wrapped tight in the dress. A gold necklace circled her neck like a thin strip of glitter. She took a deep, long breath and her chest expanded, inviting me to ravish her.

I closed the space between us, feeling the heat practically erupt. I brought my nose to her jaw, tracing the line to her delicate lobe. My mouth pressed against her ear, I whispered roughly, “Are you teasing me?”

She slid her hand under my shirt and up my abs. “I would never do that.”

I put an arm around her waist and pulled her tightly into me, forcing a breath from her lips. Before I knew what I was doing, I had a fist of her hair and total control of her body. A barely audible moan escaped her lips. Mia’s tough and unshakable persona had dissipated. In this moment, with me, she was vulnerable. Then I had a revelation. Mia was very, very good at her job.

Her eyes closed, and her head fell back. I firmly pressed my lips against her bare shoulder, kissing it once. My hands effortlessly found the curves of her body as I traced the outline of her ass up to her waist. My lips brushed the outside of her ear as I spoke. "I'm going to rip those black lace panties off your body."

She inhaled sharply with eyes pressed tightly closed.

"Then I'm going to lick you until you completely melt in my mouth." I inhaled her, allowing myself to indulge for a fleeting moment. "I'll do things to your body that you never even knew you wanted. You will crave me. Need me. More than anything you've ever known. Once you have completely unraveled in my hands, melting like a piece of sucked-on candy, I'll make you beg for sweet release." I kissed her neck just below her lobe. Shivers ran through her body as she softly trembled in my hands.

Then I released my grip, giving her the weight of her body back. I growled, again, pulling a few disheveled strands of hair from her face and brushing the rest of it off her mesmerizing shoulders.

"But not now, Princess. Now we work. Save this little show for the club."

She opened her eyes to find my million-dollar smile. Her confusion quickly turned into a cute rage. "Ugh!" She took both hands and pushed my chest hard with all her strength. I didn't budge.

Furious with me, Mia stormed back to the room, her heels echoing through the hallway all the way to the bedroom.

I win.

"Be ready in 20 minutes!" The door to the bedroom slammed. I flinched at the loud noise. If it was any indicator of how mad she was, I might regret what I did. I chuckled. *This will be more fun than I thought.*

I finished gearing up and put a stack of cash in my wallet. Our driver would arrive any minute. We used a discreet

service for OPS clients, and I was lucky enough to have a driver I trusted for the evening.

About fifteen minutes later, Mia came around the corner composed and with no sign of coming undone only moments before.

“Ready, Miss Jade?” I held an arm out for her and she ignored it.

She pointed a finger at me. “I’m still mad at you.” I opened the front door and laughed while she gave me the cold shoulder.

Though I was having some fun at Mia’s expense, sex between us would have jeopardized the mission. There was too much at risk now. One bad decision could put the entire team in danger. I knew that better than anyone.

I carried her bag as we exited the house. “You look lovely.”

“Shut up.” She hissed, putting as much distance between us as possible. Our driver Carl, an old friend of Logan’s, waited patiently. Dressed in a black suit and white tie, he held the door open for Mia. Carl spoke excellent English, but with a slight Afghani accent. When Logan helped to secure his visa, he changed his name and took a new identity. Carl loved America, sacrificed everything for us, and had never looked back.

“Be nice to Carl,” I said as we approached the car. She ignored Carl and scooted in quickly. He gave me a disapproving look and whispered. “Sir, I see you’re up to your old antics.”

“Actually, Carl, I am behaving very well.” I shook his outstretched hand. “How are you? How’s the family?”

“We’re all doing well. To the Wild Rose, Sir?” Carl asked, standing tall with one hand on the door.

“I’m happy to hear that. First, to the diner a block away. You know the one?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Mia and I sat together in the back seat, but she refused to talk to me. I busied myself with the mission, sending our arrival time to Greyson and the rest of the team.

Carl stopped at the diner's entrance. "No need to open the doors for us, my friend. It's best if we stay low-key."

"Understood, Sir."

"Drop Mia off at the Wild Rose and be available until 6 AM."

"Yes, Sir."

"Mia, I'll be in later to assess the internal security. Don't look at me or talk to me."

"Is that all?" She asked, her hands folded tightly in her lap.

"No. Be careful. Don't trust anyone and have natural conversations. You'll blow our cover if they think you're phishing for information." I couldn't resist. I liked her all riled up. "And, well, if you're going to blow something ..."

Mia's eyes narrowed. "Not in your wildest dreams."

"We'll see about that." I closed the door before she could chew me out.

Once out of sight, I turned the earpieces on and walked towards the diner. Looking up at the sign, I said the name out loud, "Dolly's Diner". I picked an empty corner booth, pulled out my phone, and used an app to track Mia's movement.

"Can you hear me?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"I'll be listening."

"I know. But you're still an asshole."

"You'll forgive me later, Jade. Head in the game now."

"Right." She exhaled. "Game time."

MIA

WILD ROSE

Alex McCallister was the most infuriating, frustrating, arrogant man I had ever met. Hell, I wouldn't have actually fucked him. Clearly, I was just playing the game. So, why was being told "no" making me absolutely crazy?

"We're here ma'am." Carl stopped the car in front of a large windowless building with a set of gold-etched double doors inside a set of white Romanesque pillars. I expected a "Girls, Girls, Girls" sign to flash overhead, but the club looked more like a fancy nightclub than a strip club. I thanked Carl, put my arm through the loops of my oversized bag, and let myself out of the car.

Above the large doors hung a massive white sign with "Wild Rose" spelled with elegant cursive lettering. Suddenly, a gorilla-sized man in a white dress shirt with a black tie opened the door for me. I smiled. He did not.

The heavy door closed behind me, and I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. The gorilla-sized man guarded a roped-off entrance in front of a thick red velvet curtain. A woman in her early twenties, with long brown hair and bright highlights, sat on a stool behind a rectangular counter with one cash register. She wore a tight red tube dress and tall black thigh-high boots. "Welcome to the Wild Rose. A gentleman must accompany you to be admitted." She said flatly, batting her unnaturally long eyelashes.

"I'm not a customer. Is there a manager I can talk to about dancing?"

Giving me a quick once over, she muttered, “Of course. Please wait here.”

The woman spoke into a mic fastened to the top of her dress. “Luka, I have a dancer for you. Can you come up?” She stared at the counter, listening to his answer through a black earpiece. The large silent bouncer wore a matching piece. A camera above the register moved in my direction.

“Copy that.” She nodded at the oversized bouncer.

“Oleg will take you.”

Oleg held the velvet curtain open, and I walked through. His facial expression never changed. The main floor was lit by small wall lights. I blinked several times as my eyes adjusted to the dark as I followed close behind him. Pictures of exotic women painted with flowers adorning their naked bodies decorated the walls. Small lights placed above the frames gave each picture an eerie glow. Flames from candles on small round tables flickered throughout. Mirrored walls gave the illusion the room was vastly larger than it was.

Oleg pushed a few bucket chairs into their respective tables as we moved through the main floor. The chairs glided smoothly on wheels over a thinly carpeted floor. We walked towards the back wall. A door, not easily recognizable from a distance, appeared flush on the wall. He pushed it open to reveal a short hallway with office-type doors on each side. Oleg knocked on the second door to the left.

A deep voice called out, “Come in.”

Oleg opened the door, and I stepped inside an office slightly brighter than the club. A man with broad shoulders, short black hair, and a neatly trimmed beard sat behind a large cherry wood desk. Ivory pillars near the walls displayed statues and artifacts. Luka Koltsov, the monster who had my sister, held me in a penetrating gaze.

“How can I help you?” He broke the intense stare as he settled back in his chair with an arm on each rest.

“I’d like to dance here at the Wild Rose.”

“You would?” He smiled, showing white, pristine teeth. Luka stood abruptly. “Where are my manners? Please, sit.” He motioned with his arm towards the two chairs in front of the desk. I placed my bag beside the one on the right and sat down. I crossed my legs and gently flipped my hair from my shoulder.

“Your name and where you’re from?”

“Jade. I’m from Southern California.”

“You like our little club?” He smiled, expecting only one answer.

“I do. It’s beautiful.”

“Hmmm.” He growled, “I have an eye for beautiful things. I like to surround myself with exquisite ...” He paused, “art.”

Luka’s predatory gaze pierced through the dim light. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood as a chill ran down my spine. I fought the primitive signal my body sent me to run.

“Dancers often come here from other areas of the country. You are close to home. Does your family know you are here?”

“No. They don’t know I’m here.” I swallowed. “And the art displayed is lovely. You have impeccable taste.” I noticed the silk painting hanging on the wall behind Luka’s desk. “This is a replica of Guo Xi’s Early Spring, correct?”

Luka looked over his shoulder in admiration. “Yes. You know your Chinese art.”

“I have a particular fondness for Chinese art, particularly ink on silk.” I smiled politely.

He turned back around. “I adore the slight color on this piece.”

A ray of light escaping through the bottom of the far wall caught my attention. I noted the direction and brought my eyes back to Luka. “It’s beautiful.”

He stroked his bearded jaw as he studied me from across the desk. Luka was tall and slender in build. The outline of his

muscles shone through his pressed and collared white shirt adorned with gold cuff links. Two open buttons at the top revealed a gold chain necklace and a peek of salt and pepper chest hair that matched his trimmed beard.

“Do you have tattoos?”

“No, I do not.”

“Body piercings?”

“No.”

“Good. Such things are tolerated, but not encouraged.” He motioned for me to stand. I did as he directed.

“Spin around once. Slowly.” I got the feeling he enjoyed telling me what to do more than watching me spin.

I turned with confidence, flashing a sweet smile over my shoulder.

“You have a beautiful body. Are you experienced?” He continued to stroke his beard as he watched me.

“I am. I would like to start tonight, if possible.”

“We have paperwork that must be filed.” He tapped the table with one finger. “However, we can make certain accommodations for such an exotic woman. Tell me about your heritage.”

“My mother is white. My father is half Chinese.”

“And this is why you have knowledge about Chinese Art, I’m assuming?” He motioned to the silk hanging behind him.

I nodded, “Yes. My mother was an artist. She taught me more about my Chinese heritage than my own father did.”

“You resemble your mother more than your father?”

An odd question. Or was it a statement? Regardless, it wasn’t a hard conclusion to draw. I had just a hint of almond eyes and high cheekbones. “People do tend to say that about me.”

He nodded, “You’ll start immediately.”

“Thank you,” I put a hand on my hip, still standing on display like the artifacts near the wall.

“Sonja will get you everything you need.”

Luka spoke into the mic on his shirt, “Sonja, come to the office. Please escort Jade to the dressing room. Thank you.”

“She will get you settled. You are staying for a few days, I hope?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Perfect.” He paused and during the silence, the weight of his stare gave me chills for a second time. I grew up with evil and I knew it the moment I saw it. A knock at the door startled me.

“Enter,” Luka called out. He leaned forward onto his elbow, motioning toward the door with a dismissive wave. “Sonja will take you from here.”

I stepped towards his desk and knelt to retrieve my bag. The light still shone from under the wall. *Maybe it's a door.* I stood quickly and followed Sonja out of the office.

As I stepped away, Luka called to me, “Jade. One more thing.”

I turned around.

“I’ll see you at my table later this evening.”

I nodded. Sonja led me by the hand, and we walked into the hallway.

Alex spoke over the mic in my ear, “What door is Luka’s?”

“Second on the left.”

Sonja turned around. “What was that?”

“I was just thinking out loud.” I blurted out, my heart beating hard and fast from almost getting caught.

“I’m taking you downstairs to the dressing room. You can meet the house mom and get yourself ready.”

I followed Sonja to a set of stairs that led to the lower level. The club was larger than I expected, with a maze-like

feeling. As we walked down the stairs, Sonja educated me on the house rules.

“We only use stage names here. I’ll introduce you to our house mom, Ellen. She takes care of all the girls. Ask her if you have any questions. She has food, too.”

Sonja rambled, like a tour guide at a zoo, “The VIP section and glass booth are reserved. Do not go into the roped-off area without an invitation. Luka will sit in the glass booth when he’s on the floor. Be polite to everyone. Luka doesn’t tolerate rudeness or sloppy drunk girls.”

“You’ve danced before, right?” Sonja asked, looking over her shoulder as we stepped down the stairs.

“Of course. Every club is a little different, though,” I said.

Sonja squinted at me before turning back around. “Sure. So, you’re an independent contractor, not an employee. You pay the club to dance and the club takes forty percent of your money at the end. Tip out each of the bouncers and your House Mom at the end of every night. Understand?”

“Yes,” I said as we came to the last step.

The lower level was a fancy dressing room. Two large rows of lockers ran parallel in the center. Mirrored walls from the counter to the ceiling circled the dressing room with chairs spaced about every three feet. A few girls still wearing street clothes were applying makeup and attaching eyelashes. To my right, a woman with pinned chestnut hair was pulling on a bleach-blonde wig. She sat next to a chair with a silver, sparkly evening dress tossed over the top. The woman looked me over and went back to adjusting her wig.

A few chairs down, a dancer with mocha skin, gorgeous long braids, and a violet tube dress that covered half her ass leaned close to the mirror. She applied a bright purple hue to her full lips, stood back, and admired her work. She wore wireless headphones and moved her hips back and forth in a figure-eight movement.

An older blonde woman was walking around a large table adjusting and filling displays of personal hygiene items,

perfume, gum, candy, and various beauty items. She wore a bright floral shirt and black trousers. Big white curls hung layered around her shoulders.

“Mom, this is Jade. She’s dancing tonight.”

The older woman turned around with a warm smile, “Hi, I’m Ellen or mom—whichever you prefer.” She put her hand out and covered mine in a sweet hand hug.

Sonja put two fingers to her ear, likely listening to a voice from her earpiece. “I’ll be right there.”

“I’m going back up. Mom will take care of you.” Sonja hurried up the stairs.

“Alright, Jade. You can get ready right here.” Ellen walked me over to a chair. I put my bag on the floor. She turned around and wrote a locker number in her notebook. “You have number thirty-five.” I nodded my agreement. “I have anything you need, including shoes and dancer clothes, if you want something different to wear.”

“Thank you. That’s convenient.”

Ellen smiled. “After you get ready, I’ll look you over and then take you upstairs.”

After seeing a few of the dancers, it was obvious I needed to level up my makeup. I opened my bag and applied a thicker coat of mascara, eyeshadow, and brighter lipstick.

Alex chimed in my ear, “You’re doing great.”

I was furious with Alex. But, I had to admit—I felt better knowing he was listening. I took my clothes off and folded them neatly in the locker. Then I slipped into Liv’s little black dress and adjusted the straps on my stilettos.

“You want some glitter?” I hadn’t noticed the tiny blonde with a high ponytail and hot pink bikini getting ready a few feet from me.

“Sure. Thank you.”

“I’m Dixie.” She held a spritzer up. “Close your eyes.” She sprayed my arms and shoulder with a perfumed glitter spray.

I inhaled the scent. “I love the smell.”

“This is my fave body spray.” She giggled, “It smells like gummy bears and who doesn’t love candy and glitter?” Dixie stepped back and admired her work. “Pretty.”

She leaned in and covered her mouth as if she were about to tell me a secret, “Now you smell like something guys love to eat.”

I laughed, “I guess I do.”

“What’s your name?” Dixie tossed the bottle of gummy bear glitter back into her Coach travel suitcase and rummaged through a messy bunch of bikinis.

“Jade.” I squinted, curious about what she was digging around for.

Dixie grabbed a silver collar laced with rhinestones and fastened it around her neck. “This is your first night?” She sat in her chair and took a sip from her drink.

“Here? Yes.”

“Are you nervous? It’s okay to be nervous. We all are on the first night.” She crossed her ankles and bit the straw in her drink.

I shifted on my heels. “Not really. I’m just settling in.”

“You know what you need?”

I raised my eyebrows. “What?”

Dixie knelt over her suitcase, throwing a few tops on the ground while she dug once again through the mess. She held her hand up high as she stood back up. “This.” A sparkly black collar decorated with shiny rhinestones and a matching bracelet hung from her fingertips. She looked over her shoulder as the last girl in the dressing room walked towards the stairs. Ellen had disappeared as well.

I humored her, putting the collar around my neck and snapping the bracelet around my wrist.

Dixie took a cigarette out and lit it. I pretended the smoke didn’t bother me, but I could barely breathe. Dixie glanced up

at the ceiling and blew a puff of smoke overhead. She looked over her shoulder. The dressing room was empty. Leaning on her elbow, lit cigarette in hand, she whispered, “I know your sister.”

My eyes widened. I looked behind me before talking, “Where is she? How do I find her?” A hundred questions flooded my brain at one time.

“Shhhh. We only have a minute.” She spoke quickly, “Your sister’s stage name was Holly. She wasn’t here long before she was sent to an invite-only party, and I never saw her again. I should have told her to leave. To go home and never come back.” Dixie held her arms close to her body. Her hand shook as she puffed again. “I didn’t know what was happening.” Regret washed over her face. “Fuck, Jade. I was in denial. But your sister. She told me some things.”

“What? What did she say?” I whispered harshly.

“I think he’s taking her back home—to Moscow.” She tossed the cigarette on the floor and twisted her stiletto over it forcefully.

“Oh, my god, Dixie. I have to stop him.” My heart thumped heavily in my chest.

The clicking of heels down the stairs quieted Dixie. Once it was clear, she continued, “Do whatever you can to get an invitation to the next party. Luka only invites the best girls. I’ll help you once we’re inside. I can’t watch another girl disappear.”

“What do we do now?”

“We stop talking about this before Luka finds out. He will kill us for even thinking of leaving. I’ll text you. Not from the same number, though. Just wait for my message.”

“Is she ok?” I was desperate for more information.

“She’s alive. We have to stop talking.”

“Yes, but ...”

She cut me off. “Wait for my message.” Dixie returned to her bubbly persona in a flash.

“Mom!” Dixie yelled as Ellen walked back into the room. She opened her arms and Ellen rushed over to hug her. From the outside, they looked like close friends.

“I see you met the new girl.” Ellen nodded at me. “Are you ready to go upstairs? Luka will want you to dance right away since you’re new.”

“I am,” I said, fighting a tornado of emotions and struggling to remain calm.

Ellen looked me over. “You look great. I’ll let Dixie take you upstairs. The evening crowd is coming in. There’s good money to be made with the early guys sitting by themselves.”

Dixie made an exaggerated motion with her arm, waving me forward. “Let’s go. The customers are going to love you.”

Just as I walked onto the main floor with Dixie, Alex spoke to me, “I heard everything. Do not talk to her on the floor about Tasha. You could get Dixie killed. Stay cool. I’ll handle everything.” I fought the urge to respond, not wanting to give myself away, but desperate to know more.

Dixie and I walked together, passing several men in business clothes sitting at tables. Some patrons drank alone. Others had girls sitting on their laps, laughing and whispering in their ears. The bar was a shiny black rectangular island in a sea of small round tables accented with chairs. Dixie led me through the maze of tables, stopping at the center of the long bar. Glass shelves displayed the finest alcohol behind two male bartenders in tuxedos. A large stage at the front of the club lit up with bright lights.

The DJ announced “Nadia” on the front stage as a slow beat played. The dancer teased the crowd, half hiding her body in the shadows of the lights.

Again, the DJ sounded through the sound system, “Jade, sound check, Jade.”

I’m up.

“Do you want a drink? Your first drink is free. You’ll be on stage next.” The suited-up bartender stared at me, waiting for an answer.

“I’ll take a mandarin orange vodka and club soda.”

“You got it.” He made our drinks with lightning speed and pushed both our glasses over to us. Dixie moved her shoulders back and forth. “Thank you, Tony.” She said with her straw in her mouth. He smiled, immune to her bikini-clad body, and went on to the other customers at the bar.

I walked with Dixie through the scattered tables to a door near the main stage. A short hallway, heavy with stage smoke, led to the DJ. The booth smelled like cheap cologne and the DJ took too long staring at my legs before he opened his mouth to talk. “You’re next.” He turned his attention back to a control board with knobs and flashing lights. “Do you have a song preference?”

“Do you have ‘6 Underground’ by Sneaker Pimps?”

“Sure do.”

Dixie touched my elbow. “I’ll wait for you at the bar.”

The girl on stage before me walked by, holding a small pile of clothes and stuffing several bills into a tiny purse.

I peeked from behind the curtain to survey the audience. The crowd was growing and waitresses busied themselves running drink orders from the tables to the bar. The DJ announced my name and my song played.

The flashing lights and hungry eyes felt familiar. I walked slowly, my hips moving side to side as I gripped the first pole to the right. Flipping my hair back, I arched my back and let my hair hang down to my ass. I spun in little circles around the cold steel, testing that the pole was sturdy and the floor wasn’t slick.

The velvet curtain at the front entrance parted and my heart skipped a beat as Alex walked into the club. He dwarfed the average joes at the bar and towered over the ones seated as he walked. Alex chose a table in the back and sat comfortably in the chair. A cocktail waitress hurried over to take his drink order.

I spun again, resting my head against the pole and moving my body in a wave. In my peripheral, I saw the waitress leave

his table. Alex settled into the low-profile seat, looking relaxed with his elbow on the arm of the chair and his chin resting on his fist. His gaze locked on my body.

I moved to the middle of the stage, swaying my hips side to side. Once center stage, I turned around with my arms in the air and my hips swaying to the beat. I bent over with straight legs, allowing my dress to come halfway up my ass. A glimpse of my black satin panties shone from underneath my dress like a soft runway.

“Must you stare?” I whispered, peering at him from between my legs as my hair swung to the floor.

“It would be odd if I didn’t. Everyone is staring, doll. You’re the hottest thing in here.”

I flipped my hair up and twirled as I glided to the opposite pole. I gripped it tightly and pulled myself up. Holding the pole close to my body, I spun, inverted, with my legs out in a V shape. A slight gasp came from the crowd as they watched me twirl effortlessly to the bottom of the pole.

I stood, pushing my ass out and tossing my hair behind me as I came to my feet. A few quick steps and a twirl, and I was at the opposite pole, again. I stretched, gripping the pole as high as my arms allowed. Pulling myself up with the pole gripped tightly between my legs, I let my upper body fall back. My hair dangled below me as I watched the crowd gasp from my inverted view. I pulled myself upright and twirled my body around the pole, landing slowly in a split.

The sound of Alex choking on ... whatever, traveled across the room. As I crawled in his direction, I watched him pound his chest with a fist. *Got you.* Brimming with satisfaction, I kneeled where the men in button-up shirts and stupid grins stood with bills in their hands. Moving like a sly kitten, I held out the thin elastic of my panties and let them slide their money onto my hip.

All eyes were on me. I sat on my knees, crossed my arms in front of my body, and pulled my little dress over my head. Goosebumps rolled through my body from the cool air, putting my hard nipples on display for my eager audience. Men from

several tables were waiting with money for a moment of my time. Stage time was a dancer's advertisement. But I didn't want money. I wanted information, and I'd do anything to get it.

A dancer in a tiny bikini walked into the crowd, making a B-Line for Alex. The dancer gestured to the chair next to him and he nodded his approval. The sight of her jiggling and flirting with him made me bite my lip. I had to watch. What if she broke his cover? I would need to know immediately. At least that's what I told myself.

A second song came on as I twirled back and forth on the poles. Holding the attention of every man, I seductively ran my hands over the curves in my breasts, stopping briefly to tug on my nipples and then down my stomach to my panty line. Every mouth hung open. The dancer left Alex's table and my stomach quit doing flips.

"All eyes are on you. Perfect." Alex whispered, and he disappeared into the shadows of the back room.

The large men guarding the floor were too busy watching my finger run over the center of my panties to notice Alex leaving. The longer I could keep their attention, the more time Alex would have to locate intel. I stood up, wearing only panties and stilettos, and walked to the other pole. I held my arms above my head, gripping the pole behind me as I twirled again to the floor.

Luka emerged from the shadows, accompanied by two large bouncers. Briefly, he watched me dance, then continued towards a roped-off glass VIP box. Luka sat in a tall chair next to a bottle of chilled champagne, with his fingers intertwined in his lap and eyes locked on me. Luka was the lion. I was the mouse caught under his palm, and I knew it.

ALEX

HYPNOTIC

First things first—I needed an inside look at club security. The big guy at the front sized me up as I paid the overpriced cover charge. My long-sleeved shirt hid my military tattoos and scars. I’ve been told that my “pretty boy” face didn’t match my earned reputation in the Corps. *Good.* Being underestimated was an advantage on OPS missions.

Damn, Mia was something else—a dark-haired beauty, outshining every other woman in the room from center stage. Mia could pull off “man-eating stripper” better than even I imagined. Two nearby men were practically drooling on themselves as she danced. I imagined slamming their faces into the table just for looking at her.

Quickly, I redirected my thoughts toward security. A door at the opposite end of the main room caught my attention. *Luka’s office.* I noted the exits and assessed the security detail. One bouncer at the front, one at VIP, and one who went towards Luka’s office. So far, three in total.

I had listened closely to the conversation between Dixie and Mia, texting Greyson all the intel as it came through. When I activated my tracking device, he’d loop the closed circuit, add in a signal disruption and give me enough time to get in and out without being recorded. Luckily for me, between guys on their phone and ogling women, this was an easy place to be overlooked.

Strip clubs were never my taste. An overly friendly cocktail waitress stopped to take my drink order. I loved whiskey and women, but I only paid for one. Strip clubs had

their own rules. Natural-born hustlers thrived between thick clouds of smoke and the rampant exchange of money. I craved a different excitement. The thrill of storming a building in the desert, saving a life, or killing a terrorist gave me a rush. Strip clubs were artificial highs.

Settling in my chair, I swirled my whiskey while I watched the show. Mia was the snake charmer of dancers, and we were all unsuspecting cobras. I practically inhaled a gulp of whiskey when she spun upside down around the pole. *Fuck, Mia was irritatingly addictive.*

A pair of soft hands slid down my chest, waking me from Mia's trance. I removed them playfully before her wandering fingers found the mic. Or worse, my gun. The blonde laughed as I pushed her to the side to see her face.

"I'm not used to getting pushed away." She smiled playfully while studying me. "Mind if I sit?"

I gestured to the empty seat next to me. "Be my guest."

She plopped into the chair, crossed her legs, and shimmied a bit to get comfortable. I knew her type. She was the fun girl that partied with the guys, made them laugh and before they knew it, *Boom* all their cash was gone. Hell, it wasn't her fault they were a bunch of dumbasses.

"I'm Annalise. What brings you here tonight?" She raised her eyebrows and smiled again.

"I needed a night away to de-stress."

"I can help you de-stress. But I have to sit there." She pointed at my lap and ran her tongue across her teeth.

"Here?" I asked, clarifying and pointing at my lap.

"Yes, sir." She leaned forward in the chair, her large breasts barely covered by the small triangles of her top. "I rarely dance for young sexy guys. They don't tip. But ..." She bit her lip and put a hand on my knee, attempting to run it up my thigh. "I can definitely make an exception for you."

I stopped her hand immediately, covering it with mine and sliding it off. "Sugar, I'm not that young. Sexy though? I'll

buy that.” I sipped from my glass and moved five twenties to her side of the table. “How about I buy you a drink, and we talk for a minute? Then I’ll let you get back to your business.”

Annalise sat back, “Ugh ... You’re not trying to go all ‘Captain Save-A-Hoe’ on me. Are you?” She shook her head. “I hate that.”

I chuckled, “No. No, I’m not.” I pushed another twenty over to her. “There’s more where this came from.”

I rattled off a fake story about waiting for a friend. “I don’t mind paying for the time until my friend gets here.”

“You’re sweet.” Annalise grabbed the cash, folded it, and slipped it around a garter at her ankle. She wrapped a rubber band around it and sat back up. “What do you want to talk about?”

“My friend met a dancer named Holly. He really liked her, and she danced for him last time. Is she here?”

“You don’t need her.” She shimmied her shoulders and her large breasts jiggled as she moved. “She doesn’t dance here anymore. I’ll dance for both of you.”

“I was hoping to surprise him. Do you know why she stopped dancing?”

Annalise’s eyes darted back and forth at the bouncers. When she spoke, she lowered her voice. “Look, you’re asking a question that could get me in trouble. I liked Holly. She was a good kid, but I don’t know what happened to her. She was hanging out with Luka. Then she quit coming to work.” Annalise shrugged. “Some girls work for Luka outside of the club. I mind my business.”

She took one more puff from her new cigarette and put it in the crystal ashtray centered on the table. “I gotta dance on stage soon. I wouldn’t ask any more questions. Luka doesn’t like people snooping around.” Without saying goodbye, Annalise stood up and left.

The door leading to Luka’s office opened and out slithered Luka, accompanied closely by two of his thugs. Luka made his way to the glass booth, sat down comfortably at a VIP table,

drink in hand, and watched Mia. Irritated at my primeval reaction to kill him on sight, I found a silver lining. Luka was preoccupied—completely entranced.

Mouths hung open at every table. Even the bouncers focused on Mia's perfect curves. During the onslaught of hoots and hollers, I activated my tracker, and crept to the side door, swiftly moving in the dimly lit club without being seen. I opened the door leading to the back hall and found Luka's office. *Locked.*

I entered the room using a small pick and closed the door behind me. The cold room felt more like a museum than an office. I approached the desk and placed my drink on the floor. Working quickly, I picked the lock on the top drawer. Thumbing through a pile of papers, I found several commercial plane tickets. I photographed everything for later examination.

Luka's daily planner sat on top of a neat stack of papers. I took pictures of the surrounding weeks while turning the pages of the book.

I stopped, hearing the bouncers talk to Mia through the mic. Koltsov was asking her to dance for him. Mia would preoccupy him for at least a few minutes. The thought of Koltsov touching her almost sent me over the edge. I pushed the thought from my mind and focused on the mission.

The computer screen flashed on when I moved the mouse. The display showed four separate rooms. They had cameras positioned at the front entrance, the glass booth, main floor, and a separate room with a metal table and chairs. Next to the metal table were several suitcases, duct tape and plastic bags—nothing else.

The video icon at the bottom of the screen caught my attention. I recorded with my phone and hit play. A grainy black and white surveillance video popped up. In the video, a man in a long coat walked on a nearby dock. The man held the arm of a dark-haired woman, muscling her forward. He turned towards the camera and I glimpsed the gun pushed into her side. He shoved her forward on the dock towards a boat. The

man and his captive moved off the screen as he forced her to board the boat. Soon after, the boat left the dock.

I examined the walls and noticed light slipping from beneath part of the wall. I pressed gently against the hard surface. The wall moved to reveal a cement staircase leading to the lower level of the club. My guess was the room with the metal desk was below Luka's office. Brightly lit stairs and cinderblock walls replaced the luxurious feel of the club. I stepped back and the weight of the door brought it back to its previous position, resuming its wall-like disguise.

What I gathered would have to do. Running out of luck in Luka's office would be less than ideal. I grabbed my glass from the floor and left, locking the door behind me. I hurried down the hallway, but one of bouncers pushed through the main door, catching me before I escaped.

"What are you doing here?" The big oaf squared up with me.

I spilled some of my drink on his shirt and stumbled, "Oh, oh, man ... I'm so sorry."

He muttered something in Russian and tried to wipe the whiskey off his chest.

Fumbling, I also tried to wipe the drink off for him.

"Don't touch me! Fucking drunk."

"I'm so sorry, man. Man, I'm ... hey, I gotta piss and I can't find the bathroom."

"It's not back here." He pushed me through the door.

"Whoa, easy." I said, throwing my arms up. "Never mind. I'll find it." I staggered through the now crowded main floor, hoping to resemble just another drunk. Mia was still with Luka in the glass booth. At least I had eyes on her.

I found my table and sunk low into the seat, avoiding any more attention. Mia stood—visible briefly within the glass walls of the booth. She moved her hips in a figure eight while she pulled her dress over her full tits, revealing her gorgeous body for her semi-private show.

I spoke quietly, “You ok?”

Mia turned, giving Luka a first-class view of her ass as she swayed and murmured, “Yes.”

Rage pulsed through my veins as I clenched my jaw. I couldn't recall the last time I felt territorial about a woman but it sure as hell felt new. The vibration of my phone distracted me.

Greyson:

New intel from my contact.

Masquerade party tomorrow night at a warehouse in the desert.

5K entry fee and invite only. The bartender is your way in.

I slipped my phone into my back pocket, disheveled my shirt, splashed the remaining drops of whiskey in my glass on my neck and went to the bar. I pushed through two scrawny customers to make room at the bar.

They muttered something under their breath before backing off.

I leaned over the bar on my elbows and obnoxiously waved at the bartender.

The bartender looked at me sideways and put a towel in his back pocket as he walked towards me.

I smiled, big and obnoxious. “My man!” I was tall enough to reach him as I slapped him on the shoulder. He scowled and folded his arms across his chest.

“Don't do that again. What do you want?”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry ...” I trailed off, leaning all my weight on to my elbow, “I don't usually drink this much, but I'm celebrating. Another glass of your best whiskey, please.”

The bartender's face relaxed. “What are you celebrating? He reached for a bottle high on the shelf and poured me a double.”

“How much?” I wobbled as I thrust my hand into my pocket and dropped a wad of hundreds on the bar. “Oh, man. Hang on. Here you go.” I overpaid by a hundred dollars and pushed the rest of the money back into my pocket. Two scantily clad girls at the end of the bar slithered towards me at the sight of my drunken stupor.

“My uncle died. Horrible really. But he left me all this money.” The bartender tapped the bills on the bar and put them in a collection box behind him. When he turned around, his expression had changed from annoyance to intrigue.

“A lot of money, huh?”

I nodded, “Yeah. So, I came to Vegas.” I motioned for him to lean in closer, and he obliged. I lowered my voice. “Listen, I want some different kind of action. Some crazy once-in-a-lifetime shit. You know what I’m talking about, boss?” I slipped another wad of hundreds to him under my palm. He discreetly took the cash.

The bartender leaned in on both elbows. “How crazy are you talking about?”

I rested my body against the bar. “I want the shit that’s in movies. Party favors, ladies—all the good stuff. Something no one else knows about.”

The bartender glanced over his shoulder at the encroaching girls eyeing me since I unveiled my cash. He nodded in the other direction, shooing the girls off. “I have the perfect party for you, but it’s not cheap. It’s an invite-only masquerade party. It’ll cost ya five G’s, but the bonus is that it’s a charity event. Tax write off and everything. An exclusive invitation charity event. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“You can’t tell anyone. Penalty is ...” he paused, “Severe.” He said firmly.

“I’m in.” I nodded over-enthusiastically.

“Stay here. I’ll return in a few minutes.” The bartender disappeared behind the bar. I used the free time to check on Mia. She was still dancing and Koltsov sat watching her. Not

touching her, but sitting there, drink in hand, watching her every move like a true psycho.

Apparently, the bartender had called me off limits. None of the dancers were approaching me. I hoped that was a good sign.

He returned with a small black burner phone. “Put this in your pocket. In a few hours, once you’re vetted, you’ll get directions. Follow the directions.” He repeated himself, “You follow them, PRECISELY.” If you fuck it up, you lose your money. Don’t come back here. You’ll lose more than money if you do.” He handed me the phone across the bar. “Do you understand?”

“I get it. Follow the directions. Thanks, man. This sounds like exactly what I wanted in Vegas.”

“Alright, buddy.” This time, he slapped me on the shoulder. “No one uses their real name. Everyone shows up in a mask. It’s the most exotic masquerade party you can imagine. Everything you need will be there. Good luck.”

I leaned forward across the bar. “What about a girl for tonight?” I nodded towards Mia in the glass booth, dancing to a slow beat with wild hair around her shoulders. “Can I get some company from her?”

He looked up and shook his head. “You’re too late, man.” He pointed to a portly, balding man in a suit sitting at a table, practically drooling in his glass as he watched Mia. “He beat you to it. She’s the hot new girl. When she’s done dancing for the Boss, that guy is taking her for the night. Maybe next time.”

He went to the waiting customers and never looked back.

MIA

CAGED

Dancing at the Wild Rose was easy. If things kept going my way, I may actually be able to pull this off. I felt hopeful. That is until I finished my stage dance to find a straight-faced bouncer waiting for me.

“Luka wants to see you.” He turned around immediately, walking towards Koltsov. I followed the suited thug through the crowd to the VIP area. We walked up the short stairs to the glass booth set above the growing crowd of men at small tables.

“Good evening, Jade.” Luka gestured to a seat across from him. Pristine glass walls encircled us, creating a crystal cage. A long bench lined the three sparkling clear walls. A bottle of champagne waited on a circular table, chilled on ice.

Smiling, as if I wasn’t fully aware that he could slit my throat at any moment, I sat and crossed one leg over the other. My tiny black dress left little to the imagination. I was all sex and fire. I needed to be or he would see me.

“Am I pulling you away from anything important?”

“Absolutely not.”

Luka motioned to the champagne. A waitress scurried into the glass booth to serve us. She poured the bubbly liquid into a flute. Luka drank from a tumbler with ice and dark liquor.

“That is all.” The waitress nodded and hurried off into the shadows, waiting at his beck and call.

“Thank you.” I took a sip.

“What do you think?”

“Mmmm, wonderful.” Champagne and brand names never impressed me.

“It should be. It’s a five-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne.”

“I appreciate the extravagance.” I ran a hand down the soft velvety fabric of the seat. “Do you bring all the new girls up here?”

Luka huffed under his breath, “No. Very few ladies keep me company. I prefer them to work on the floor. It’s better for business.”

“I feel special.” I smiled, meeting his intense gaze.

“You should.” His eyes moved over my body as he spoke. “You’re an exquisite woman. I imagine that you come from a long line of beauty.”

“Your intuition was correct earlier. I look almost exactly like my mother.”

Luka sat back, resting his arms on the edge of his chair. “She must be quite a beauty herself.”

I cleared my throat and spun a piece of hair around my finger. “She left when I was young. I would imagine we still look very similar.”

“Knowing you grew up without a mother tells me a lot about you.”

I dropped my strand of hair. “I believe that how a person responds to tragedy tells you more than the tragedy itself.”

“Indeed.” Luka folded his hands in his lap. He tapped a gold ring on his hand, with the opposite middle finger, as he thought. “Your father ... he must have cared deeply about your education. Your knowledge of art seems extensive.”

What the hell kind of questions are these? “I enjoy reading. It would surprise most people what they could learn by simply reading up on a topic.” I changed the subject abruptly; afraid he would probe further about my education. Knowledge was

difficult to hide. “The strip club business is lucrative. I’d love to hear all about your business here.” If I could get him talking about himself, then I might get valuable information without him suspecting a thing.

Luka twisted his lips with arrogance. “This?” His arm swept out in front of his body. “This is just for fun. A pleasurable past-time, if you will.” He stopped talking and his eyes followed the curves of my leg, finally settling on my breasts. “Let’s see you dance. Call it part two of your interview.”

“I thought you would never ask.” I stood as the next song started to play.

“Stay there. I want to admire you from a distance,” he practically hissed as he spoke.

A steady rhythm bumped through the club. I moved my hips to every second beat, reaching my arms above my head, pumping my hips to one side and then the other. One hand followed the outline of the other outstretched arm and down, exploring my body as if it were brand new territory.

I brought my finger to my lips, biting it gently before gliding it down my front. Both hands gripping the hemline of my dress, I gently pulled it up and over my head, exposing my practically naked body. Once my hair had fallen, I held the dress to the side with two fingers. Locked in Luka’s venomous glare, I dropped the dress as if it were an old T-shirt. I brought my hands to the base of my neck. Then, held my thick hair up with one hand while my other caressed my breasts and followed an invisible line around the curvy outside of my waist and hips.

I danced in Satan’s lair, playing a game with no rules. Luka served evil with civility and a devil’s smile—the most dangerous evil I knew. This man had taken my sister. If he hurt her, he would pay. My heart thumped heavily in my chest. On the outside, I was calm and alluring. Inside, crazy thoughts flooded my mind. I thought of lunging across the table, grabbing his throat, and strangling him until he told me where Tasha was.

Just as my emotion bubbled to the brim, Alex's calming voice spoke in my ear, "Are you okay?"

I leaned forward on a chair, bending over to hide my response. "Yes," I forced the word out. Unknowingly, he had calmed the wave of panic washing over me, saving me from making a devastating mistake. I could have killed us all.

Alex. The battle-scarred, arrogant, badass who killed bad men without hesitation. He would get Tasha back and each one of them would pay.

Luka watched me, undisturbed by his thugs and the worrisome waitress. He studied every inch of me between intermittent drinks from his glass. I danced. I teased. I smiled and it felt like forever. Never had I imagined I would dance for a Russian strip club owner in a pair of panties and a rhinestone collar. But there I was—and he was buying the whole charade.

"Sir." Oleg stood at the glass booth entrance.

Luka motioned him inside, and the oversized man bent down to whisper in his ear. Luka nodded and the big man left as quickly as he arrived.

"Please, allow me." He bent down and handed me my dress from the floor.

I slipped the dress back over my head and pulled it to my hips.

"I am not surprised to hear that you are already catching the eye of our VIP members." Luka crossed his legs with his hands in his lap. The tips of his fingers touching in a triangle. "We have certain guests who would enjoy your presence outside of this club. Perhaps as a dinner companion or as a good luck charm at the casino tables. It's an exotic service."

"That is precisely what I'm here for." *Is this what you said to Tasha, you piece of shit?*

"There is a certain 'Je ne sais quoi' about you. I noticed it when we first spoke. You would enjoy the sinfully extravagant arrangements I can offer you. I know this. Do you enjoy pushing your limits?"

“I do. Tell me more about what is involved. There are many levels of sin and I have a vivid imagination.”

“Some things are better left unsaid. Your service relates directly to the amount of money you will make. The better the service, the happier I will be about you working here. Do you understand, Jade?”

His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. “Will you give this VIP an extraordinary experience? Do you understand this is a business arrangement?”

“Of course.”

“Excellent. Tomorrow I’m throwing a masquerade party. If this evening goes well, I would like you to attend.”

“I would like that very much.” I smiled politely, trying desperately not to seem over eager.

Luka stood, reaching out his hand adorned with gold rings. I gave my hand, and he kissed it gently, sending ripples of terror through my body.

I forced another smile and refrained from jerking away. “You’re such a gentleman.”

“I’m happy you appreciate the decency of proper manners. You are lovely—a diamond amongst coal in a place like this.” My body involuntarily broke out with goosebumps in response to his touch. He noticed immediately. “You’re cold.”

“I’m not wearing much clothing.” I shrugged and pulled my hand from his.

“Yes,” he chuckled, “This is true.”

The bouncer returned, whispering again in Luka’s ear. This time, Luka’s eyes widened as the man talked quickly.

“The price for your company has doubled. This is good news for both of us. You will accompany a VIP to Club Vision at Moon Bay Casino.”

“For how long?” I asked.

“Until you have satisfied him. Are you looking forward to your first night?”

I smiled and swallowed the sick taste of nausea in the back of my throat. “Yes, I am.”

“Excellent. That’s what I expected to hear. It appears we will find out sooner than later if your entertainment abilities match my needs.”

My heart thumped. I scanned the dance floor for Alex, but he was nowhere. My fears surfaced in a train wreck of thoughts. Had he dropped his guard and left me to the wolves?

Luka checked his watch. “I’m afraid our talk must continue another time. I lost track of time as we chatted. I have important business to conduct.” Luka motioned for me to stand. I did as he expected. He put his hand on my back to escort me down the stairs. “One more thing, Jade.”

I turned around. “Yes?”

He growled into my ear, “Do not disappoint me.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I understand.”

Luka turned to his bouncer, “Please take Jade to the Moon Bay to meet our guest.” Then he murmured further instructions.

The big guy nodded, “Yes, sir.” He immediately fell in line behind Luka as he followed his boss through the loud room.

Luka moved quickly through the crowd. A guard held the far door open, surveyed the room, and closed the door behind them.

Oleg’s grumbly voice startled me from behind.

“Get your things, Jade. I’ll wait for you at the door.”

I jumped. “You’re stealthy for a big guy.”

He stared blankly at me. “You have fifteen minutes.”

“I just need to change.”

Oleg nodded, and I rushed to the dressing room. Thick and smokey air surrounded me, making it difficult to breathe deeply. I navigated through the maze of hungry eyes as

strangers raised eyebrows and cat called at me between gulps of drinks.

Oleg stood guard at the stairway entry. “Hurry,” he muttered.

I slipped down the stairs, finding my locker quickly. Instead of the dress I wore earlier, I chose a small black skirt with my corset top. I shoved the last of my stuff inside and looped my arm through the handles of my bag.

Oleg waited like an ogre statue, coming to life the moment he saw me and escorting me through the main floor. There had been no time to communicate. *Had Alex heard it all?* I had no idea. I scanned the main floor again—still nothing.

Oleg opened a side door to a waiting car. The cold air hit me, refreshing my lungs from the polluted air of the building. Out of the lair, but still in danger.

I slid into the back seat and Oleg closed the door and took his place as the driver. We sat in silence as he drove onto the main road toward the Moon Bay Casino.

Focus. Who was I meeting? Would he expect me to have sex with him? How far would I really go to save my sister? Tonight, I would find out. The stakes had been raised. I would gamble with my dignity—the one priceless thing I clung to.

The longest fifteen minutes of my life finally came to a halt. The valet entrance bustled with business under the bright lights of the Casino. Oleg talked to me over his shoulder. “Go to Club Vision. Tell the doorman you are there to meet Mr. Montgomery. We made arrangements for a private area. Be here at the valet at 10 PM tomorrow, unless your VIP extends you an additional day with our approval. Do not be late. Do not make me look for you.”

I opened the door and put one leg out.

“And Jade?”

I turned around with my hand still on the handle. “Yes?”

“We will always be watching you.”

“Understood.” I clutched my bag and moved from one invisible cage to the next. A black car, exactly like the one I exited, pulled up twenty feet behind me. A younger Oleg look-a-like sat behind the wheel, eyes locked on me.

A bellhop, maybe nineteen years old and in a gold and red shirt, closed my car door and Oleg sped off. The bellhop reached for my bag. “Let me get that for you.”

“Thank you, but I have it.”

“Ma’am. I’ve been instructed by Mr. Montgomery to take your things to the executive suite.” He reached for my bag again.

I pulled the bag away sharply, remembering my small weapons and tracking device. The bellhop looked confused.

“I’m sorry. I just need to pull my little purse out. A girl needs her lipstick.” I dug the smaller purse out of the bag, found the lipstick-shaped taser, and slipped it into my bra. Remembering the tracking device in my purse, I clutched my only connection to Alex tightly and gave the bag to the bellhop. “Thank you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He bowed slightly and hurried off with my things.

Oleg’s look-a-like still sat in his vehicle, staring at me like a creep. I ignored him and entered the casino through the broad glass door with silver handles. A barrage of bright lights and pinging slot machines surrounded me instantly, as cocktail waitresses circled seated gamblers throughout the casino floor.

I followed the signs pointing toward Club Vision. After a few minutes of making my way through the maze of roulette and blackjack tables, I arrived at a velvet rope and chain stretched across an open floor. Techno music blasted intermittently through the club doors as they opened for the most privileged guests in line.

A bearded, dark-skinned man in black slacks and a tight black shirt stood guard at the front. As I emerged from the tables and crossed the wide walkway, he put his hand on the velvet rope. Peeking beneath the sleeve of his right arm was a

partial anchor tattoo. His forearm bore the numbers 0317. This guy was shorter than my recent OPS acquaintances, but what he lacked in height he made up for in width. Hell, he looked like he could lift a house. I stopped directly in front of the man.

He looked down his nose at me. "You, Jade?"

I looked up. "Yes."

He unhinged the rope and let me in. I glanced behind me. The Oleg look-a-like, though unseen, was surely close by.

"Thank you."

He nodded and continued to look out over the crowd as I stepped past him. A much slender man with a boyish face and light brown hair pushed the double doors open for me. "Follow me, ma'am."

The young guy pushed through the thick sea of people, and I followed closely behind. A horseshoe-shaped walkway looped a front stage with bars lining the right and left sides. Several beautiful women danced atop tall pillars. A fast beat played, and the room went dark.

Suddenly, a flash of flames came from the center stage. A bald, skinny man with bright colored tattoos on his shaved head, blew flames above the audience to the beat of the techno song. The floor shook as the crowd roared and jumped up and down in unison.

Another velvet rope sanctioned off an inside VIP section with a bouncer standing guard at the private entrance. I peered into the dark, hoping to see who paid for me. A man dressed in a suit sat on a low couch next to a full bottle of dark alcohol in a bucket of ice. The dark shadows covered him from the waist up. The bouncer guarding the private area spoke to my young chaperone, ignoring me. Once he finished speaking, he stared over the crowd vigilantly.

The young guy came back, and I listened intently, straining to hear him through the music.

"What?" I asked, confused.

“He wants you to dance there.” He pointed up at the empty pillar towering over the dancefloor directly in front of the roped-off section.

“In this?” I pointed at my skirt and corset. It was a short skirt but clearly not a stripper outfit.

He squinted and put a finger in the air. “Good question. Stay here and I’ll be back.” I watched the guy go into the private area and talk to Mr. Montgomery, who never moved from the shadows. Walking quickly back, he handed me a shot of whiskey. “He said ‘Yes, in what you’re wearing.’” The guy held out the shot glass. “He said you’ll need this for later.”

Fuck me.

I took the shot glass from the guy, tossed my head back, and downed it, swallowing my anger, fear, and everything else that might get in my way of doing what needed to be done.

The young guy stared at me, eyes wide and mouth open at how fast I took the ample shot. “Tell him I need another. And hurry.”

The young guy hurried back to Mr. Montgomery and returned with another large shot. I downed the whiskey and let the fire ignite the wild in me.

I found the ladder that led to the top of the pillar and climbed to the top. I could see even less of Mr. Montgomery. All I saw was the table. The asshole, however, had the perfect view of my ... everything.

I danced for several songs, trying to lose myself in the music. I kept my mind busy by watching the audience. People-watching was a great escape. Intoxication moved heavily in the crowd, taking over groups of people at once. An hour passed by. I watched women pair up with their selected men. Couples broke off from the pack of partygoers to begin their ritualistic one-night-stand mating dances.

Look at that. Two girls I saw earlier in the dressing room moved swiftly through the crowd selling small bags of white powder in the center of the dance floor. From my position on the pillar, I could see everything.

I kept my eye on Mr. Montgomery, but he never moved—just sat there occasionally having the waitress fill his glass from the bottle on the table. Did Alex know I had escalated from stripper to whore in the last hour?

Maybe I could get him so drunk that he passed out? Maybe I could talk my way out of this corner I had so cleverly painted myself into. I climbed down the ladder to insist on meeting Mr. Montgomery. I would outsmart the man who bought me and win this game.

“Jade.” The bearded bouncer from the front was directly behind me.

“Holy shit! You scared me.”

The burly bouncer spoke unphased by my surprise. “Mr. Montgomery has requested your presence in the executive suite. He’s waiting for you there. Follow me, please.” He turned without waiting for my response.

I followed him through the crowd, out the front entrance, and to the hotel elevator. A group of half-drunk girls in high heels walked like baby giraffes down the stairs. They laughed together as hotel security did their best to keep them moving towards the casino exit.

A pristine elevator took us to the forty-third floor. I shook my head, glimpsing myself in the mirror. *What a mess.* Briefly, I considered running my fingers through my hair. *Why should I care if this asshole likes my hair?* The elevator door slid open, and the bouncer waited for me to exit.

“Do you know this guy?” I asked as we walked to the end of the hall.

No reply.

“You’re not very talkative,” I mumbled. “Do you all go to the same school to have lobotomies?”

He stopped in front of room 4300. “I don’t get paid to talk.” He slid a key card into the door, pushed and held it open for me. A small flight of stairs led to a large living room area with a bar and vaulted ceilings. The balcony door was open.

Long, sheer curtains swayed in the breeze, where they opened to the twinkling night sky.

“Thank ...” I turned to see the door close. I froze, suddenly feeling very alone. I pulled the taser from my cleavage and palmed it discreetly.

“Hello?” I called out as I walked through the exquisite living room to the balcony. I pushed open the curtains to find an outside table with soft chairs and a bottle of champagne chilled on ice. The view was stunning. I leaned over for a better look. A vibrant city sparkled below me. Tiny bright lights from cars decorated the ground and the Vegas noise was practically non-existent. A gust of wind cooled my body and blew softly through my hair. I inhaled deeply, happy to be out of the nightclub.

A deep voice from behind startled me.

“You like the view?”

ALEX

Mia stood on her tiptoes leaning over the balcony as she watched the busy Vegas city beneath her. I leaned against the open sliding door. “You like the view?”

Her hair whipped as she turned, and her bright hazel eyes widened at the sight of me. “You!” she growled walking towards me, “It was *you* the whole time?”

I smiled. “Yes, but I couldn’t tell you.”

“Why the hell not?” Her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of dark pink. “Hear me out. Greyson researched the party that Dixie talked about. It’s a masquerade party. I needed to get in fast. Then I tried to buy an evening with you at the Wild Rose.”

“To humiliate me all night? You’re an asshole!”

I raised my hands in the air. “No, no. To keep you safe. But another guy beat me to it. So, I tipped the bartender five grand to convince that guy to pick another girl.” I smiled at how perfectly it had gone down. “Greyson was on the spot with fast cash and a flawless identity. He was prepared for all of it.”

“That still doesn’t explain why I danced on a pillar in a nightclub for an hour while you eye fucked me.”

Mia wanted an explanation, but I made her wait and poured two glasses of champagne instead. She crossed her arms and her face turned from pink to red.

“There’s a good reason for all this.” I pushed one glass of champagne on the table towards her body. She refused to look

at it.

“I don’t want champagne. I want an explanation.” She removed her ear piece and placed it on the table.

“Fine. Here’s the thing ... you look so damn cute up there dancing.”

“Ugh!” she stepped past the table and hit me hard in the chest with both hands. The lipstick taser fell out of her palm and on to the floor. I took a step back. She was much stronger than she looked.

“Whoa, whoa!” I attempted to calm her but couldn’t hide my amusement.

“I thought I was somebody’s whore, Alex!” She pushed me again with both hands, but this time I didn’t budge.

“You are.” I smiled over the top of my champagne flute. “You’re my whore.” Her face tightened and steam could have practically rolled from both her ears.

Maybe I went too far. “Listen. I knew we were being watched, and I thought Luka and his cronies would see straight through our ruse, so I came up with a plan that involved me buying you, but keeping you safe and in character if you will.”

Her face cooled to a bit more of her natural color. “You could have told me.” She grabbed the champagne flute and downed half the glass. A drop escaped her mouth and landed on her soft cleavage.

“It wouldn’t have been as fun.” I shrugged.

“You’re a real asshat.” She said and finished her glass. I reached for the flute in her hand and she refused to hand it to me.

“May I?” Still furious, she reluctantly gave up her glass. I filled it to the top and handed it back to her.

“This has been a terrible night for me. You’re not funny.” Mia turned away from me and looked over the balcony.

I chuckled, “I know. Everything is working out, though. we’ll be at the party tomorrow, you did great tonight, and Luka

thinks I'm an idiot with a ton of cash to blow. But if I die tomorrow trying to save your sister, then at least I get a night alone with you."

"This is how you handle stress?" She whipped around; her anger replaced with bewilderment.

"Pretty much." I watched the tiny people and cars below, then rested my side against the rail, facing Mia under the glittery night sky. She leaned against her back, holding an empty champagne flute delicately in her fingers. "I knew you'd be angry, but I also knew you could handle it if it meant getting into that party tomorrow."

My phone vibrated in my back pocket, and I pulled it out.

"Is it about Tasha?" Mia asked, stepping closer to me.

I showed her the screen. "It's the instructions for tomorrow. I need to transfer the 5K now. Then, they send the address and arrival time for the party. They bought my cover. We're in for sure."

I texted Greyson with the information and he replied.

"Greyson is taking care of it." I showed her the message.

She looked up from the screen. "There's nothing to keep them from taking the money and not letting us in."

"No, there's not. But we're past the point of no return. We can't go back now. The only way out is to finish this."

"I'll never be able to repay the cost of all this." She shook her head and twirled a piece of hair tightly around her finger.

I put a finger on her chin, tilting her face up. "It's only money. We're talking about your sister's life. I couldn't care less what it costs."

"No one does anything for free. I've learned that the hard way." She looked away.

"Maybe I want you to be safe." I offered.

She tilted her face sharply. "Or maybe you're a liar?"

I chuckled, “Trust me, babe. The only one lying to themselves here is you.” I smiled, waiting for her comeback, but Mia was quiet. A dangerous thoughtful quiet that made even me apprehensive. I couldn’t help but push her to the edge, but what would she do when she got there?

Mia pushed her body against mine, resting her hands on my bare chest beneath my unbuttoned and open dress shirt. “Mmmm,” she purred, sliding her hands down my abs. Blood rushed through my body. My cock strained against my pants as she grazed the length of me with her hip.

“What do you think you’re doing?” *Holy fuck*. I was treading in dangerous waters.

“I think you’re right. Why not play this one night before we risk it all?” She moved her hands over my shoulders and scratched me lightly with her nails on the way down. A wave of heated tingles ran through my spine. Her hands stopped at my belt. One finger slipped between my jeans and abs and tugged, alluding to the unleashing of my cock.

I grabbed her hand and removed it, holding her wrist, wavering on the exhilarating tightrope we were walking.

The evening wind blew her dark hair, baring her shoulders in the moonlight. If I plucked a star out of the night sky, it wouldn’t have been as beautiful as her at that moment.

“What?” she asked, with her wrist in my grip.

“You’re stunning, Mia.” I wanted to tell her everything, but I choked on her beauty. She looked to the ground, maybe taken aback at the simple honesty of my words.

“Pretending you’re not everything I want is harder than just giving in and taking you.” Sometimes bare honesty clears the air.

“Does this help?” She pulled my shirt open and licked me from the bottom of my pectoral muscle to my nipple in one slow movement. The hot lick left a cool trail across my hot skin. When she got to my nipple, she bit it—lightly, playfully—her eyes narrowing the way a cat plays with a toy.

The little bite demolished all residual self-control. I slipped my hand into the base of her neck and tilted her head up. Craving the taste of her mouth, I brought my lips to hers. Just before I tasted those cherry-plucking lips, she turned her head and gave me her neck. Her refusal to kiss me was fucking with me at the highest level. Mia surrendered to no one. But I would change all that in time. Tonight, I would be reckless with her body and careful with her mind.

I clenched her hair as I brought my mouth to her shoulder, kissing her delicate skin. My mouth moved over her collarbone, nipping as I kissed her neck. Mia moaned with every tug at her skin. I whispered through her hair, “I’m going to lick you until you come. Do you want that?”

A barely audible, “uh huh” departed her lips.

“I need to hear a ‘yes’, Mia.”

Her chest heaved in a short, quick breath. “Yes.”

I growled my approval in her ear and released my grip on her hair. Turning her around at the waist, I guided her a few steps to the balcony. It was time to turn her into a wet and stuttering mess. I whispered roughly in her ear from behind, “Put your hands on the rail.”

She twisted her body to look back at me. I shook my head no, “Hands on the rail.”

Mia followed my instruction. Gently at first, I pulled on her skirt. “This needs to come off.” With a hard tug, I pulled both her panties and skirt down to her ankles. She stepped out, and I flung them onto the chair. Her beautiful heart-shaped ass formed perfectly atop two lean legs in black stilettos.

Starting behind her ear, I kissed my way down her back, over her corset top, and down her hip to the dimples at the base of her spine. I knelt, palming her ass as I kissed that sweet spot where her gorgeous leg met the curve of her ass, mere inches from her pussy. I sucked and licked all around her exposed slice of heaven until I saw little droplets run down her thigh. Then I licked the sweet trail up her leg. With a broad tongue, I swiped straight up her center, from bottom to top.

Pulling her clit into my mouth with my lower lip, I sucked firmly and with a powerful rhythm, stopping only to push my tongue inside her.

A breeze rushed by, blowing her hair wildly over the arch in her back. I returned to sucking her clit, all the while rubbing her ass as I feasted. Her legs shook. I stood over top of her and pushed two fingers inside her. Mia gasped and gripped the railing as I rhythmically pulsed my fingers into her, curving them to rub the tender spot inside.

“Do you like this?” I asked.

“Oh, God. Yes,” she muttered between breaths.

“Do you want me inside you?”

“Yes.” Her ass rocked on my relentless fingers.

I pulled my fingers from her to make circles over her clit.
“Say, please.”

“What?” she gasped; her body trembling.

“Say, please.”

She groaned in frustration, “Please.”

“Say, ‘Please, Alex. Fuck me’.”

“I’m not say-saying that.” She stuttered in bliss.

I abruptly stopped making the circles.

Her ass wiggled in desperation. “No, don’t stop.”

“Say it now, Mia.”

She growled again in frustration. I made light little circles with just enough pressure to drive her insane.

“I hate you, Alex.” She teased.

I laughed and gripped her ass with one hand and thrust two fingers inside her. “But you don’t hate this.”

She could hardly catch her breath. I had found her spot, and I was rubbing it with purpose. “Say it,” I growled.

Nothing.

I slowed again, and she cried out in frustration, “Arrrgh ... Please, Alex. Fuck me.”

“That’s a good girl.” I smiled at her sweet surrender. “But not yet.”

I dropped to my knees and pushed my tongue between her folds again as I rubbed her. She held on to the rails as her moans turned to breathless whines. Her legs trembled and her pussy tightened in spasms around my fingers as she drenched my hand with her sweetness.

Mia leaned over the rail with her naked ass in the air. A trail of shimmery liquid dripped from her inner thighs. *Fucking spectacular.* I let her catch three or four breaths.

I unclipped my harness and put my guns on the chair. The sound of my zipper pulled her out of her orgasmic daze. She looked over her shoulder and her eyes widened as she watched me stroke my thick, throbbing cock. She had probably never seen a cock this big, but the surprise was half the fun. Mia attempted to turn around, but I shook my head and made a twirl motion with my finger again. Her pussy glistened from between her legs, making my cock drip with anticipation. Mia arched her back and wiggled her stiletto-propped ass from side to side—effectively provoking the beast in me.

I unzipped the back of Mia’s corset top and it fell to the ground. Her breasts were now free, but I didn’t touch them—not yet. I ran one hand down her back, watching the tiny hairs stand up from the gentle stroke on her newly exposed skin.

I took my shirt off and tossed it on a chair. Prepared for any situation, I pulled a condom from my wallet and quickly discarded the rest of my clothes and shoes. My cock stood hard at attention. Eating her out had pre cum freely dripping from my round head. I ripped the package open with my teeth and slid the magnum rubber down my shaft.

I reached around Mia and rubbed the front of her neck and jaw with my hand as I moved my cock over her slit. I gripped her firmly, but carefully, touching her wet entrance with just the head. She gasped as I slid partly in, matching her rocking

motion. My hips thrust deeper and deeper, stretching her until I was completely inside her.

I swept her hair to one side, kissing and nibbling from her shoulder to neck as I cupped her full breasts. Her hard nipples rolled in my palms. I pinched them both softly. She pushed her hips into me and moaned, and I pinched harder, guided by her whimpers and heavy breaths.

I ran one hand around Mia's waist and down her front to her swollen clit and made steady circles with my two fingers. I felt her tighten—this time around my cock. Every whimper and moan put me on the brink of explosion. Her insides spasmed, and I rubbed her faster, still pumping into her relentlessly from behind.

I held her up as she shook in waves beneath me. No longer able to restrain myself, I erupted inside her. Her moans morphed into heavy pants as I fully released into her, careful not to hurt her, but wanting to be even closer to her than just inside her. My cock pulsed as I slowed, slipping in and out of her. Mia's head rested against the railing. A slight gloss of dew formed over her skin in the moonlight.

Still inside her, I pulled some of her hair from her face, trying to see her expression as she laid across the steel. She held one finger in the air. "I just need a minute. I can't walk."

I chuckled and grabbed two towels from the champagne table. I cleaned Mia off from behind as she caught her breath. Then used the other towel on myself and pulled on my boxer briefs.

I swooped her up from behind and carried her across the entertainment area to the master bath. I sat her down on the corner of the tub and started a hot bath.

The water filled the tub rapidly. "Hang on." I left her sitting naked with her legs crossed on the edge of the tub and went to get a water bottle. When I returned, I found her immersed in the bubbles.

"It's possible I put in a little too much bubble bath." She giggled and sank lower behind a bubbly wall. I swooped some

bubbles away and turned off the jets and water.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you giggle before. You do a convincing fake laugh, but this was different.” I twisted a cap off and gave her the bottle of water.

“Thank you.” She took the water. “I guess I don’t giggle much.”

“I like your new noises.”

“That makes two of us.” Her eyes closed as she drank half the bottle in one gulp.

“Better?” I asked.

“Oh, God. Yes.” She capped the bottle and placed it next to her shoulder.

“Mia, explain to me why you don’t kiss. I need to know.”

She shrugged and sunk lower into the bubbly water. “I find kissing to be too intimate.”

I pointed with my thumb over my shoulder. “That’s not intimate to you?”

“It is, but on a different level. Kissing is soul-melting. I don’t give that part of me up. It’s nothing personal.”

The pieces of Mia exposed through the white bubbles taunted me to pull her out and send her into another whirlwind of orgasms. But that wasn’t the way to win her kiss. Mia had to trust me, and she had to trust herself. I sat on the side of the tub, wondering if she knew how crazy I was about her.

“So, now what?” She asked.

Just as the words escaped her mouth, my phone vibrated. I found it near my clothes on the balcony and scrolled through the messages as I walked back through the spacious room.

“It’s Greyson.” I looped her in so she wouldn’t think I was ignoring her. I finished texting him back and put my phone on the table.

“Any news?” she asked.

“Not yet. He’s at Luka’s estate. He’s checking out security and will report back on observations.”

“Will he come here?”

I sat on the tub. “No.” I flicked some bubbles at her nose. “He’ll go back to the house and meet up with us when it’s safe. You and I can’t leave this hotel. We’re being watched. We have to let Greyson get the intel.”

Mia straightened up in the bubbles and arched an eyebrow. “You think you’ve bought me?”

I grinned, “That’s right. For now—you’re mine.”

MIA

Holy hell. Alex lit my body on fire and calmed the chaos in my mind. Never in my life had I dreamed that sex like that existed. I ached from how roughly he handled me. Or maybe it wasn't his strength, but his size. *Damn, it was both.* I spent my entire adult life calling the shots. But my God, when Alex took control, it was ... liberating.

I turned the hot tub jets on and disappeared beneath a mountain of bubbles. Alex was at the table wearing only grey boxer briefs while reading through documents on his computer. The gun on the table next to him a constant reminder of how good he was with his weapon.

A tattoo of skulls, reapers, and smoke started at his elbow and spread up his shoulder and chest. Around his neck, he wore the partly melted dog tags he showed me at Howard's house, and on his wrist a tactical watch.

His body was one mountain range of muscles, tattoos, and scars. My eyes wandered over the rough skin that peppered his side and back. I notice a large angular scar on his thigh and wondered how many times he had cheated death.

Alex closed the laptop and looked over at me. "You know what we need?"

I sat up in the bubbles. "Do tell."

"Cheeseburgers. I'm starving."

My stomach rumbled on cue. "Agreed."

“I’ll order room service. Cheeseburger and fries sound good?” He grabbed a menu and looked for an extension to call.

“Sounds perfect.”

Alex placed the order but picked up the menu again. “Breakfast here looks good.”

I stood in the tub and let the bubbles slip down my body. He looked over the menu at me and placed it on the table. I smiled, sly, and stepped out of the tub with no regard for a towel. I walked, leaving a trail of bubbles on the floor. He stood from the chair. The bulge in his briefs grew in bounds as I approached.

“Round two?” He laughed. In one swoop, he picked up my soapy body, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. I circled his neck with my arms. His hands gripped my ass hard. I was slippery as soap, but he would never drop me, that I knew for certain.

I kissed his neck as he walked us back to the bedroom. A knock at the door interrupted us. “That’s really fast room service.” I rested my head on his shoulder.

Alex looked at his watch, holding me up with one arm. “It’s my connection here at the casino. He’s got valuable intel for us.”

He released me slowly, and I dropped to the floor. The idea of finding out more about Tasha and Luka straightened my head fast.

“Rinse off in the master bedroom shower. Your things are in there. Come out when you’re ready. He knows what’s going on. I briefed him earlier.” He looked down at his boxer briefs. “I need pants.” A second knock had Alex pushing me gently and closing the double doors behind me. A moment later, the main door opened, and I heard Alex greet what seemed to be an old friend. I shivered from the chill and found the bathroom.

The massive shower had four separate sprays. I washed off, found my bag, and slipped into a soft set of clothing. I

opened the bedroom doors a few minutes later to see the big doorman from the club sitting next to Alex at the table. Alex had his jeans on and was laughing at something as he looked my way.

“Mia, this is one of the funniest guys I know.” He put an arm on his shoulder, “Jerome, this is Mia. Mia, meet Jerome.”

I smiled and sat in the chair next to Alex. “Nice to meet you ... Mr. ‘I don’t get paid to talk.’”

“Just Jerome will do.” And then he smiled, which looked odd. I hadn’t pictured his face being able to move those muscles under his black, manicured beard.

“All kidding aside. Thank you for helping us.” I crossed my legs and got comfortable in the chair.

“I don’t really have a choice. This fucker saved my life four years ago and waited until yesterday to call in a favor.”

Alex laughed. “It was a favor worth saving. That woman was insane.”

“You were overseas together?” I pulled my arms into my sweater, hoping to hear something good.

Jerome folded his tattooed forearms over his chest, “Yeah, but this happened in a bar.”

“Really?” I said, excited about this story.

Alex pointed at Jerome. “This guy likes to shit talk. We were blowing off steam at a bar in Australia and he hit on the wrong guy’s girlfriend. Then he had the nerve to pass out at the table. I fought three guys while Greyson carried his fat ass out of the bar.”

“I’m not fat. I’m husky.” Jerome shrugged.

“The girl kicked me in the balls after I knocked her boyfriend out.” Alex shook his head.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t see that coming.” Jerome teased.

“You didn’t see any of it. You passed out! That’s the whole reason I got kicked in the nuts. Well, that and I had finished a

bottle of whiskey that night.” Alex winced in pain. “My left ball still hurts when I think about that night.”

“You see, pretty lady, I clearly owe him. So, here I am.”

Something told me that he owed Alex for more than a bar fight. For a big bearded guy, he sure had a lot of love in his eyes when he looked at Alex. As if they grew up together, “You have friends everywhere.” I said to Alex.

“Nah, not friends, brothers.” Jerome reached over and slapped Alex on the shoulder.

“One hundred percent. So, what can you tell us?” Alex sat back in his chair.

“Right. Well, one of Luka’s guys waited outside the club. He’s downstairs at the bar. The dude tipped my guys earlier to let him know when we escorted Mia up here to your room.” He put his hands up. “Don’t worry. I made sure no one saw me come here. There’s a bartender on the casino floor who gives Luka and Dimitri intel. He will be at the pool tomorrow and he will report everything he sees to them. The guy bringing up your food is good to go for anything you need. I have one of my men doing your room service tomorrow as well.”

“I appreciate that.” Alex nodded his approval.

“Does this kind of thing happen all the time? With the girls going to hotel rooms?” The pervasiveness was terrifying. A girl could get caught up and disappear before her family ever knew what happened.

“Absolutely. If you tip big enough, anyone will turn their head.” Jerome ran his hand over his beard. “It’s normal Vegas life. But Luka Koltsov is a different breed. Nobody tells him no, and his reach extends almost everywhere. The city is under his thumb. He paused for a moment, rubbing his chin while he thought. “I think Koltsov has been using the women as a front. He’s heavy into drug trafficking and uses his strippers to move product. I bust a lot of sellers in my club. I eighty-six them from the establishment, but a new one replaces the last. Here’s the weird part. It used to be mostly men in here selling—now

it is all ladies. The new product has a red skull blowing a kiss with a skeleton hand and hearts for eyes.”

“When I was dancing on the pillar, I saw two girls selling on your dance floor. Cocaine, I think ... maybe Ecstasy. It was hard to tell.”

He shook his head. “The one with the braids and the blonde in the blue shirt?”

“Yes. They were discreet and handed off quickly on the dance floor.”

“I’ll have the bouncers eighty-six them the next time they come through. I haven’t been able to catch them selling, but I’ve had my eye on both girls. The girls sell products all stamped with Luka’s insignia.”

“This is exactly what we needed to know. Anything else you think is relevant?” Alex pried.

“The buzz about this masquerade party has been intense. It’s basically an indoor playground for rich people—all under the guise of charity. No one knows the guest list and no one can ask who you are. A barcode will be sent to your phone. It’s the only way in.”

I took a sip from a water bottle on the table. “What’s the charity?”

“It’s called ‘Global Housing’. They ship cheap durable materials to underdeveloped countries to help build homes for villages.”

I crinkled my nose. “That sounds like such a great idea.”

“Doesn’t it?” Jerome rolled his eyes. “I’ve seen charities cover up so much illegal business that I don’t trust any ‘charitable organization’, especially from a man that makes his living as a strip club owner and pimp.”

“I’m sure it’s just a cover.” I agreed.

“A cover for lots of rich people misbehaving in the name of charity.” Alex folded his arms.

“Rich and powerful people. He provides anonymity for everyone using his services. The Koltsovs are linked to politicians, high-ranking police officials, judges, and big-time commercial property owners. They have dirt on everyone.” Jerome ran his hand over his smooth head. “There is something else, but I can’t confirm it one hundred percent.”

“What?” Alex asked.

“Dimitri has been noticeably absent lately. If they’re holding these missing girls somewhere, then that’s probably where he’s been. Luka’s son is his second in command.”

Alex thought for a moment before agreeing, “That would make sense.”

“Well, that’s everything, man. If anything changes, I’ll send someone to your room or text you.”

“Thanks, brother.” Alex sighed.

Jerome slapped Alex’s shoulder. “No problem. Keep your head on a swivel. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be at Club Vision working tomorrow night.” Jerome stood and Alex walked him to the door. “It’s good to see you.” The two men clapped each other firmly on the back.

As Jerome left, room service arrived at the door. Jerome nodded at the young man as he walked out. Alex took the tray and tipped the concierge. It must have been big because his eyes widened like saucers as he thanked Alex.

Alex closed the door and locked it behind him. “Hungry?”

“Hungry doesn’t begin to describe it. I’m famished.”

The smell of burgers, cheese, and fries filled the room, and my stomach rumbled. Alex put a plate in front of me and a cup on the table. I eagerly accepted. Five minutes passed before I looked up from my food to find Alex smiling and eating a fry.

I stopped chewing for a second. “What?”

“I’m happy to see you eating. It’s been a long day.”

I swallowed my bite and took a drink of water. “It’s making me sleepy.”

“Finish eating and then get some rest.” Alex popped another fry into his mouth.

“You’re not going to bed?”

“I would love to sleep next to you, but I need to loop the team in on our meeting with Jerome. Also, I have to review more intel from Greyson.”

I inhaled the last few bites of food and pushed my plate forward. “I’ll stay out here with you.”

His phone rang just as the words left my mouth. I heard Greyson on the other end rattling off details about the Koltsov Estate. I listened for as long as I could, but sleep pulled at me as I laid my head down on my arms for only a minute.

When I woke the next morning, the room was dark. Slight beams of sun peaked through tiny slits between the floor-length black-out curtains. Panic washed over me. Was I alone? Did I miss something important? Totally disoriented, I pushed the covers down, anxious to find the time.

I burst through the master bedroom doors to find Alex sitting at the same table, shirtless and wearing light blue board shorts. He turned around, resting his forearm on the back of the chair. “Mornin’.”

“Is it still morning?”

Alex looked at his watch. “For the next thirty minutes, yes.”

I walked to the table and took a seat next to him. “I didn’t mean to sleep so long.”

“You need the sleep. We’ll be awake most of the night.”

“When do you sleep? I mean really?” I asked, astonished. He never looked tired.

“Three to four hours and I’m good to go.” Alex went to the printer and pulled out a picture. He added it to a stack on the

table.

“What’s all this?” I picked up a picture of one of Luka’s goons wearing dark sunglasses and an earpiece standing outside a large house door.

“Greyson went to the estate last night. He sent me pics of the security detail, the building, and the grounds.”

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked, sitting next to him.

Alex leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. “There are only four security personnel on the grounds. Luka keeps one personal bodyguard close by. The staff includes three people in the kitchen and three on cleaning duty most of the day. The security detail has one restaurant deliver food. Nothing is within five miles of the estate, so they must have an arrangement. The next time a delivery comes, Greyson will enter the property and bug multiple rooms.” Alex pushed a photo towards me. “The estate has guard dogs that patrol the outside perimeter.”

“I love dogs. Are they mean to them?” I wrinkled my forehead in concern.

“We don’t know yet. They look healthy, but I don’t think Luka’s men are particularly affectionate. The dogs are definitely a variable. My guess is that they are for intimidation. It’s not too often you find a well-trained dog and handler on private property. We’ll do our best to avoid them.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, see those?” Alex pointed at several bikinis with tags laid out on the counter next to the bar. I hadn’t noticed them when I walked out.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“You. I had several brought up from the shop downstairs. Find one that fits.”

He smiled that cocky smile, and I remembered all the reasons he had to be confident. My body flushed as the previous night flashed through my mind.

“We’re making an appearance at the pool.”

ALEX

WINNING YOU

Mia disappeared into the bedroom with an armful of swimsuits. I secured the room in preparation for our public appearance and placed my laptop, ammo, and second Glock into the safe.

Luka would have eyes on us from the moment we left the hotel room. The poolside bartender would watch our every move. The chance of someone searching our room was slim, but I couldn't be sure how in-depth Luka vetted his party guests. As long as he was buying our covers, we would be relatively safe.

Mia emerged from the bathroom in a white bikini with gold accents. The triangle top was almost see-through, showing the outline of her perfectly etched nipples. The bronze of her skin contrasted against the white suit in a sun-kissed outline. She wore her hair soft and down around her shoulders.

I wanted to rip that suit off with my teeth. But today we had work to do. I cleared my throat. "That's perfect."

She walked towards me, speaking as her hips swayed. "What's the plan?"

"You are going to keep looking phenomenally beautiful. I'm going to check out the scene and bartender. They will probably make contact with us once we're in public."

I grabbed my shirt from the counter and fastened my packed holster in the front of my shorts. I tucked money and

the hotel key card into my pocket. “One more thing. no matter what happens, we have to keep our covers. Understand?”

She put a hand on her hip. “You’re not going to make me dance at the pool, are you?”

“Not necessarily, but you have to wear a smile with that knockout body of yours. Look like you’re trying to impress me. Whatever we do must be convincing.”

Mia rolled her eyes playfully. “I’ll do my best.” She slid her arms into a white sheer cover-up. It hung open in the front, providing the perfect amount of coverage to take the elevator to the pool.

She looked down at her new outfit. “You like it?”

I moved forward and pulled Mia into me by her waist. “I don’t just like it, I love it. And if I recall right, I spent a good portion of the night worshipping it with my mouth.”

“I meant the outfit.” She spoke through a held breath.

“I know what you meant.” My eyes fell to all the slopes and turns of her nose and mouth, finally resting on her eyes. “I can still taste you on my lips. I’d spend an entire day drowning in a sea of you if I could. But today is not the day for that. Today we find Tasha.”

Mia exhaled. “Tasha ... she’s all that matters, Alex.”

“Trust me when I say this mission is the only thing keeping me from ravaging you.” I released her waist, but not her eyes. “Now tell me you trust me.”

“I trust you.” She said, locked in my gaze.

“Good. Let’s get to work.” I opened the hotel door, holding it as Mia walked out like a goddess.

She stopped and turned around. “Is it safe to leave our things?”

“Jerome has eyes on the hotel door. I’ll know if someone tries to break in,” I whispered.

Mia followed me down the hallway to the elevator. The pool entrance was a short walk from where we exited. A large

pool area, littered with partying people, had bars on each side and multiple cabanas. I walked to the only male bartender on duty. Jerome had given me a description, and I was sure this was my guy. I motioned for Mia to sit at the bar.

I placed the hotel key on the bar. Seeing the suite identifier, he walked promptly over. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“For starters, I would like a table with mimosas and a private cabana.” I palmed him a hundred-dollar bill as we shook hands.

“Absolutely.” He slid the money smoothly into his pocket.

“Put the charges on my room. I’ll tip in cash.”

The bartender smiled gratuitously. “Thank you. I’ll get things started for you.” He waved down a waitress with a tray of drinks and entered our information into the cash register. She sped over and nodded as he whispered to her. Clearly, they saw the high-limit credit card associated with the room and my fake personal information. The waitress smiled as she walked in our direction.

“I’ll take you to your cabana, Mr. Montgomery.”

“Thank you.” Mia and I followed her through the tables of patrons to a large beige tent with tied-back curtains.

“This cabana comes with a full minibar. I’ll bring you a bottle of champagne and orange juice.”

I thanked her, and she hurried away to fill our requests. Mia sat on a foldout chair. “This is beautiful. You can see everything from here.”

She was right. I had a perfect view of the pool entrance and could see the bartender. I smiled to myself as I watched him text from his phone. I figured he was telling Luka we were here. *Perfect.*

“What should I do?” Mia asked.

“I think you should lie on that chair in your bikini.”

Mia disrobed and laid down like Cleopatra. She was breathtaking. Heart-stopping. And then I realized, if I were a guy spending thousands of dollars on a woman like Mia, I wouldn't be watching her sunbathe.

The waitress returned with a bottle of Dom and a glass pitcher of orange juice. I threw a hundred on her tray. "Thank you."

She tapped the hundred on her tray and smiled ear to ear. "Thank you, sir. I'll check on you in about fifteen minutes."

Mia propped herself on her elbows to survey the crowd. Two women dressed in bikinis and heels were escorting a man through the crowd. Waitresses shuffled ahead of him to prep the cabana with drinks before he arrived. The man sported a thick greying mustache and thinning hair. He wore swim trunks with an open Hawaiian shirt revealing a round and hairy stomach.

The girls, one blonde and the other brunette, looked familiar. "Don't stare," I whispered, reaching for the sunblock on the mini-fridge. "Sit on my lap." Mia moved from the lounge to my lap. I rubbed the thick white lotion over her back as we spoke. "Talk to me. You know those girls?"

She whispered over her shoulder. "They work for Luka. I saw them at the club. The blonde was in Club Vision last night."

Rubbing sunblock on Mia made it hard to concentrate, but I wanted to hear everything they said. The duo settled in with their VIP, laughing, taking shots, and showering him with compliments. An hour passed and the man finally shooed the girls off to their own chairs as he lit a cigar.

Hawaiian shirt guy looked at me and then Mia, raising his cigar in salute. I raised my drink and shouted, "How's it going?"

"It's about to be great." He shouted back, grinning. I nodded, hiding my disgust. His slimy enthusiasm told me I wouldn't like his implication.

A DJ began playing music poolside, and the crowd grew three times the size it was when we arrived. The girls next to us danced wobbly on their feet and the guy rubbed his hands all over them.

“He’d do a lot less touching if I broke his fingers,” I mumbled.

“Easy, Alex. We can’t blow our covers out here, remember?” Mia smiled as if she had said something funny. The blonde girl with Hawaiian shirt guy waved at us and stumbled over to our cabana. “Hi, I’m Tori. You’re Jade, right? I saw you at the club yesterday.”

“I am.” Mia shook hands with the girl. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too! Can I steal her for a minute?” she asked and pulled Mia from my lap. “We’ll be right back.”

“Don’t be gone long.” I tried to not sound overly annoyed.

I opened a bottle of water while I waited for Mia. Tori took her to the corner of the other cabana. Hawaiian shirt guy couldn’t take his eyes off her ass.

He shouted over at me, “Hey, man. You wanna trade ladies for an hour? Maybe we could share once they get all wasted.”

“I’d hate to break your face,” I said back with a smile, knowing he couldn’t hear me that well.

Confused, he shouted, “What?”

I shouted back, “I said, she’s not wasted. But I don’t share, so no thanks.”

“She will be soon.” He said with a smirk.

I hate this guy.

I turned my attention back to Mia just in time to see her throw her head back and swallow something. *What the fuck!* Panic swept through me. I white-knuckled the chair, unsure of what had just happened.

Tori escorted Mia back to my lap. “You’ll be fine. Drink lots of water and show this guy a great time. Don’t forget to be

at the valet at 10 PM.”

Mia nodded. “I’ll be there.”

Tori went back to her cabana. Once she was out of hearing range, I roared. “What the fuck are you doing, Mia? We gotta get your stomach pumped.” I pulled out my phone in a rush to text Greyson.

“Mia put a hand on my chest and straddled me. “Everything is fine.” She whispered in my ear. Then her right hand slipped into my pocket. “The pills are in your pocket.”

I sighed with heavy relief. “You had me about to blow this whole fucking mission.” My heart beat like a sledgehammer in my chest. “What happened?”

Mia pressed her body against mine as she talked in my ear. “Luka wanted her to watch me take the Ecstasy. It came in a white bag with a skeleton blowing a kiss. That’s not the first time I’ve faked taking drugs at work. I’m a professional, remember? I always keep a clear head.”

Our waitress popped in, surprising us. “Sorry, if I’m intruding. Do you need anything?”

Mia spoke for us. “We’re perfect. Would you mind closing the curtains?”

The waitress put her tray down. “Absolutely.” She untied each set of curtains and brought the sheer and thicker fabric to the middle. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you,” I said.

She walked through the center of the curtains and closed them behind her.

“Do you think she reports to Luka too?” Mia asked.

“Definitely. At a minimum, she tells the bartender what she sees, and he reports to Luka.”

She looked up in thought. “Hmmm. I think I have an idea.”

“That was quick thinking with the pills. You did good, Mia.”

“There’s only one problem.” Mia spun a piece of her hair around her finger in thought. “They’re going to think I’m high on a drug that gives you an oral fixation and insatiable need to touch everything.”

“Where are you going with this?” I asked, adrenaline still pumping through my veins from thinking she ingested Luka’s drugs.

“Let’s make this as real as possible.” She pointed at my chest. “You be the guy having fun.” Then she pointed at her chest. “And I’ll be the girl hired to give it to you.”

Mia bit my shoulder through my shirt. I growled and grabbed her face. “We don’t have to do this here.”

Our noses touched, and she rubbed my chest with her hands. “I’m being watched and don’t intend to leave any doubt. We’ve come this far. There’s no turning back.” Mia slid her hand over my holstered gun and onto my cock. Then she licked my ear and whispered, “Take off your gun, Alex.”

Obliging the lady, I pulled my holster out of the front of my shorts and slid it between the cushion and the back of the oversized wicker chair with plush padding.

She purred, “Mmmm ...” Then she moved her hand down the front of my board shorts, running an open palm over my now hard cock.

Gripping the back of her neck, I pulled her face into mine. “Give me your lower lip.”

She froze, and panic washed over her face. “It’s not a kiss. I just want your lower lip.” She pushed her lip out in a pout. I took her lower lip and sucked for a second, and released it with a popping sound. “You trust me. That’s a good girl.” I held her face so close our noses touched. “Are you sure you want to do this, Mia?”

“Shut up and let me work my magic.” Mia slid between my legs to her knees. She had my board shorts open and was pulling my fully hard cock out faster than I expected. For a moment, she just stared. It was an impressive size, matching

my height, but it didn't intimidate her. Hell, that's what was so damn attractive about Mia—she was unshakeable.

Mia straightened up on her knees and ran her hand over the head and shaft as if she admired it. Holding it with one hand, she licked me from the bottom of my shaft to the head with a wet, wide tongue. I ran my hands through my hair to keep them from grabbing her and pulling her onto me.

Stroking the shaft, she positioned her mouth above the head and took half of it in her mouth. She choked briefly before pulling off of it. Then she held me with one hand and let her spit run off her pouty lips and down my hard cock before putting it in her mouth again, this time getting more of me down her throat.

I locked my hands behind my head, rolling my eyes in bliss before watching her third attempt. Mia positioned her face inches from the head as she rotated her hand up and down my shaft. She opened her mouth and let her spit drip onto my cock while twisting her hand up and down over my length.

FUUUUUUCK. I could have come right then and there.

Suddenly, she opened wide and fit almost all of my cock down her throat. I throbbed in her mouth, on the brink of explosion. She moved her mouth and hand in unison, pumping over and over like she was desperate to see me come.

“I'm almost ... there,” was all I could groan.

She purred, and the vibration in her throat was too much. I couldn't hold myself back. An earthquake of an orgasm ripped through my body. Mia kept her mouth around my head, sucking every drop of me while she moaned.

Without warning, the waitress opened the curtains behind Mia. She gasped and turned around immediately. “I'm sorry. I'll come back later.” As she walked away, she said once more, “I'm so sorry, Mr. Montgomery.”

I let her leave flustered, far more concerned about Mia feeling embarrassed than the waitress. *Interesting.* Mia was smiling with big doe eyes and a wet mouth.

“Don’t move.” I reached for a towel at the top of a nearby stack and wiped Mia’s wet face gently. Then I cleaned up and tied my shorts.

Mia stood, but I reached out and quickly pulled her down to me. “You wanted the waitress to see us?”

“Yes. But no one else. If she walked in on us, then she would tell the bartender—and the bartender would report to Luka that I was doing everything he expected.”

I pushed a piece of wet hair from her face. “You’re improvising now? I’m very impressed.”

“I’m learning from the best.” She said, biting on her bottom lip.

I growled, “It’s not me. You’re naturally talented.”

“Speaking of talents. You make me go from wanting to punch you in the face to getting naked with you, all in one evening.” She tilted her head.

“Don’t be mad about last night still. I like it when you don’t hate me.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and giggled. “What are you doing to me?”

I rubbed my thumb over her new puffy lips and kissed her forehead. “I’m winning you over, baby.”

MIA

THE PICTURE

The waitress blushed every time she came to our table. With her eyes looking everywhere but our faces, she served us lobster salad and fillet mignon under the shade of the cabana. I played my part and avoided the food. I knew the girls at my old club would go several hours without eating when they did Ecstasy. The drug suppressed their appetite and made them thirsty. I asked Alex to take my food to go, so I could eat in private. After two hours of being seen, we returned to the room to plan our departure.

Once inside the suite, I found my dresses hanging next to a tuxedo on a portable rack. “You had my dresses cleaned?”

“Just pressed. Your bag was open, and I didn’t want to wake you this morning. I hope you don’t mind.” He removed his holster and placed it on the counter next to the bar.

“No, I don’t mind. That was a nice thought.” I ran my hand down the plastic cover, admiring the perfectly smooth fabric. “Thank you.” I hadn’t thought about the dresses crammed in my bag. Alex thought of everything.

A gold box wrapped with a black satin ribbon caught my eye. I picked it up from the bottom rack.

“Open it,” Alex said.

I pulled the ribbon and removed the lid. Carefully, I opened the gold shiny folds of paper to find a black lace mask. I held it up to my face and looked in the mirror. Alex appeared behind me as I examined the exquisite detail. A crown was detailed into the lace above the bridge of the nose. It was

stunning. He picked up the ribbon on each side and tied it gently behind my head.

I admired my mysterious look in the mirror. “This feels incredible.”

Alex put his hands on my ribs and traced the curves of my body from behind. He whispered in my ear through my hair, “I agree.” And then he growled, and my knees weakened in response. “There should be one more.”

I folded another piece of paper over to reveal a black matte mask lacking an intricate design, but luxurious all the same. “It’s yours?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I handed it to him as I turned around, trying to stifle the heat that now built in my body every time he touched me.

He looked it over and held it smoothly across his face. His bright blue eyes were a brilliant contrast to the black fabric. “Perfect.” He placed the mask back in the box. I untied mine and put it in the box.

“We need to call Greyson. He messaged, saying the rest of the team was here.”

Alex sat on the couch and I sat next to him cross-legged.

“We have reinforcements now.” Alex put his phone on the table as it rang on speaker.

Greyson answered, “Hey.”

“Everybody all set?” Alex asked.

“We’re on standby.”

“What’s the plan on your end?” Alex stretched his arms up and crossed his legs on the table.

“I’ve had eyes on Dimitri. He makes multiple trips between the estate and another building out in the desert.” Greyson said.

Alex nodded. “It’s the location for the party.”

“I believe so. It’s an isolated building on a flat desert area with one road in and out. It’s a warehouse with two guards at all times. Trucks and large boxes have been coming in since we started surveillance. The party is going to be massive.”

“And you researched the dates from the pictures I took at the club?”

“Yes. I’m betting he’ll smuggle drugs in with his supplies for this masquerade party.” Greyson answered.

“He brings the drugs in with “charity” party supplies and then accumulates dirt on rich and powerful people as they let loose at his party,” I said.

“Precisely, Mia,” Greyson said.

“We need to locate the shipment information. I bet it’s in Luka’s office.” Alex said.

“I agree, Alex,” replied Greyson.

“What about Devin and Liv?” Alex rubbed his jaw as he listened.

“They’ll have barcodes to get in. The party list is long and they won’t notice a few extras. We’ll have two additional teams on standby in case the shit hits the fan inside the party. I’ve hacked their system and added us to the list. Once you are in the party Agent Kelly wants you to see if you can arrange a drop off of his skull product to your undercover home address.”

“I can do that. We divide into two groups. You guys hit Luka’s home once he leaves for the masquerade party and Liv and Devin are with me,” offered Alex.

After a brief pause, Greyson continued, “Agreed. I think Logan and Cadie should go to the estate after Luka leaves. John has a vantage point from a cluster of trees on the property. He can provide additional coverage from there. I suspect Luka will leave his ‘B’ team at the residence when he leaves.”

“And the dogs?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, man. They have two German Shepherds and one handler. The security detail comprises one at the entrance, one or two with Luka, and one or two patrolling.”

“I bet he leaves the dogs, the handler, and one other.” Alex rubbed his chin in thought.

“I concur. The rest will be at the party. He’s hired out temp security for the event, as well. I don’t believe security will be in masks. His team will be easy to pick out.”

“Is my sister in the house?” I blurted out, afraid of the answer.

“She was there. Now, she’s being moved to the warehouse.”

“What? Why wouldn’t you tell me?” I held my hands out to Alex as if he had the answer.

“I’m telling you right now,” Greyson said flatly.

“He knew she was being taken to the warehouse. Once we extract her, the mission is over and everyone’s cover is blown. We need to get the information and Tasha all at one time.”

I crossed my arms and clenched my jaw. Part of me wanted to be selfish—to get Tasha out and run as fast as we could from this city.

Alex put a hand on my shoulder. “We will pull her out using the party as a distraction. Security will be the highest before the party starts.” He put a thumb under my chin. “Trust me. Now we know she’s alive. This is good news.”

“Mia, have you received a message from Dixie?” Greyson asked.

“I haven’t. I’ll tell Alex as soon as I do.” My head jerked up from my thoughts. “Do you think Dixie is ok?”

There was a pause on Greyson’s end that made my stomach sink. “It’s hard to tell. It is possible that she’s working the party and needs to be on the premises to message you with accurate information. Let’s hope you hear from her soon.”

Suddenly, Alex's burner phone vibrated on the table. He picked it up and read the message, "Luka's bartender just texted. They're sending a car for us at 2200."

I did the math in my head—10PM.

"You two play your parts and leave the rest to us. I'll text you if I need to. Mia, don't wear your earpiece but carry that purse with your tracker. Understand?"

"I understand, Greyson."

"Alright, brother. Stay alert."

"You too, man."

Alex hung up and ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair. Then rested his face in his hands with his elbows resting on his knees.

"What's wrong?"

"I get nervous every time Cadie takes a role in a mission."

"That's understandable." I pulled my knees to my chest, unsure how to comfort him.

"Don't get me wrong. Logan, John, and I have spent months training her, and she's a natural. But it worries me."

"She's a real badass," I said with total sincerity.

"She's a McCallister. We like danger, saving people, and fast cars." He stretched his chest out as if it were a normal thing to say about a family.

"I thought *you* were the biggest badass when I met you. You might be my kryptonite." He patted my knee. "I need to pack a few things. Jerome is going to drop all our stuff off at the safe house." Alex walked to the table and put his pictures and printouts into organized files.

"I'll take a shower." I walked back to the master bedroom. Alex nodded his approval. I hoped Dixie was okay and that Greyson was right. I put the phone on the counter so I wouldn't miss a call or message.

Suddenly, I remembered the DNA test I had shoved in my bag. Oh, no! *What if he saw it?* I ran to my bag. The absent dresses left lots of space. The DNA test was folded neatly inside.

Just as I thought about Sarah, my phone lit up. I read the message carefully.

Sarah: This was a legitimate DNA test from a private company. They took it right before the public ancestry sites were created. There's a file number on the paper. I could find out that it was an actual test from a real company, but I wasn't privy to additional information.

Me: Thanks. I'll explain everything soon.

Sarah: Are you okay?

Me: I am. I'll talk to you soon.

Alex needed to know that Tasha and I may not have the same father and that Luka and Dimitri knew more about it than I did. A hot shower would help me pull my thoughts together. I undressed and stepped into the water. This party would be intense. Tonight, I'd be ready for anything and anyone.

I spent the next twenty minutes with hot water beating down on me. I dried off and pulled on a plush white robe hanging next to the door. Then, I combed my hair out and left the bedroom in search of the man who both calmed me and made my heart race. It was time to come clean about everything.

I found Alex standing next to the neatly organized table with a fully packed bag at his feet. Alex smiled at me, then pulled his phone out and read a message. It must have been long because he took a full minute to read it.

When he looked at me, his lips were a straight line. "Tell me about this picture." He held up his phone.

He held a photo I had never seen before. Meret was standing outside my childhood home next to his work vehicle in an advertisement for his business. I could clearly see my address on the curb. My heart thumped heavily in my chest. I was speechless.

“Meret. Tell me about Meret Orlov, Mia.”

I swallowed hard. “I don’t know much. He was our gardener. I remember him being a nice guy ... always smiling and bringing us candy. We were little. Sometimes he brought us presents.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why would you hide that from me?” His jaw clenched twice as he stared straight through me.

“I didn’t mean to hide anything. I just ...”

He shook his head, looking away from me and running a hand over his face.

“Yes. I should have said that I knew him, but I wanted to figure out the connection first. It didn’t make sense.” I stepped forward. “Alex, I didn’t want you to think that I knew more about her disappearance than I was telling you. I tried to explain that my father was a bad guy. I was scared OPS wouldn’t take the case if I told you everything.”

He turned around abruptly. “You absolutely knew more than you let on. That’s the fucking definition, Mia. Greyson has been working on a connection since the meeting. There was a link between your family and Luka and you withheld that information. You lied to us. You lied to me.” Alex shook his head in utter disappointment, “And this isn’t the first time. I let Tasha’s drug issue slide, but this is too much.”

I walked towards him. “I knew my father was involved with the Russians, but I couldn’t be sure it was Luka. Meret was a gardener, not a gangster. I didn’t know how they were connected. Please don’t be mad. That’s truly all I know about Meret.”

“Do you know how he died?” Alex asked, his face void of emotion.

“He died in a drunk driving accident.”

He stared at me as if he didn’t know me. “Who would know that specific driver would most likely be drunk and driving from his typical bar, through that light, and to his home?”

“Alex, it was an accident,” I said softly.

“Meret had no reason to be on that corner, much less in the street. Your uncle is the only connection. The one person who knew his client would be drunk, like he was every Friday, driving down that dark road.” He exhaled harshly. “I read the news reports and the case file.”

My chest tightened. My heart beat like it would explode from my rib cage.

“What else, Mia?”

“I found a DNA test in Tasha’s room that shows my dad isn’t her dad.” Trying to recover from my betrayal, I blurted. “I’ve been in denial, hoping it wasn’t true.”

Alex didn’t look surprised. He folded his arms across his chest. “I knew about the DNA test. There was a copy on Luka’s desk. I sent it to Greyson to be verified.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked, confused.

“I know you have trust issues. All that mattered is that I knew, not if you knew. And since you already did, I let you keep your secret. Clearly, you didn’t trust me with it.” He clenched his jaw. “But this ... you knowing Meret. It’s too fucking much.” He exhaled. “What else happened around this time?”

I couldn’t breathe. The world was closing in on me. “My mom ... my mom left.”

Alex shook his head. “Your mom didn’t leave—she vanished. No note, no criminal investigation, she just disappeared, and your father did nothing about it.”

“My dad always told us she left him. He told us she didn’t want us anymore. She didn’t want to be married or be our mom. I never questioned him. I figured she was tired of him getting rough with her. I didn’t blame her. I wanted to leave too!” *How had I never questioned him? Had he known all these years that something terrible had happened to her?*

Alex went to his phone. He pulled up a video. “Watch this.”

I held his phone and squinted at the grainy black-and-white image. My eyes swelled with tears. My mom ... I could barely see her profile, but I recognized the back of her, including her pea coat and tall black boots she wore the last morning she dropped us at school. The time in the corner displayed 9:07 PM. My uncle was shoving a gun into her side and pushing her toward my father's boat.

"Where did you get this?"

"Luka had it on his computer. You never gave us a picture of your mother, but as the intel surfaced, it seemed likely it was her." He went to take the phone, but I pulled it back and watched the video again.

"How long have you known?" My words barely formed a whisper as I watched the last known images of my mom over and over again.

"I had my suspicion when I saw it, but I didn't want to show you until after the mission. I thought it would be too much for you. But I need to know everything. If that means showing you how complicated this situation has become, then so be it."

"You were hiding something from me, too." I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming.

"There's a difference. I hid something from you to protect you. You hid something you knew would help the mission."

I pushed his phone into his chest. "I deserved to see this as soon as you suspected that was my mom."

"This video is just confirmation. Deep down, you always knew there was something suspicious about your mom's disappearance, but you were too afraid to say something. You ran away to hide behind a pile of books during the day and a stripper pole at night. Tell me I'm wrong, Mia." Anger fueled his sharp words and they cut me deep. Alex was merciless. Heartless. And I deserved it. *I deserved every terrible thing that happened to me.*

"Shut. Up. That's not true." I was angry too, but not just at Alex—at myself.

“Of course, it’s true.” He threw his arms in the air. “Your sister is caught up in it and you’re hiding information that could help get her back.” He laced his fingers on top of his head and looked at the ceiling. “Unfucking believable! I’m putting my life on the line for you.”

“I didn’t mean for this ...” I looked down in defeat. *What had I done?*

“Now we know that your mother had an affair. Meret was overly nice to you. A DNA test was done, proving your dad is not Tasha’s dad. A few days later, your mom is shoved by gunpoint on a boat by your uncle, never to be seen again. Then, a week later, Meret is killed by an acquaintance of your uncle. As soon as your sister turned 18, Meret’s best friend snatches her up, hoping to take her back to Moscow.”

“I’m sorry, Alex.”

“Meret was the key to understanding all of this. I’m calling the team. Get yourself dressed.” He grabbed his tuxedo from the rack and walked by. Phone in hand, Alex went to the opposite bedroom.

I swallowed the lump of guilt stuck in my throat with the coppery taste of blood from my cheek. *How could I have been so stupid?* I took my dress from the rack and brought it to the bedroom. I was angry at myself for not trusting Alex. I was damaged and it was going to ruin everything—it would ruin me.

I laid down on the bed, pulled a pillow over my face, and sobbed. There was more I hadn’t told Alex. He needed to know Arthur was responsible for getting the man who killed Meret out of jail the night of the accident. The news article had omitted that information. I was the only one who could confirm what Alex suspected.

I splashed some water on my face and sucked everything back in. I would make this right tonight.

Pulling myself together, I carefully applied my makeup and straightened my hair. I barely recognized the woman in the mirror. She was broken and numb. I destroyed Alex’s trust.

My mother never abandoned us and my uncle had probably killed her on orders from my father. Now, I was on the verge of losing my sister to the most evil man of them all.

I went through the motions and slipped into a black sheath dress that fit me snugly. A light shimmer of glitter on my collarbones and eyes and I sparkled in the light. I puckered my lips and applied a strawberry red lipstick. The pain in my heart competed with the numbness in my body for “worst feeling of my life”. This nightmare had to end.

The burner phone vibrated on the counter just as I finished my makeup.

Unknown number: Luka’s office has a safe with important documents.

The lock code is 51768.

I walked from the bedroom to find Alex. He was at the mini bar with a glass of whiskey in his hand. His broad shoulders were even more impressive in the black tux jacket. His square jaw gave him an almost invincible aura and the dimple in the center of his chin was downright charming, even when he was angry.

I held the phone up. “I got a text.” Alex walked to me and I handed him the phone. He read it and then sent a picture of the text to Greyson.

“There’s something else you need to know about Arthur and Meret.” I felt more numb by the minute, “and that code ...” I swallowed hard, “That’s my mom’s birthday.”

ALEX

MASQUERADE

We arrived at the valet a few minutes before our 2200 deadline. As expected, Luka had a limo waiting for us.

The driver stood with his hand on the door. “Mr. Montgomery?”

“Yes, sir.” I politely allowed Mia to enter the limo first and followed behind her. The privacy screen separated us from the driver, but the vehicle could be bugged and we knew we couldn’t break cover. Conversation had to be kept to a minimum.

I poured a glass of sparkling water from the limo bar. Before the party, water was a better choice than alcohol. Luka’s guests would enjoy all things of excess. I had protected several clients at parties twice this size with the same level of debauchery. Hell, nothing surprised me anymore.

Mia wore a black Versace dress that sparkled like the desert sky. When she crossed her legs, a long slit revealed a slender strip of her flawless body to the top of her thigh. Mia could make any man’s heart skip a beat. Mine had almost stopped.

I handed Mia the first glass of water and poured one for myself.

“Thank you,” she said with a half-smile.

Our ride to the warehouse was quiet. We both felt betrayed. That much was clear. I only hoped her devotion to the mission would overcome her emotions.

Greyson texted. Everyone was in place. I showed the text to Mia in silence, accepting the probability the limo was under surveillance. Luka had left for the event and minimal security was at his estate. Devin would arrive an hour after we appeared at the party. Liv was close by with the Tank.

We traveled through a familiar Nevada landscape. Desert, sparse trees, and tumbleweeds flanked the two-lane highway. The days were warm, but the night air left a chill.

Mia sat, sipping water—making an ordinary movement look divine. At the hotel, she had promised to be open with me, but I had my doubts still. I reminded myself that she was handling enough to break a normal person. I knew the feeling. We were all broken. She didn't see the moment I hit rock bottom. But I had a front-row seat to her world's destruction. Though I wanted her to trust me, I couldn't force her. She would open up when she was ready.

I messaged back and forth with the team as we drove. The mission had Devin amped. He was an adrenaline junkie with a hard-on for drug smugglers and human trafficking. Nothing made him feel better than annihilating a ring of criminals.

After thirty minutes of uncomfortable silence, we arrived at the warehouse. Security wasn't patting the guests down. A win for me. I wore an ultra-thin Kevlar layer under my tux and two Glocks at my waist with extra ammunition—dressed to impress.

Our driver took Mia's hand, helping her exit the car gracefully. We walked side by side over a red carpet to the massive entrance. The front door reached fifteen feet high, slid on a track, and was manned by two security guards dressed in black. One stepped forward with a hand-held scanner.

“Bar codes, Sir.”

“Sure thing, boss.” I held out my phone to provide each of our barcodes. His scanner beeped and the second guard slid open the door.

Immediately, I assessed the security situation inside. What looked like a warehouse on the outside was a multi-level club

intricately decorated with an Arabian Nights theme. Masked women danced in cages hung from the ceiling. Guests were given a private room with a view of the dance floor. At the opposite end of the first floor, a D.J. played techno music in front of a waterfall wall. Mini bars were throughout the lower level with a circular, centered dancefloor. The crowd was steadily filled with tuxedos and ball gowns.

Some rooms had the curtain partition still open. I stepped forward and casually glanced inside. Huge black and gold plush pillows lined the walls of the rooms and surrounded low tables in the center. Other rooms were closed, with an attendant standing watch. Waitresses dressed as belly dancers and genies circled with trays of colorful drinks.

“Wow.” Mia stared up at the cages. “The paint is spectacular.”

Once my eyes adjusted to the ceiling lights, I saw that the dancers were completely naked—painted from toe to neck. The rhinestones and feathers embellished across their noses gave the illusion of a real mask. Each woman was a moving work of art.

I quickly returned to evaluating our surroundings. “Let’s go over here.” I pulled her hand, bringing Mia’s body to me, and whispered through her hair, “We’ll hold flutes and drink casually. Try to smile. You look pissed.”

“This is how I always look.” She replied straight-faced.

“You know what I mean.” I nudged her forward. “I want to watch the crowd for a while.”

We walked to a place where I could see the entrance and the floor.

“Champagne, sir?” A waitress blinked through a sheer veil covering her face.

“Absolutely.” I took the last two flutes, handing one to Mia. “Do you know where the restroom is?”

“Down the back wall on the right.” The waitress hurried off with her empty tray.

We stood for a few more moments, the sexual tension between us replaced with awkwardness. I adored Mia more than she knew. Meeting her was like a gut punch that I couldn't recover from. She drove me completely crazy. I hated being angry with her, but I also hated that she lied. I took a deep breath and tried to ease the uncomfortableness between us.

“You look beautiful, Mia.”

“Thank you.” She rolled her eyes playfully and smiled that smile only I seemed to see. Maybe it was forced, but I'd take any smile right now.

Her eyes darted to a man staring as he walked by. The stranger looked her up and down, practically panting. She grinned politely. I knew the real Mia wanted to punch him square in the jaw. With everything this day had already unveiled for her, she was still holding it together.

The stranger noticed my glare and scurried away quickly. “Want me to kill that pig?”

Mia laughed, shot champagne out of her nose, and covered her face with her hand. A few nearby guests looked away disgusted. A waitress laughed and covered her mouth quickly.

“Oh, my gosh. No.”

“Because I will.”

“Okay, okay. Simmer down.” She swiped a napkin off a passing tray. “That went out my nose, you know.” She dabbed her chin with the napkin.

“Here, let me help you.” I dabbed a napkin down her neck to her cleavage. I tapped several extra times on her beautiful breasts. Mia rolled her eyes again as I completed my thorough cleanup.

“You done?” she asked with one hand on her hip.

“I'll do this all night, Princess.” I shoved the napkin into my pocket, and we locked eyes. My heart settled in my chest as the last of the awkward tension dissipated with her giggle.

Mia slid a hand around my neck and whispered softly in my ear, “I’ve been thinking about everything. I’ve refused to see some things. Maybe because avoiding it was easier than dealing with it. I told myself I was making my own life, but you’re right—I was running away from something I knew in my heart was wrong. I want to make things right, Alex.”

I put my hand to her face and gently stroked her cheekbone with my thumb. “I know. I know because I did the same thing when my parents died. After their death, I joined the Marines. The only thing that could distract me from the pain was war. For you, it’s dancing. You get to be a version of yourself you would never normally be. I understand how liberating that is.”

“You’re my therapist now?” She smiled and suddenly I wanted to wrap her in my arms and never let go.

“Maybe.” I chuckled.

“Oh, no.” Mia straightened in surprise.

“What is it?”

“Luka. He asked if I looked like my mom when I danced for him at the club.” She was looking at the space between us, clearly thinking. Her head popped up. “He knows who I am. He had some kind of relationship with my mom, and he knows I’m her daughter. He has to, Alex. I look exactly like my mom’s pictures.”

“Calm down. When you told me the lock number was her birthday, I knew the direction we were going. Luka is a smart man.” I squeezed her hand. “Everything is fine. He knows who you are, but he doesn’t know who I am. He thinks you’ve come for your sister but doesn’t know you brought OPS with you to ruin his little Arabian Nights party.”

Behind Mia, Luka appeared at the far end of the dance floor as the only man not in a tuxedo. He wore a black suit with an open collar, no tie, and a thin gold chain around his neck.

Immediately, two waitresses came to his side. They hurried off after he spoke to each of them. He perused the room with an intense glare and his fingers interlocked at his belt buckle.

Moving effortlessly through the crowd, he greeted guests on his way through the crowded room.

My phone vibrated. I pulled it out and read the message quickly. “Devin and Liv are here.”

It took only a minute for Luka to make his way towards us. He looked directly at me and I raised my glass to him. At my acknowledgment, he came closer.

“Mr. Montgomery, I presume?” He offered his hand, adorned in gold, black diamonds, and onyx. “I’m Luka. I hope you are enjoying my event.”

“I truly am.” I shook his hand. “And the entertainment is top tier.”

I had a couple inches in height on him, but he held his stature with confidence. Luka smiled at Mia, “I am happy to hear that. You have paid for exquisite company. In fact, Jade is my newest entertainer.”

“She mentioned she was new. I’m grateful for the company over the last two days. It’s been everything I hoped a Las Vegas experience could be.”

“It was my pleasure,” Mia replied.

“My business thrives off repeat customers. Your satisfaction is my highest priority. I hope you find this charity event as rewarding as your time with this beautiful woman.”

“I’m sure I will.”

“My understanding is that you’ve recently come into a substantial inheritance. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. I’ve kept busy enjoying my time in Vegas, but am also in the market for a reliable source of entertainment for my frequent Vegas trips.”

“Indeed. I think I can assist you in those matters.” Luka waved an attendant over. “I’ll have one of my assistants help you find all the entertainment your heart desires.” He turned to Mia. “Let’s have a conversation about your time as a Wild Rose entertainer. I’d prefer that Mr. Montgomery speak alone

with my assistant.” Luka held out his hand. Mia didn’t budge. “I insist.”

Mia put her hand in his, and I watched as Luka walked away with her. The tracker in her purse was now my only connection to her.

“Sir?” an attendant beside me spoke.

For a moment, I contemplated grabbing her and running out the door, guns blazing—abandoning the entire mission to get his hand off her. *Burn the whole fucking place to the ground. Take Mia and never look back.*

“Sir?” the attendant spoke again.

I shook the dangerous thought away, “Yes?” I turned to the short bald man.

“I’ll take you to your table, sir.” He said and guided me down the hall. He stopped at a large room with dark purple pillow seats and a low black table. A small gold chandelier hung in the center of the room, giving it a soft glow.

I turned to the man. “Please bring a bottle of Jameson and a bottle of Dom.”

“Any other women for the evening?” He asked, straight-faced and professional.

“No. But I require a different type of entertainment.” I lowered my voice, though I knew no one could hear us. “The kind with a red skull.”

“I see the reputation of our product has preceded us offering.” His slant smile told me he was proud of the Koltsov brand.

“I’m interested in a large amount being delivered to my home. Is it possible to have both E and blow with the skeleton emblem delivered to my residence next week? I’ll buy enough to make it worth the trip.”

“Ahh, you’re having your own party. We make special accommodations for the right buyer. I will speak to Luka. I think I can arrange this.” He waved the waitress over and held the whiskey up.

I nodded, “On the rocks, please.”

He poured the glass and handed it to me.

“I’d like to be left alone until Jade returns.” I sat on the oversized cushion. “Please leave the curtain open.”

The assistant bowed and opened the curtains fully before scurrying off through the club. Once he left, I stood near the opening. I pulled out my phone and checked for Devin and Liv on my tracking app. Devin was fifty meters to my left. Mia was signaling from a room ten meters above me.

My phone vibrated. Greyson left a lengthy message.

Greyson: We’re in his office. I have papers showing the containers and shipment information. There are also receipts for a hotel downtown. Multiple rooms. Agent Kelly is working on a search warrant.

I have five plane tickets for females leaving Los Angeles to various areas surrounding Moscow. There are five more stubs for a past trip with five other females. All on our missing persons list.

Check back in a minute. I’m still going through things.

He’s taking troubled girls out of the country before their families realize they’re actually missing. *Dirtbag*. I slid the phone back into my pocket. In my peripheral, I saw Devin. He was hard to miss, but blended into the fancy crowd better than I expected with his black tux. I grinned, thinking about the amount of cussing he probably did when Liv made him slick his hair back and groom his red beard. I texted him to stand by.

Luka’s assistant appeared between the curtains. “Luka would like to offer you a new escort for the evening.” A beautiful blonde wearing nothing but body paint and sequins stepped from behind the short man. “Please accept a free evening with Kimberly.”

She smiled and moved closer. I put one hand up to halt her.

“I would appreciate the company of the woman I paid for.”

“I understand. But there’s been a miscommunication and her services are required elsewhere.” He bowed politely. “We

apologize, Mr. Montgomery.”

“I’ll take my time choosing another escort, thank you.”

The assistant nodded in agreement and left with the blonde beauty.

I exhaled and ran my hand down my throat in frustration. Luka had Mia and Tasha. A fierce rage overtook me. FUUUUUCK! *Why did I let her leave?*

My phone vibrated.

Greyson: Luka’s private plane just scheduled an immediate departure. Agent Kelly has eyes on Dimitri and his men at the hotel. Search warrant is coming through as we speak.

I found a written note from twenty years ago.

You won’t believe what it says. I’ve photographed it and left the original in the safe.

I’m sending the image now.

MIA

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

Luka led me through the dance floor, and I followed behind, clutching the purse with my tracker and taser.

Moments later, Oleg and an associate stepped in line behind me. We walked up the stairs to the second level. The muffled music vibrated through the floor under my stilettos. Dark curtains, similar to the ones on the lower floor, lined the hallway. A glimpse through an opening showed a naked woman with her face down and ass up with white lines of powder across her ass. A man stood above her, holding one nostril closed. As we passed, I heard a long sniff and a following, “Wooh!”

Luka walked to the end of the hallway. He opened the door to a fire escape. A wave of panic rushed through me.

“I should probably let my client know that I won’t be gone long.” I turned around. “I’ll be right back.” Oleg’s face was emotionless, his body an impenetrable wall. “Excuse me.” I moved to the side and Oleg mirrored me, blocking my exit.

I swallowed and turned back around. A breeze blew through the door, sending goosebumps over my bare skin. The unmistakable rocky sound of tires on dirt stopped directly beneath us. A limo waited below the steel staircase.

“You won’t be back. You’re coming with me.” Luka blocked my way down.

“I would rather not.” I refused to step forward.

Luka pulled a photo from his back pocket. Pinched between his finger and thumb was a picture of Dixie. She was

duct taped to a chair with her hands bound. Luka had Dixie and Tasha.

“Do as I say and your little snitch lives. Let’s not make this messy.” He tilted his head and shrugged, with evil ambivalence. “Make this difficult, and no one ever knows what happened to her.”

I was too stunned to breathe. Dixie looked terrified. Mascara ran down her cheeks and her glossed eyes were wide with fear.

Luka snapped his fingers. “Stay with me, Mia.” He commanded, “We’re going for a ride.”

“Walk.” Oleg shoved me from behind. I grabbed the steel rail to keep my balance. Luka was already moving down the stairs with the other man.

I looked down at the steel bars of the stairs. “I have to take my shoes off.” I bent over and slid my stilettos off my feet. Holding my heels in one hand and the railing in the other, I stepped down from the fire escape to the waiting limo.

I stopped at the open car door.

Oleg stood directly behind me. “Get in.”

I clutched my purse tightly and ducked into the limo. Oleg followed after me and closed the door. I sat with my back to the driver. Oleg and Luka faced me on the opposite bench seat. The limo pulled away from the warehouse. *Hurry, Alex ...*

“What’s happening?” I asked, straight-faced. Luka would not have the pleasure of seeing me frightened.

He touched his finger tips in a “V” shape on his lap, sitting with perfect posture as the limo pulled away. His gold chain glinting in the dim light. Perfect white teeth threatened to eat me alive when he smiled.

“What are you smiling about?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“You, darling. You are the perfect image of your mother.”

I matched his glare without flinching.

“Would you truly do anything for your sister?” The words slithered from his lips.

“Of course.”

“Many people would say that ...” His lips parted slightly in a satisfied smirk, “But doing it—that’s another story. You went all the way. A deliciously intriguing show of devotion. I could use a woman like you in the family business.”

I’ve had enough. “What happened between you and my mother? Why did you take Tasha?”

“Right to the point. That is why I like you, Mia.” He nodded slowly. “I will tell you everything. I promise.”

The limo merged onto a two-lane freeway in the middle of the desert without a car in sight. The surrounding darkness threatened to swallow us if we ventured from the road. Our headlights were the only light for as far as I could see. My fists tightened around my purse as the limo picked up speed.

Luka continued, “You are collateral for a bit of business I’m doing with your father and uncle.”

“We are not bargaining chips!” I raised my voice and leaned forward. Oleg immediately put a hand to my shoulder. My eyes darted to his hand. “Don’t touch me.”

“Sit back,” Oleg ordered.

Luka waited patiently for me to do as commanded. “You are precisely bargaining chips.”

His perfect teeth sparkled in the dim limo lighting. “Your sister is doing as well as a drug addict is expected. My people will get her off the heroine when we arrive in Moscow. Your family has fucked her up enough.” His eyes narrowed and my skin crawled as his eyes sliced through me.

“Your father will win the election. I will keep you and your sister until my business is done. Once I am finished, I will give you back and release Dixie.”

“Why did you let me into your club if you knew who I was?”

“Mia, you are clearly good at your job. I couldn’t pass up the money that I knew would follow you.” Luka looked up, grinning. “I was curious how far you would go. It was all very entertaining, watching the daughter of the soon-to-be District Attorney whore herself out.”

Rage consumed me. I spat across the seat at his smug face, my saliva nailing him on the cheek. Oleg raised his arm to strike me in response. Luka put a fast arm up to stop him. Then he wiped the spit from his face with the back of his hand. Holding me in his icy glare, he licked the spit from the spot below his thumb.

“You taste just like your mom.”

“Fuck you.” I clenched my jaw, fighting the urge to lunge at him like a maniac.

He chuckled, “She was feisty like you.”

“Why are you playing this game? If you want to tell me, then tell me. I’ve already proven I would do anything to get Tasha back.”

Luka was trying to rattle me, but he had just told me he had no idea Alex was my bodyguard and not a VIP client. A tinge of hope sparked in my heart.

“I am a man of my word. I will tell you a story and pay you for your services. I have the money you earned held for you. When you leave, you may take it or you may accept other business opportunities I offer.”

“I’m finished doing business with you. What do you know about my mom? How is my father’s election involved in this?”

Luka crossed his ankle over his knee and adjusted the seat. “This story starts before Tasha was born. You were just a toddler. Meret and I left our families in Moscow to come to the great land of opportunity.” Sarcasm dripped from his last words. “We wanted a better life. Meret was like a brother to me. He had dreams of working with his hands, starting a landscaping business, and living a humble life. I, however, wanted more than common things. I dreamt of ruling the night like a King.”

I bit my lip. *Tonight, you get dethroned, you son of a bitch.*

“I worked with Meret, helping start his business while I pursued my connections in Las Vegas—two hard-working men from Russia hoping for more.” Luka shook his head, “Then Meret fell in love with a devastatingly beautiful dark-haired woman. A dangerous woman.”

“How was she dangerous?” I interrupted.

“She was married to your father.” Luka cleared his throat. “In Meret’s defense, one look from your mother could have won any man’s heart. Secretly, I too fell in love with her. I kissed her once and her rejection scarred my heart for eighteen years. I stepped aside because of my respect for Meret. Gia’s love for Meret was true, but she feared your father and his brother.”

“We all feared them,” I whispered, losing my breath at the sound of her name. It had been years since I heard someone say ‘Gia’.

“You see, we are more similar than you think.” Luka exhaled, relaxing as he continued, “Your mother would not admit that Tasha was Meret’s child, but he always knew. One day, she found the courage to leave your father. She made plans to run away with Meret and take you girls with her.”

My stomach knotted up, and I swallowed the sick taste in my mouth. I knew what came next.

“The day before they planned to leave, your mother disappeared.”

“I had always thought she left us.” Tears swelled in my eyes. Suddenly, I found comfort in Luka’s words.

“Your mother loved you and would have never left you. A week after her disappearance, your Uncle Arthur called Meret and told him he had information about Gia’s whereabouts. I begged him not to go, but he could not resist. He met your uncle on a street corner to hear him out.”

I inhaled sharply. “I always thought it was an accident.” I wiped the tears from my eyes. “What happened to my mother?”

“I had my suspicions. I bought the surveillance video from the stores surrounding the area where your father’s boat was docked. I watched Arthur take your mom out to sea at gunpoint. He returned alone.”

I held my face in my hands and cried into my palms. The pain in my heart consumed me. Though I already saw the video, hearing the truth about my mom broke me in half.

Luka put a hand on my shoulder as I wept. For the first time I didn’t shutter at his touch, “Your uncle sent me the DNA test. He told me to leave town and never come back.” Luka put a hand under my chin and lifted my face. “I vowed on that day to take my revenge. I would get stronger—powerful enough to take on your father and uncle. Mia, they need to pay for what they did to your mother and Meret.”

Revenge. I wanted them to pay, too. I pulled away from Luka and wiped my tears again.

Every emotion swirled in my brain. Luka quit speaking, innately knowing I needed time to process his words.

The driver rolled the window down and spoke over his shoulder, “Sir, the flight has been canceled somehow. We’re working on new flight plans.”

Luka growled in frustration, breaking his usually cool demeanor, “Get a new flight scheduled. Take us to my home until arrangements are made. Make it happen soon.”

“Yes, sir.” The driver replied, and the partition window rolled up.

After twenty minutes, we came to a large estate in a small valley. Luka had been clenching his jaw since the news of the flight. Now he sat with his arms crossed over his chest. The driver followed the main road until it dead-ended into Luka’s enormous estate. Seven-foot hedges followed the perimeter of the grounds. Small clusters of trees surrounded a perfectly manicured property.

A security guard and his dog greeted us at the main gate. Luka waved without lowering his window. The driver followed a circular driveway to a Federal Colonial-style

mansion with a wide staircase in front, which narrowed at the top near the door. East and West wings of the house jutted out from the sides with layers of windows within the brick walls. A vast fan-shaped window crested over the double front doors. The night prevented me from seeing much else. The area looked exactly as it did in Alex's pictures.

Oleg and Luka got out and waited for me to emerge from the limo. I held my heels with two fingers in my right hand as I walked, clutching my purse with my left. Luka and I followed Oleg up the stairs. He opened the door, and we entered the estate.

The house was eerily quiet.

"Bring Tasha to my office and check on the flight plans," Luka ordered Oleg, and he rushed off.

She's here!

We walked down the West wing, past art displayed on pillars and hung on the walls, until he stopped at a door at the end of the hallway.

Luka unlocked the door and held it open for me. "Please. Take a seat."

I walked to a seat opposite a large cherry wood desk. Bookshelves lined the wall to the right. I couldn't help but stare. A thousand books lined the wall below the vaulted ceiling. Near the books hung a beautiful portrait of a woman and two boys.

Luka lit a cigar as he sat on the corner of the large desk, looking at the painting with me. "You find that painting interesting?" he asked.

"It's beautiful." I studied it carefully. *Why does it look familiar?*

"Meret's mother cared for me when I lost my parents to illness. This is a portrait of me, Meret, and Meret's mother, Natasha."

I gasped. The blonde woman wore a beautiful dress with her hair pinned high. There was no mistaking her resemblance

to Tasha.

Luka blew a puff of smoke across the desk. “I want to take Tasha to her family in Moscow. She will be safe and loved.”

My head whipped around to meet his eyes. “You can’t take her from me. Tasha is all I have.”

He motioned at me with his cigar hand. “Then, come with her.”

ALEX

I waited anxiously for the document to appear. Once it loaded, I reviewed it closely. Greyson had sent an old receipt for four plane tickets—Giada Denali, Mia, Tasha, and Luka, from San Diego to Moscow. The purchase date was the day Gia disappeared. The departure date was the day after Meret was killed.

Greyson: Luka kept anything related to Gia. He was obsessed with her.

Me: He knew Arthur was going to kill Meret, so he bought the ticket to run off with Gia and her girls.

The realization hit me like a sledgehammer. This was never about Tasha. Luka wanted Mia. He was going to fulfill his twisted obsession and get his revenge. Pulling her into his dark world, he would try to break her and then take her home to Moscow.

A phone alarm alerted me that Mia's tracker had left range. *Damnit.* Greyson responded immediately, tracking Luka's limo as it headed for the airport. He was already hacking the system and canceling Luka's flight plans for maintenance issues. It would take a few hours for the small airport to clear the jet for takeoff.

We continued to text quickly.

Me: He has Mia.

Greyson: I'm tracking the vehicle. He'll have to go back to his Sandy Valley estate.

John's still in position. I'm going to take an opposite position to the East.

Me: I'll push his assistant for information and bring Devin with me. See you soon.

Greyson: Keep your head on a swivel.

Devin spotted me, waiting for my move. I signaled him to take out the security closest to Luka's assistant.

A wall separated the dance floor from the side hallway. The two men stood near the entrance to the hallway. Devin causally walked towards the security guard, discreetly pulling a gun and pushing it into the man's side. He talked low, ordering him to turn around. I passed Devin and found Luka's assistant talking to another beautiful woman. He dismissed her with orders and kept his head down as he typed into his phone, oblivious that we apprehended his security guard.

I pulled the gun from my holster mere inches from the unsuspecting man. "Move forward and you might make it out of here without a hole in your rib cage."

Instinctively, he raised his hands to his shoulders, still holding his phone.

I took his phone. "Out the back," I ordered. He took a shaky step forward. "A little faster," I demanded. He stumbled briefly as we hurried to the back door.

Devin was a beast of a man, having about three inches on the already tall security guard. While the disarmed guard went through the door, he kept aim from behind. Once out the door, Devin pushed the man against the wall, removed his earpiece, and zip-tied his hands.

I kept my gun on the assistant. "Turn around."

"Are you going to kill me?" He stuttered.

"I'm not." I nodded toward Devin, "But he will." Devin was busy whispering to the guard, just inches from his face, about the horrible things that would happen to him if he refused to cooperate.

The security guard, not nearly as nervous as the assistant, spoke to Devin, “If I tell you anything, Luka will kill me.”

I shrugged. “Then you’re already dead. I got no use for you,” I motioned at the visibly shaking assistant, “I feel like this guy might tell us everything.”

“Don’t tell them anything!” roared the guard.

The assistant yelled back, “Fuck you! They’re going to kill us!”

I picked the wallet from the assistant’s pocket and examined his driver’s license. “Andrew, is it?”

He nodded, “Andy.”

“Here’s what I think, Andy. I think they hired you for your intellect and knowledge about business—the brains sorta speak. I think that ...” I pointed the gun at the security guard and shook my head in confusion.

“Ivan,” offered Andy. Ivan rolled his eyes at the giveaway of his name and what we all knew would soon be a verbal vomit of information.

“Ivan. Good. I think Ivan might know some helpful information about security. And I want to know everything.”

“I’m not saying shit.” The guard spoke through gritted teeth.

Devin nodded to Andy, “He wants to live.” Then he clenched his jaw as he spoke, “This one ...” Devin pressed the muzzle directly at the guard’s forehead, pushing firmly against his head, “Not so much.”

“Let’s give him another chance.” I smiled.

“Ivan. Who is in charge if you leave?”

No answer.

“Andy?” I asked.

“It’s usually Dimitri, but he’s busy. There’s a guy at the front. He’s hired specifically for the night. He’s not part of the regular team.”

“Perfect. Andy, let’s send him a text message. We’re going to let him know that Luka needed your immediate help to schedule a new flight. The two of you left and forgot to communicate on the radio.”

I took his phone out of my back pocket. Andy showed me the contact, and we sent the message. A set of lights beamed through the darkness. Liv was here with the Tank.

“I want to shoot this one. He’s worthless.” Devin took the safety off his Glock.

“No. Bring him. I have questions and he’s going to answer them.”

Devin growled at my insistence on keeping him alive. “Clock’s tickin’, bitch.” Devin motioned for the guard to walk forward.

Liv pulled up next to us and jumped out of the driver’s seat. Her black curly hair was in a bun and she wore a black sweatshirt with jeans. “Everything ok? Have you killed anyone?” Liv asked, scowling at Devin.

“Not yet, babe. But soon.”

“Please don’t kill him in the Tank. The blood is terrible to clean up.” Liv opened the passenger door and jumped into the tactical vehicle.

“I have an idea.” I smiled at Ivan. “Devin, zip-tie their feet and let’s toss them in the back.”

Ivan was quite heavy, but we got him in the back. Then we threw a zip-tied Andy next to him. Devin drove, and I sat in the back seat, watching them bounce around the cargo area as Devin drove off the road until we were out of sight.

Devin stopped the Tank about five miles away from the party. I got out and opened the hatch. Coyotes howled in the distance as the hatch fully rose.

“Do you hear that? A pack of coyotes are hunting. Now, you are going to answer my questions or I am going to slice you open and leave you here—zip-tied and bleeding.” The coyotes howled in the distance, seemingly closer than just a

moment before. “You die now or take your chances with Luka. It’s up to you. If you talk, I can hand you over to the police and they may offer you a deal. But either way, talking is your only chance to live. Do you understand?”

Devin didn’t wait for Ivan to answer. He jumped out of the Tank and, using almost inhuman Viking strength, pulled Ivan out of the back. The guard landed with a thunk onto the desert ground. He locked Ivan’s feet solidly under his arm and dragged him across the rough desert ground into the tumbleweed. In the darkness, I heard Ivan cry out in pain. Devin was done fucking around.

“Where should I cut you next?” Devin tapped the knife in his hand. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. That coyotes are gonna smell you miles away.” Devin raised his arm, ready to push the blade back into Ivan’s body.

I strolled up with my hands in my pocket. “Wait. Give him one more chance to talk.” Ivan’s chest heaved in and out with pain. “It’s decision time, Ivan. Are you living or dying?”

Ivan made the mistake of hesitating, so Devin answered for him, “Dying.” Just before the blade thrust into his thigh, Ivan blurted out, “Wait!” he sucked in a deep breath, cringing in pain from the deep laceration Devin already left on his leg. “I’ll talk.”

“That’s good. Now you’re being reasonable. How many men are at Luka’s estate?” I asked.

“Probably six to eight.” He replied.

“And dogs?”

“Two.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s Dimitri doing?”

“I honestly don’t know. He’s been spending his time at a hotel downtown.”

Now for the money question. “Does he think Mia came alone?”

“Yes. He told us to watch her, but he thinks you’re a high roller.”

“Excellent. Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“What else do you know about Mia and Tasha?” I asked.

“I know nothing. The only thing I do is security. I’m not even high level.”

“Andy! You’re up. Is he lying?” I tilted my head towards Ivan.

“No. Only a few people know the details of the business. Or about Luka’s infatuation with Mia.”

“You get to live for now, Ivan.” A disgruntled Devin helped me throw him back in the Tank. I closed the hatch and got back inside. “Devin, go.”

Devin drove off as I questioned Andy, “What are the plane tickets for?”

Andy swallowed hard.

“It’s not too late to leave you in the desert, Andy. My patience is running short.”

Devin slammed on the brakes. The trapped men rolled into each other and grunted in pain.

“We don’t need them anymore. Shoot ‘em and roll ‘em out,” yelled Devin.

“Wait, wait. I’ll tell you. It’s just ... Ivan’s right. Luka is going to kill us.”

Devin turned around and pointed his gun from the driver’s seat, “Motherfucker, I’m going to kill you. You worry about us, not Luka,”

“Jesus!” Andy said, “Please! Stop pointing that thing at me. I’ll talk.”

Devin turned around and the hefty man exhaled in relief. “The girls are being used as mules. He sends a group of girls from here to Moscow. Then he keeps them there as part of a mock exchange program. After they’ve been there a while, he sends them back with the product. Dimitri has the girls right now.”

“Why so many girls?” I asked. Even for Luka, it seemed excessive.

“Some girls never make it back. They’re picked up at the airports in Russia before they even board the plane. Some girls have balloons rupture inside them and they die.”

“He sends many, hoping a few make it back.” I shook my head in disgust.

Devin merged onto a paved road, and the ride smoothed out.

“I know about the DNA test. What does he really want with Mia and Tasha?” I asked.

“He’s been waiting years to take revenge on Arthur. But killing him is not enough. He wants to have leverage on the new District Attorney’s office. Luka is moving from mules to piggybacking the product on boat shipments under the guise of his charity. Boats come in twice a month with building supplies. He’s blackmailing Arthur to use his connections at the Port of San Diego to overlook certain containers before they ship out to other countries—making Luka’s drug business international. Luka’s taking Mia and Tasha to Moscow until Arthur does everything he wants. With Moscow officials paid off and easy access through San Diego, Luka stands to make ...” Andy stopped to calculate in his head.

“Millions,” Liv said from the passenger seat.

Andy shrugged, “Yes. Millions.”

“Arthur knows Luka has the girls?” I asked.

“He knows Luka has Tasha and that Mia was working for Luka, hoping to find Tasha. Arthur agreed to help get the last set of mules through customs and two boat shipments—if Luka doesn’t make a scene before the election and if he destroys the video showing him taking Mia’s mother out to sea.”

“Does Tony Chen know what’s happening?” I asked.

“Arthur is keeping him in the dark. Tony would be livid if he knew they had Mia. It’s like stealing someone’s nicest car.

Luka wants to bring them both down, but he has a special hatred for Arthur.” He paused as if there was something else.

“Mia is a human being, not a fucking car, you asshole. What aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

“I overheard a conversation between Arthur and Luka. Arthur was begging Luka to keep calm. They were arguing over Meret and Gia’s death. Arthur was supposed to kill Meret, but he double-crossed Luka and killed Gia, too. He said Tony made him do it. And that Gia was a liability. Arthur is afraid of Tony and Luka. He’s playing both sides. Luka said he would regret ever making that decision.”

Devin spoke without taking his eyes off the road, “ETA ten minutes. We’ll park down the street and gear up.”

Liv opened the center console and pulled out a small bag. She unzipped it and removed two syringes, filling each with the appropriate amount of ketamine from a small vial. Liv cleared the air from the syringe and handed the first one to me.

Without warning, I injected Andy.

“No ...” he protested but, the quick stab in the arm knocked him out within seconds. Ivan struggled upon seeing his buddy passing out.

“Take the wheel, babe.” Liv took the wheel and Devin turned around, pointing his gun directly at Ivan’s head to keep him from moving too much. Ivan locked eyes with Devin and I injected him quickly into the leg. Devin holstered his weapon and took the wheel back from Liv. Ivan was out just as quickly as his talkative friend.

“Will you bandage this one up, Liv?” I secured the syringes and handed them back to Liv.

“Of course. But you guys are cleaning this mess up.” Liv scowled.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The Tank alerted an incoming call. Devin answered, “Talk to me.”

Greyson whispered quickly, “The police are surrounding the hotel now. They’ll be breaching the door in the next thirty minutes. We need to extract Mia and Tasha immediately.”

“Agreed. I was just about to call you. We should expect possibly eight men at the Estate. Dimitri should be in that hotel. Arthur is being blackmailed to assist in the movement of the girls. I don’t think Luka ever intended on letting Tasha or Mia go. He planned on taking them to Moscow this whole time.”

“That makes sense.” Greyson said, “Luka just arrived. There’s lots of movement.”

“10 4 on that. Do you have eyes on Mia?” I asked.

“Yes. He’s taking her inside.”

“ETA three minutes. Then comm check,” said Devin.

“Copy that. John and I have you covered when you get here. He’s hitting the lights as soon as you arrive. Be safe, brother.”

We drove for a few more minutes. Devin parked the Tank off a road that led to Luka’s estate. We suited up, each of us wearing Kevlar, additional ammo, night vision, a small amount of explosives, and our comms. I grabbed a flash-bang for distraction.

“Good to go?” I asked Devin.

Devin kissed Liv quick and hard on the mouth before she took his place in the driver’s seat. “Let’s go,” he said.

We hurried down the private road, jumping from shadow to shadow. In fifteen minutes, we made it to the front of the manor. The dogs were barking on our arrival, likely anxious about the surrounding movement.

“Comm check,” I whispered

“Lima Charlie.” Chimed in John, followed by Greyson and Devin.

Greyson hit the lights and chaos immediately ensued. The darkness from the desert night covered the estate like a thick

blanket. The dogs barking got louder as their handler closed in on the front gate.

Greyson interjected, “Team, I just got word that Dimitri disappeared before the search warrant was served. Be on the lookout for him here.”

“I got the dogs,” Greyson said. A moment later, the dogs collapsed. Each with enough tranquilizer to let them sleep unharmed for the next three hours. I threw the flash-bang outside the front gate. Devin and I positioned ourselves on opposite sides of the gate, low against the hedge.

“Knock, knock motherfuckers.” Devin whispered.

The noise from the flash-bang immediately attracted attention. The gates opened and two of Luka’s men walked out with guns loaded. Devin and I attacked from the back. I slipped my arm quickly around the neck of the first guard. He struggled, but I tucked his neck firmly into the crease of my arm. I dropped my elbow, and he lost consciousness after a brief struggle. This wasn’t war. We were in Las Vegas. Each of these dirtbags probably deserved to die, but I wouldn’t be their executioner—unless I had no choice.

Devin broke a guard’s arm, and he squealed in pain. We gagged them both and zip-tied their hands and feet, leaving them neutralized on the sidewalk. We entered through the front gate, crouching in the darkness.

Gunfire shot out from across the vast green lawn. Two rows of tall narrow evergreen trees followed all the way around the semi-circle driveway. We took fire from a guard at the front of the house.

“Can you see the asshole firing on us?” I asked.

“I don’t have a visual,” Greyson said.

“He’s behind Luka’s car,” John added.

Devin and I split up and took cover behind the trees near the front door.

“Moving,” I said and ran forward to take cover behind the next large tree. “Set.”

“Moving,” Devin said, letting me know he was ready to move to the next tree.

I shot back towards the barrage of bullets now coming from the bushes in front of the house.

“Set,” Devin said, taking cover behind the next tree.

John fired twice and the barrage of bullets ceased from the front of the house. “You’re covered to the entry,” John said.

We sprinted to the front door. A security guard with an automatic weapon lay dead and bleeding across the steps. John had shot him in the chest.

I opened the door, leading with my rifle.

Two guards shot at us from behind, grazing my side.

“Fuck.” I put my hand to the wound. *Just a graze.* Devin fired on the first, shooting him dead in the chest while Greyson simultaneously shot the other while he ran toward us. Each guard fell to the ground, bleeding profusely from their wounds.

“Check Alex. I’ll cover.” Devin crouched low on the lookout as Greyson looked at my side.

“You’re good. Just a gash. I’ll patch you up and cover the perimeter.” He pulled out gauze from his utility jacket and had me taped in seconds. The adrenaline was already masking the pain. Nothing would keep me from Mia.

I led our entrance into the house while Greyson headed around the side towards the back door. The front door opened to a large foyer. Our footsteps echoed under the vaulted ceiling. I motioned for Devin to move to the right. We moved effortlessly through the darkness using our night vision.

Bullets zipped by our heads, coming from somewhere up front. I kicked in the door to my right and cleared it quickly. Devin kneeled and took the shooter out with his first shot. The man fell to the ground. I moved forward quickly and checked the pulse in his neck. Nothing. We stepped over him and continued down the hallway.

“We’ve got movement from behind the estate. Luka’s trying to leave out the back.” John said.

Greyson spoke as he jogged. “I’m halfway around the building. Meet you at the back exit.”

“Liv, we’re going to need that Tank,” I said.

Silence.

“Liv. Answer me.” Devin growled.

Something was wrong.

“Go,” I said to Devin, knowing Liv must have run into trouble.

John spoke again through the comm, “Greyson has you. I’ll go with Devin to get Liv and the Tank.”

Devin was already down the hallway and headed back to Liv’s location.

I broke each door in until I found Luka’s office. Empty. I moved to the end of the hallway and pushed the backdoor open and looked into the surrounding courtyard. With my night vision, I saw Luka’s bodyguard with a hand on Mia’s arm. Another guard had a second girl, who was surely Tasha. I could see a vehicle coming through a passage in the hills. Then two more. Running, I closed in quickly on Luka.

“On your six, Alex.” Greyson had cleared the perimeter and was moving behind me through the darkness.

Luka took Mia from the guard. He held a gun directly to her forehead, hiding behind her like a desperate coward. Humvees with at least two occupants in each closed in fast from our front.

I yelled through the darkness. “You can’t get away, Luka. It’s all over. Hand me the girls and we won’t kill you!”

“You can’t make threats. You’re already a dead man, Mr. Montgomery. You just don’t know it.”

“Alex!” Mia yelled out as Luka pushed her inside the Humvee.

Devin spoke through the comm, “I have Liv. She hit her head when they tried to run her off the road, but she’s ok. The tank is in a ditch. I can get it out.”

“Hurry,” said John, “We need the Tank now!”

Greyson and I moved on the Humvee, shooting at the tires. The vehicle drove off, unphased by the bullets. Luka had prepared for this evacuation.

“Comm check,” an unmistakable voice came through. “John, meet us on the ground.”

The bright lights of a helicopter closing in fast appeared over the farthest mountain.

Cadie and Logan had brought the FBI.

MIA

THE RECKONING

Moments from my terrible childhood flashed before my eyes like a T.V. show with shitty reception. My life had been a lie before I ever made it one. Countless days passed as a child, crying myself to sleep and feeling unworthy of love. I hated that our mom would leave without us—and I have been suffocating in that darkness every day since. My father and Arthur had taken the only people who ever cared about me.

Stunned, I sat speechless in Luka's office. The man I would have killed to get Tasha back was telling me things I had only dreamed might be true. Our mother had always loved us and would have never left us behind.

He sat on the edge of the desk, watching me as I stared at the floor, processing the new information. Luka's periodic puffing of his cigar was the only sound in the otherwise quiet room.

"I still don't understand why you let me go to a hotel with one of your VIP clients?"

Luka put his cigar out in a crystal ashtray on the desk. "To prove that you belong in this world with me. You have an infatuation with dark things. You crave it. I rule it. You belong with me."

Instinctively, the words fell out of my mouth, "I would have done anything to find Tasha. That doesn't make me a terrible human being."

“I knew you would grow up fierce like your mother. I smiled in amusement when you left your father’s money, stripping to rebel against his name.” Luka kneeled down and looked deep into my eyes. “I want you to come with me willingly. Once you agree, your sister will follow without issue. That’s what she does. You are the leader. Tasha is the follower.” He cleared his throat. “Your father, Tony, told Arthur to kill your mother. You need a new family. One that understands you. You need me.”

Luka was romanticizing his business, and I was hurting, but not naïve. “I’m not a drug dealer. I don’t kidnap people. And I would never ruin the lives of vulnerable women. We are not the same.”

Luka stood. “You are a wolf, not a sheep. These women are doing business with me and they know the risk. Many have walked away with more money than they ever made elsewhere. I don’t expect you to understand the business I do here. But you will grow to tolerate it, and if I must keep you until you do—I will. There is a price to pay for the past. This Mia, is the reckoning.”

“No, this is delusional. My sister and I have nothing to do with this fucked up battle between you, Arthur, and my father. We want out.”

Before Luka could speak, his phone rang. He answered it, listening with a straight face. “I see. Thank you. Have everyone come here. We leave through the back.”

He hung up and stood. “This ...Mr. Montgomery. You brought him with you?”

The lights went out. Luka grabbed my arm, yanking me to my feet. I gasped at his powerful grip. “You should have come alone.” He said through his clenched jaw, yanking me by my arm faster than I could walk to the door, “You’ve sealed your fate and his.”

I finally got my feet under me as he pulled me down the hallway. I kept my purse tight on my body. Gunshots were fired at the estate and men yelled in Russian as they scrambled to find the intruders.

Alex was here with the OPS team. They were dismantling Luka's security one by one.

Luka continued to pull me through a door leading to the outside courtyard. Oleg appeared from somewhere to the left of us, dragging Tasha by the arm.

"Tasha! Tasha!" I screamed.

"Mia!" she answered back.

I reached out to her in the dark. Luka and Oleg led us through the back area despite the lights being out. Twin headlights moved swiftly towards us from the mountains ahead.

A voice shouted out from behind. *Alex!* Luka and Alex yelled out at each other, as Luka tightened his grip on my arm, positioning me directly in front of him as a shield.

The vehicles were closing in, but a new light appeared in the distance—this one in the sky, and it was approaching fast. Oleg looked up and spoke in Russian to Luka. Luka glanced up and then behind us. The first of Luka's Humvees pulled up, and then the second. Oleg pushed Tasha toward one car while Luka held me tight in front of him.

"Kill them!" Luka yelled while opening the door and pushing me in.

"No!" I screamed as my shoulder hit the seat. I clawed my way to the other door, hoping to get out, but it was locked. Luka was inside, sitting next to me, heated and breathing hard. A total maniac completely losing his cool.

"Get us out of here now. We'll lose them in the valley." The tires gripped the desert floor, and the Humvee sped away from the men trying so hard to save us. I pressed my head against the tinted windows. The vehicle with Tasha was about thirty feet away, going in the same direction.

"What are you going to do? Tell me what you want. I'll do it." I had never been so desperate. I begged, "Let Tasha out and I'll go with you without any problems. I swear!" My mother had been killed by her family and the last bit of my life was speeding away in a car only a short distance away.

A desperate woman, stripped of all that ever mattered, would do desperate things to survive.

“Sir!” the driver yelled over his shoulder, “We’re being followed!”

We turned around.

“Looks like he didn’t die,” I whispered.

Luka turned to me with rage in his eyes. He raised his arm and hit me hard with the back of his hand. The force sent me into the corner where the backseat met the door. The impact of his rings hitting my jawbone sent pain down my face to my neck. I closed my eyes, wincing in pain.

When my eyes opened, Luka was pulling his gun from his waistband. He rolled down his window and leaned out, “Slow down a bit and keep straight. I’m killing this mudak myself.”

The driver slowed, and Luka stuck his head out the window. I straightened in the seat, ignoring the ache in my face. *Where is the car with Tasha?*

Peering through the window, I watched the other Humvee stop. The helicopter had landed. Cadie and Logan were approaching the front of the vehicle. Their unmistakable silhouettes in the lights of the helicopter were the best thing I had ever seen. The driver surrendered with his hands out the window. Tasha was safe.

Luka aimed at the Tank from the backseat. Devin sped up and Alex fired at the wheel of the car. The car violently shook for a moment, finally taking more damage than it could withstand. Luka fired back with sloppy aim.

Alex fired once more. This time, my driver slumped forward onto the steering wheel and the Humvee lost acceleration.

“Fuck!” yelled Luka. He climbed over the seat, reached across the dead driver, and unlocked his door. Cursing, he unbuckled the driver and opened the door. Luka kicked him, but he barely moved and the Humvee lost acceleration quickly. He kicked the man two more times until he finally rolled out. Luka was now in the driver’s seat. Without hesitation, he

rolled the window down and fired at the Tank from across his body.

Desperately, I searched for my purse. I felt wildly around the floorboard with my hands until I found the soft fabric. *Got It.*

I pulled the lipstick-shaped taser out, popped the top off, and stabbed the taser into Luka's neck. He convulsed hard, making the Humvee accelerate and steer erratically. I stuck my body out the passenger window. "Alex!"

Devin maneuvered the Tank as close as possible to the out-of-control vehicle.

"Hold on!" yelled Alex. Devin pushed the Tank against the Humvee. I could see Alex close enough to jump through the window. *Mia, you can do this. You have nothing to lose.* Alex held his arms out, and I lunged forward through the window, almost into Alex's arms.

As I was half out the window, Luka grabbed my ankle. The shock from the taser didn't incapacitate Luka as severely as I hoped. He was attempting to drive while pulling me back into the vehicle with surprising strength. My chest slid across the plastic seal of the window while he pulled my ankle with his right hand. I was back in the Humvee more than out now. I searched for anything that would help me.

I found my purse again and grabbed the strap tucked inside. Without thinking, I threw the length of it over Luka's head and pulled fast, twisting it as tight as possible around his neck. Luka reached for his gun, but the lack of oxygen and the pain of the cord around his larynx made him fumble. I couldn't risk him getting to his weapon. I found my stiletto shoe and gripped it, heel-out. With all my strength, I struck Luka hard in the eye with the pointy heel. He screamed out in pain and the vehicle sped up.

Again, Devin pressed the Tank against the Humvee. Alex was at the window. "Jump!" he yelled.

I let go of the strap and launched my body out the window. I landed halfway through the open window. Alex grabbed my

arms and pulled me into the Tank with one powerful pull. Luka was slowing down, but heading toward the face of the mountain, nowhere near the road leading through the valley.

Fueled by what I could only imagine was an ungodly amount of adrenaline, hatred, and revenge, Luka hung out the window, firing wildly in our direction. Alex fired back, hitting Luka in the face. Luka's body slumped, but the Humvee still sped through the tumbleweed. Devin slowed the Tank.

Alex held me tight. "He's got it on cruise control and he's gonna hit that mountain." We watched as the vehicle sped through the desert and hit the side of the mountain. Seconds later, it burst into flames.

I grabbed Alex's shirt in desperation. "Where's Tasha?"

"She's in the helicopter with Logan and Cadie. Are you ok?" He held my arms and looked into my eyes. His thumb grazed what was surely a purple bruise on my cheek.

I winced at the touch. "My face hurts but I'm ok." I slumped against his chest, meeting the firmness of his Kevlar. "Just hold me. And take me to Tasha."

"Can you land over here to reunite the sisters?" Alex asked, talking through an earpiece.

"You did real good, Mia," he whispered, still holding me tight.

A second helicopter appeared. We stopped, and the chopper landed close by. Devin went to the back, unstrapped Liv, and pulled her from the third row. She was conscious but grimacing in pain. During it all, I hadn't seen her in the back.

"Oh no! Is Liv OK?" Devin didn't stop to answer he just carried her to the helicopter. The medic immediately attended to her and strapped her onto a gurney for safety.

Alex squeezed me. "She's going to be ok, but she hit her head hard when they crashed into the Tank. She has quite a headache and was unconscious for a bit. They're going to take her to the hospital with you and Tasha."

A trail of dirt rose behind Tasha as she ran from the other helicopter. “Mia!”

I sprinted in her direction. We met in the middle, running into each other as we hugged. I let go to push her sandy blonde hair from her eyes. Tasha continued to squeeze me as I held her face in my hands. “Are you hurt? Did they hurt you?”

“No. They were using me to get to you. Luka wanted to keep us. He was stealing us like a madman. Like we would eventually be okay with it.”

I dropped her face and held her tightly again.

“I was so scared.” She buried her face in my neck and cried. I pulled back and looked at her arms, cringing at the bruised veins. Never had I seen her with so many track marks. Tasha looked at the ground in shame. “He kept feeding it to me. It’s been a nightmare.”

“You’re going to be okay. I love you.” I held her while she sobbed, just as our mother would have held her. “We’re going to get you the help you need.”

I knew I couldn’t save her from everything. In my heart, I understood this was only the beginning for Tasha. She needed to take the help from OPS or she would die. Drugs had been her villain long before Luka, but he had used them to control her.

“Let OPS take you to treatment. You’re going to get better.” I wiped the tears from her face and she nodded, giving me just a glimpse of hope.

A woman with strawberry hair pulled tight in a ponytail approached us. She wore a black vest that read “FBI”. She put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m Agent Kelly. I have to take you to the hospital. We can talk once you’ve been examined by a doctor.”

“Do you have Dixie? Is she safe?”

Agent Kelly put a hand on my shoulder. “She’s with the girls from the hotel. She’s bruised and beaten, but she’ll be fine. She’s getting medical attention as we speak. She’s expected to make a full recovery.”

Several police cars with sirens sped toward us from the estate. I put my arm around Tasha and looked over my shoulder at Alex. He rushed through the desert towards me. "I'd like to ride with them."

"Yes, please." I pleaded with Agent Kelly.

She nodded.

Alex smoothed out my hair, smiled that charming smile, and kissed my forehead.

"Let's get going." Agent Kelly put an arm around Tasha and led us through the beating wind of the helicopter.

We buckled in. Agent Kelly signaled the pilot to take off, and we climbed high into the sky. Through the wild hair whipping around my face, I watched the flames of Luka's car flicker in the darkness. The farther away we flew, the safer I felt.

ALEX

DIVERSION

Koltsov and his men paid the price for their actions. But the matter of Mia's family was still unresolved. Arthur and Tony would pay for what they did—I would make sure of it.

After a short flight to the hospital, we were all together again. Mia and I talked in an examination room on the second floor while she waited for the X-ray results of her cheek. The right side of her face was swollen, and her eye had developed a dark purple hue from the strike. Blueish-yellow bruises surfaced over her arms and ankle from the struggle and leap into the Tank. It hurt my heart to look at her. After I held her safely in my arms, my hurt turned to rage. Her life—what these men had done to Mia, Tasha, and so many others was unforgivable.

I understood Mia's deep trust issues. They had taken everyone she loved, and she almost lost Tasha for good. Hell, Mia had almost lost everything she loved.

"You know this isn't over?" Mia practically read my mind. She stared at the ceiling as she lay on the hospital bed. I found a soft blanket on a nearby shelf.

"I know." I pulled the blanket over her and tucked it in on one side

She closed her eyes. "Cadie is still with my sister?"

"She went to get coffee at the cart out front while the doctors talk to Tasha. Then Cadie will stay with her until

you're both cleared to leave. Tasha will go to a rehab center—the best one on the West Coast.” I assured her.

“What about John and Greyson?”

I patted her leg over the blanket. “Everyone is fine. A few bruises and cuts, but nothing major.”

“Thank God.” she winced at the pain in her face. “And Liv?”

“She has a concussion. The doctors want to keep her overnight because she was out for a prolonged period.”

“Oh, no.” Mia shook her head. “And you got shot.” She pushed herself upright on the bed.

“I barely got shot. I'm already bandaged up. Hell, it's half a step up from a scratch. Don't worry about me. It'll be one more of what feels like a hundred scars.” I shrugged. Mia's lips parted in a slight smile.

I stroked her knee. “Liv will be fine. She's strong and healthy. The doctors are just covering all their bases.”

I attempted to lighten the mood. “Remind me never to upset you when you're wearing high heels.” I laughed. She did not. “I'm kidding! I'm kidding! You were so brave in the presence of danger. To have the wherewithal to remember your taser—and to use the only other weapon you had—it was impressive.”

“It happened so fast. I wanted to stop him from ever hurting anyone again.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You sound like a real hero.”

She looked at the blanket and her cheeks turned a shade of blushing pink under the bruise that melted my heart and made the blood leave my head. Then, Mia looked into my eyes while putting her hand on mine. *Not the same Mia*. She was vulnerable, and maybe she knew she needed me. With gentle fingers, I pulled a piece of her dark hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. Mia nuzzled her face against my hand.

“Let me hold you.” She immediately relaxed against my body as I gently cradled her bruised body in my arms.

She whispered into my chest, “This is the only place I want to be right now.” I listened to her breath and felt the rhythmic beating of her heart. After a moment, I released her. Cupping her face, I kissed her uninjured cheek. As I pulled away, our eyes met again. *Definitely not the same Mia.*

She gripped my shirt in her fist and pulled herself into my lips, igniting a fire in my soul that burned only for her. I kissed her softly, enjoying a piece of her that was only mine. Her lips felt like Christmas.

Our tongues danced as if they knew instinctively what the other wanted. She let out the smallest moan as I sucked her lower lip. Mia’s tongue swiped at my lips, and I growled, exercising all my self-restraint.

Releasing her, I whispered, my nose touching her nose. “You kissed me.”

“I did.” She looked deep into my eyes, hiding nothing.

“I want to kiss you more, but I don’t want to hurt you.” Making my arms do the opposite of what my body wanted, I pulled the blanket up on her waist.

“There’s a gentle Alex? I had no idea.” She giggled and laid her face back on my chest.

Holding her in my arms felt like everything. Kissing her felt unreal. I was crazy about Mia, that much I was sure of.

A quick knock on the door interrupted our moment.

“Come in.” Mia ran her hands through her perfectly messy hair.

Agent Kelly pushed the door open with her shoulder, carrying two cups of water and some snacks. “I thought you might be hungry and thirsty.”

Mia propped herself up and accepted the refreshing drink with a smile. “I am both. Thank you.”

Kelly wasted no time updating us on the situation. “Logan and Cadie successfully brought us five of the girls on my missing persons list. Greyson found past flight information and details of other women Luka has sent to Moscow on drug runs. My team will work day and night with the U.S. embassy in Moscow to find out what happened to the other girls. In fact, Logan stayed behind with my team at the estate to help search for remains possibly buried at the property. It’s a difficult job and we have fifteen acres to search.”

I squeezed Mia’s hand. “I’m not surprised he volunteered. We’ll all help in any way we can.”

“You did more than we ever could on our own. Luka’s connections to politicians and his dirt on public officials in this town have kept our hands tied for too long. But we’ve changed the game. Now that word of his death is out, I’ll be moving these missing person cases forward without a struggle.”

Mia sipped from her cup. “What are we doing about Arthur and my father? How do we hold them accountable for everything they’ve done?”

“I’m working on that now.”

The overhead in the hospital turned on and a voice alerted the staff, “Code Orange, Code Orange, Code Orange. Respond outside the front lobby.”

Seconds later, a 480 announced on Kelly’s radio. She grabbed the radio from her hip to respond and stood up. “There’s been a hit and run in front of the coffee cart outside the hospital.”

“Cadie!” I jumped to my feet. “Stay here. Do not leave this room.” I ran out of the room with Kelly. We jetted through the hallway, the sound of our pounding boots echoing in the otherwise quiet hallway. “Take the stairs. We’ll see the others near the exit.”

Greyson was outside Liv’s door talking with John and Devin as I ran by. Immediately they fell into running with us.

“Where’s Cadie?” I asked as we opened the stairwell exit. “Someone’s been hit outside the hospital.”

We flew down two flights of stairs, bursting through the stairwell into the havoc of the lobby. A crowd of people had gathered across the street. Traffic had slowed to a crawl as passersby stared out their windows. The four of us quickly maneuvered through the cars.

Nearby, a coffee cart was on its side and dented badly. Bottles of coffee flavor, brown to-go cups, and white lids were scattered everywhere. The barista, a young girl with short brown hair and a green apron, kept repeating, “I can’t believe it. He just drove up and hit her. It happened so fast.”

People huddled around the injured person. Two medical professionals were rushing a stretcher across the road.

“Move!” John yelled and the growing crowd parted versus being trampled by us. As we rushed in, I noticed a small black tactical boot sticking out. Cadie was hit.

“I didn’t ... see ...” Her eyes were half closed, and her mouth twisted in pain as she tried to move her body. Smudges of blood stained her blonde hair and streaked her face and neck. The arm of her black OPS shirt was shredded, showing road rash beneath the tattered fabric. A man in scrubs was holding her neck and talking gently to her while another slid a neck brace beneath her head.

“That’s our sister,” I said to the man who attached the brace, “Her name is Cadie.”

“Cadie, we’re going to move you all at once.” The man in charge motioned to the others, who responded to the code orange. With one person at her feet and the other at her head, they counted, “One, two, three,” and hoisted Cadie onto the stretcher. Another respondent secured Cadie to transport her.

John grabbed the shoulder of a responder. “I’m going with her.” He nodded, motioning for John to follow as they pushed the stretcher through the grass and towards the lobby doors.

Several police cars arrived, attracting even more attention. Agent Kelly went to the first officer out of his vehicle. From behind me, I heard someone say they saw everything. I turned to see a young man in a baseball cap. “What happened? Did

you see the driver?” Devin and Greyson leaned in to listen with me.

“It happened fast. It was a black car, and the driver seemed to drive up on the curb on purpose—like he was trying to hit her. Then, he put it in reverse and sped off.” The young man’s eyes were wide with bewilderment.

I looked down. The tire marks across the grass and sidewalk matched his account of what happened.

Devin put his hand in his tux pants. He had lost the jacket and was wearing his dress shirt with the sleeves rolled. “Fucking unreal.”

Greyson, still in his tactical clothes, pushed his glasses farther up his nose as he surveyed the scene. “Something isn’t right.”

“Are you guys cops or something?” the guy asked.

“Or something.” Devin knelt and searched the ground where Cadie had been hit.

The guy tilted his head, confused by Devin’s answer. I put a hand on his shoulder. “This is very important. Can you tell me what he looked like? Anything at all you can remember about the car or person driving?”

He bobbed his head, “Sure. Um, the driver was bald. And kinda fat. And he was wearing a suit jacket. Or something else dark.”

Devin stood up with Cadie’s phone in his hand. “Has to be one of Luka’s guys.”

“They’re taking orders from Dimitri now.” I thought out loud.

One of the police officers who arrived on the scene returned with Agent Kelly.

“But why? Just to take one of us out?” A sinking feeling washed over me. “It’s a diversion.”

In unison, Greyson and I said her name. “Mia!”

I flew across the street, dodging one car as it stopped last minute. The three of us ran through the hospital and up the stairs in a flash.

“I’ve got Liv and Tasha!” Devin rushed to Liv’s room. He wouldn’t let either woman out of his sight now. A nurse with a clipboard tried to slow us.

“You can’t run in here!” she shouted as we dashed by.

I opened the door where I had left Mia. The room was empty. “Nurse! Where is the woman who was in here?”

“She’s gone?” The nurse pulled her chart out from the front of the door. “We were still waiting for a doctor. I didn’t discharge her.” She shook her head. “I never saw her leave, but it got a little hectic when we heard they hit someone outside. She must have slipped out during the commotion.”

A nurse from down the hall stepped out of a room. “I saw her leave with someone. I thought he was with you. They took the stairs.” She pointed at the stairwell on the opposite side of the hall from us.

Above the stair was a sign that pointed West toward the parking garage. “Garage!” I shouted, and the three of us ran down the hallway.

I pushed open the ground floor exit, immediately scanning the surrounding area and parking garage. A scream rang out from the garage. Dimitri and Mia were across the street in the garage. I saw them briefly before they disappeared behind a parked car.

“Sixth floor.”

“I’ll take the South side of the structure and come in from behind.” Greyson pulled his gun out and headed to the South end of the parking structure. I ran across the street, hoping to get to Dimitri before he was in a car.

I took the stairs three at a time, making it to the sixth floor in a matter of seconds. The echoes of Mia struggling with Dimitri bounced off the concrete walls. Anger fueled a rage I hadn’t felt since I left Afghanistan. Dimitri would regret the moment he put his hands on her. I would kill every one of

them to get Mia back. I crouched low, leading with my weapon as I moved from car to car.

Taking cover behind a blue Honda, I peered over the hood. Dimitri led four of his guys past the cars. Mia was being pulled by the elbow with a gun pointed at her side. She resisted, but the man was practically dragging her through the garage.

“Dimitri!” I yelled out, “I killed your dad. This is between us now. Let her go.”

“Fuck you, Mudak! I’m the Wolf now. This bitch has ruined everything! She’s going to pay for what she’s done and so are you.” He stood between two rows of vehicles. “Put her in the car.” They dragged Mia over to an SUV and opened the passenger door on the far side of the vehicle.

“No! Alex!” Mia yelled as the man tried to push her in.

I looked around the tire and saw Greyson three cars back. He disappeared behind a nearby BMW, moving with stealth through the parked vehicles.

Mia braced herself on the frame of the door, pushing back against her abductor. The man shoved her one last hard time, and she flopped into the car. He slammed the door, trapping Mia inside. A divider kept her locked in the back. Her mouth opened, and she yelled, but the windows muffled her screams.

A black car came speeding up the parking garage. The dented front and driver matched the description of Cadie’s hit-and-run driver and vehicle perfectly. I fired at the tires, taking the front wheels out and forcing the driver to slam into the parked cars. Smoke and steam spewed from beneath the wrecked hood. Blood ran down the driver’s face as he pushed the door open. When he popped up, he held an AK and fired wildly in my direction. I took cover, leaping behind a new car and staying low. He continued to fire a barrage of bullets above my head, too busy firing like a madman to notice I had moved locations.

Dimitri hit the SUV with his fist. “Let’s go!”

The driver left the cover of the car, continuing to fire as he ran toward Dimitri. I aimed from the ground and shot the driver once in the side. He collapsed with the gun in his hand, firing again in my direction. He stopped, yelling out in pain as he limped away from Dimitri to the safety of a cement beam.

“Cover me!” Greyson popped up and fired across the cars, drawing everyone’s attention. While the driver shot at Greyson, I took cover from a corner, put him in sight, and shot the driver in the temple. His body fell to the side, slumped and bleeding out over the cement floor. *That’s for Cadie, you piece of shit.*

I moved to the next car, hoping to grab the AK from the dead man before Dimitri could use it against us. I pulled the gun from his limp hand. *No bullets. Fuck.* I threw the gun far behind me on the ground.

Greyson fired his gun, hitting the man near Mia. He instantly fell against the door and onto the garage floor. Another shooter jumped from the SUV, fleeing Greyson’s fire, and took cover between the cars and the garage wall.

Dimitri was furious as he shouted from behind the SUV, “Kill this fucking guy!”

I took my shot fast, hitting the advancing guy in his left shoulder. He fell to his knees. I fired again, hitting his other shoulder and knocking his gun across the cement. I scanned the cars, searching for the other bodyguard. They were here, somewhere, hiding between the vehicles. Dimitri sprang out, firing twice at me from around the trunk. As soon as he ducked for cover, I cleared two cars, closing the space between us.

Looking over the hood of a Honda, I saw the guy behind Dimitri shoot rapidly at Greyson from between two vehicles. Greyson grunted and I knew he was hit. The guy stopped to reload, and Greyson stood quickly and popped him in the chest with two rounds. The shooter slumped against the car and fell to the cement, bleeding profusely.

“I’m ok!” Greyson yelled out between growls of pain.

Mia put one leg out of the car and jumped over the guy Greyson had killed. Mia and Dimitri both lunged for the closer gun that had been slung across the road. I rushed from my spot and tackled Dimitri from the side, hitting him like a linebacker as he beat Mia to the gun. His ribs made an audible crack, unable to withstand the crush into the cement. I stripped the gun from his hand. Holding him up by his shirt, I pulled back and struck him with the butt of the gun. His nose exploded with blood on impact. I hit him viciously two more times. His eyes rolled back into his head as blood flowed freely from his broken nose. I reeled back once more but stopped as Mia screamed out. I let go and his limp body fell to the cement floor.

“Ahhhh!” She stretched out across the cement, reaching for the gun in desperation. The last of Dimitri’s men had crawled out from beside the car and grabbed her leg. She kicked and threw her body forward with all her strength. Her hand landed on the gun. Immediately, she pointed it directly between his eyes.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” she growled.

Staring down the barrel of her gun, he let go. Greyson stumbled from behind a car, holding his arm. I stood with an unconscious, bleeding Dimitri at my feet.

“Police! Drop your guns.” Several officers were now on the scene.

“Don’t shoot. Everyone’s putting their guns down!” We placed the guns carefully on the ground.

“Kneel slowly with your hands behind your head!” The officer commanded.

We knelt with our hands behind our heads, as instructed. The familiar sound of Agent Kelly’s voice echoed through the garage. “These three are with OPS. That’s Dimitri and the rest are with the Russian syndicate.” Several officers rushed up to secure the Russian mobsters.

Greyson braced himself against a red van, barely able to stand.

“He needs medical attention!” I waved Kelly over and she brought two medics from the back of the police crowd.

Kelly, Mia, and I walked up behind the medics as they assessed Greyson’s gunshot wound. He smiled, and I knew he’d be fine.

“You leave any alive?” Kelly smirked.

I nodded towards the still unconscious Dimitri. “He’s alive, barely. He’s gonna need a minute before he can talk, though.”

“There’s this asshole, too. He’s alive.” Greyson motioned to the guy on the ground being cuffed. “But I think that’s the extent of the lucky ones.”

“I feel like I have spent my entire time knowing you begging for forgiveness from my boss.” Kelly smiled at Greyson as the medics tended to his bleeding shoulder, “But thank you for keeping Dimitri alive. I need him to talk.”

The medics forced Greyson to lie down. The bullet was lodged in his shoulder and he needed emergency surgery.

“Trust me. It wasn’t on purpose. I need to get to Cadie now.” I huffed.

Kelly nodded her understanding, watching the medics push Greyson through the crowd on a gurney. “I’m right behind you, brother.” I rubbed Greyson’s good shoulder before letting them pass by.

“Let’s get you guys out of here,” Kelly motioned for us to follow her through the growing audience.

Mia squeezed my hand. “Will he be okay? And what about Cadie? Was it her that was hit?”

Feeling my phone vibrate, I read several text messages and slid my phone back into my pocket before answering. “It was. We’re going to her now. John is texting me as we speak. She’s in stable condition.” I kissed the top of her head. “Don’t worry about Greyson. It takes more than a bullet to stop that man, trust me.”

She threaded her arm around mine. “I need to see Cadie. I don’t know what I would do if...” She trailed off, “I can’t think straight. Please get me out of this parking garage. I’d like to be somewhere with less dead bodies.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I put my arm around Mia and we followed Agent Kelly through the crowd.

MIA

FATE

The morning sun peaked through the curtains, waking me from a deep slumber. Four days had passed since the shootout. The purple-ish hue and discomfort in my face faded with each passing day. We were staying at Devin's safe house and promised not to leave town until Agent Kelly finished submitting reports and making arrests. Greyson was working day and night to trace Luka and Dimitri's criminal ties. Once Agent Kelly made all her arrests, we would be cleared to leave Vegas.

Alex kissed my bare shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts. I smiled as he tugged me into him. The heat from his body warmed me, sending ripples of expectation through my hips.

"What are you thinking about?" he moved my hair from my neck and kissed the newly exposed skin.

I pressed my shoulder into his lips, loving every time they met my skin, "My mom. Tasha. Having to leave you."

Alex chuckled, "Oh, is that it?" He scooped me to him and sat up. I laid my head on his shoulder.

"Dimitri has already given Kelly more than enough evidence to reopen your mom's disappearance case."

I faced him, resting my chin on his tattooed chest. "They'll never be able to prosecute him. The evidence is circumstantial at best." I sighed. "And my father always seems to weasel out of trouble."

“Greyson messaged me late last night. Arthur videotaped Tony asking him to ‘take care’ of your mom. Apparently, he had hidden cameras all over. Arthur was secretly compiling evidence without your dad knowing—just in case he went down. Arthur never intended to take the wrap by himself.”

I twisted my lips in a half smile. “The tape could be a game changer.”

“I can’t believe Greyson’s working after being shot in the shoulder. How is he feeling?”

“He’s fine. The docs released him yesterday. He was good after a few stitches. You can’t knock that guy down.”

A deep sadness washed over me when I thought of the pain my new friends had endured to help me. “It hurts every time I think of my father and uncle ... all the horrible things they’ve done.”

“I know.” Alex ran a hand over my head, pushing my hair from my face, and kissed my forehead. “Arthur and your father will be going to prison. Bribery, murder, blackmail, kidnapping, obstruction of justice—that’s just to start. Greyson is still pulling up dirt. They’ll both be convicted and disbarred. It’s over for them.” He tilted my chin up, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “Dimitri, Arthur, and Tony are ratting each other out faster than Kelly can write. They’re all going to pay—but until Kelly arrests Arthur and Tony, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

I exhaled deeply, letting my hand wander up his six-pack. The silver chain and melted dog tags rested in the valley between his chest muscles. I ran my finger between the chain and his skin.

He continued reassuring me, “Tasha is in a great rehab. She’s strong. With the right support, she’ll recover.”

“I have faith in her. I’m just heartbroken about it all. I wanted more for her and I didn’t give her the attention she needed. I left her with our father and I hate myself for it.”

“You were living your life. You were coping with your own issues. She’s an adult and has to take responsibility for

her own actions.” He kissed my cheek. “Promise me you’ll stop living in regret.”

“I don’t want to lie to you.”

“That’s fair. At least promise me you’ll try.” He continued to pet my hair and I loved the gentle touch of the toughest man I knew.

“I promise.”

Alex grabbed my hips and pulled me on top of him. “Now that leaves “you leaving,” which is not happening right now. In fact, I’m going to take full advantage of every moment I have you to myself.”

I braced myself on his chest, loving the excitement I felt when I straddled him. Our naked bodies immediately searching to connect. I smiled and kept my ass just an inch from the tip of his already hard cock. Leaning over his neck, I moaned gently, “mmmm,” and bit his lobe.

He growled, put an arm around my waist, and flipped me to my back. Instinctively, I placed my hands above my head. With one hand on my wrists, his other hand moved up my rib cage to my tits. He held one breast as he sucked each nipple back and forth until I squirmed in delightful frustration.

Still holding my wrists, he kissed over my collarbone and up my neck. His other hand endlessly tugging and twirling at my hard nipples. Alex released my wrists and slipped his body between my legs, kissing and licking his way from my neck, over my stomach, and down the inside of my thighs. He ran his tongue over the side of my folds, avoiding my dripping wet center.

I moaned out of frustration again, my hips moving to meet his mouth. He pushed my hips down, demanding I wait until he was ready. Making a fist in his tousled black hair, I tried to push his face into my wetness. But Alex knew my tricks and moved south to lick the crease of my ass cheeks.

Just when I didn’t think I could handle his avoidance any longer, he pushed two fingers into me. My back arched as I

gasped. His free hand went back to my breasts and pinched my tender nipple as his wide tongue met my swollen clit.

Alex brought his head back and forth, running a broad, firm tongue over my center with a steady up-and-down rhythm. My knees trembled. He pushed my legs down and continued to lap voraciously at my center. I panted, unraveling at his merciless approach to my orgasm. His fingers moved swiftly in and out of me, as a sweet mixture of his drool and my wetness pooled between my legs. Every stroke brought me closer to explosion. My knees pulled together, my head fell back, and I arched as shock waves of excitement jolted from my throbbing pussy and through my body. I tried desperately to catch my breath, but the orgasmic vibrations were too strong.

Alex slowed his licking, kissing me gently. I laughed as he toyed with my sensitivity. Suddenly, he flipped me over by my hips. I gasped as he pushed my legs apart, teasing me with the tip of his dick.

I buried my face in the pillow, anticipating the intense amount of pleasure I felt when he filled me. He licked me up and down from the back as I arched my back. Every nerve between my legs lit up. He nibbled a path up my ass cheek. I tried to wiggle out of delight, but his grip kept me from moving. He pushed my legs together, positioning himself with his legs on the outside.

Alex pulled my arched body onto his hips. Slowly, he eased his cock into me as I stretched around his thickness. I tightened as he buried himself in me. Alex controlled everything. Moving purposefully and slowly, he lit me on fire from the inside out.

He kissed a trail of wet heat up the back of my neck, pumping in and out of me. With both my legs together, he pushed his right hand under my hips. His fingers found my swollen clit with ease, immediately moving in small circles. Alex pumped into me and rubbed my pussy in unison.

“Alex ... Alex ...” I could think of nothing but his name.

“Come for me, Mia” He growled, gripping my shoulder and thrusting into me with long strokes. I arched hard as he relentlessly circled his big fingers over my clit. Electricity burst from my insides. I cried out an indiscernible string of syllables, coming in his hand and on his cock. His rhythm changed as the last bursts fled my hips. At the height of my spasms, he groaned and pushed into me even deeper than before. His hips struck my ass as his cock swelled and erupted inside me. The heat from his cum filled me, creating an unmistakable slickness. He slowed, gliding in and out of me as I tightened my walls, wanting him to stay in me.

I heaved, turning my face to the side for more air. Alex pulled out of me. “Don’t move.” He returned with a warm cloth and gently dabbed at my skin. The warmth of the wet cloth soothed my aching parts. I rested my head on my folded hands, feeling like a princess.

He kissed my cheek and pulled the sheet over me, knowing I needed a second to catch my breath. I relaxed, and he checked his phone as it beeped.

A moment later he smacked me on the ass playfully. “Now put some clothes on.” He fastened his belt and pulled a white T-shirt over his head. “Cadie should be released from the hospital today. Let’s keep her company until she’s out.”

“That’s a great idea.” I sat up, holding the sheet over my bare breasts. “I’ll get dressed.”

A set of tire tracks on the sidewalk outside of the hospital was the only evidence of the pandemonium from a few days earlier. Otherwise, business was back to usual in the busy hospital. I fought a surge of anxiety as I recalled the events. Alex noticed my discomfort and interlocked his finger on mine. I squeezed his hand and walked through the lobby past the gift shop.

“Oh, wait.” Alex grabbed a bouquet and paid for them with cash. “I can’t show up empty-handed.”

We walked to the center elevators and hit the circle for “UP”.

Once we exited the elevator, the laughter from five rooms down had me guessing John and Devin had the same idea about keeping Cadie company. John’s deep laugh echoed through the hallway with a boom that reminded me he was a Marine.

I followed behind Alex as we stepped into the packed room. In the far corner, Devin had his arms wrapped around Liv. Logan stood at the foot of the bed, flicking through T.V. channels with a remote and John sat in a chair closest to the door. Alex reached across Cadie’s bed and bumped fists with Devin. Then he hit John on the shoulder, “Hey, brother.”

Alex held out the flowers, “I brought you these,” and he kissed Cadie on the forehead.

“Thank you.” Cadie pointed at the shelf behind the door. “You can put them there.”

We looked behind the door and found several bouquets of balloons and flowers. I giggled at how sweet the guys treated Cadie.

“Hi.” I waved at everyone at once. “How are you feeling?” I asked Cadie.

“I’m much better. Really, I was quite lucky.” She held her wrapped wrist up. “Now I have a fun piece of metal in my wrist.”

“Oh, wow. I hope it heals quickly.”

Logan pointed toward the T.V. with the remote. “Check it out.”

The mid-day news was on. My father was being handcuffed and escorted into the local police department with a jacket over his head. The running headline at the top of the screen read: Tony Chen drops out of race for District Attorney as police arrest him for his involvement in the death of his wife, Giada Denali, and her acquaintance, Meret Orlov. Arthur Chen was also arrested on multiple charges of murder, blackmail, and fraud.

I shook my head. “I never thought I’d see the day Arthur and my father were held accountable for their actions.”

John put a hand on my shoulder. “It takes a lot of strength to stand up to your family. Your mother would be proud of you. You’ll make a great attorney.”

“I can’t thank you enough ... for everything.” I wiped a quick tear from my eye and swallowed the emotion bubbling in my chest. “How do I ever repay you?”

Alex shrugged with his hands in his pocket, leaning against the wall next to the T.V. “You don’t.”

“Well ...” John rubbed his freshly shaven chin. “We could use your help with legal issues when they come up.”

“Only if that’s something you would want to do.” Cadie pushed herself up in the bed. “We would love the help but would never want to bring you into something you’re uncomfortable with.”

I nodded. “I want to make a difference. I’d love to help as much as possible.”

Cadie reached for a glass of water on the tray next to the bed. “What will you do now?”

I picked the glass up and handed it to her. “That’s a good question. While Tasha is finishing treatment, I’ll be studying for the bar exam. I think I’m going to lie low and just focus on that for the next few months. California only offers the exam twice a year. It’s a big deal if I miss it.”

A knock at the door was preceded by the attending physician. “Ms. McCallister?”

“Yes.” Cadie smiled, clearly excited to leave.

“Let’s give her a few minutes with the doctor.” John opened the door, and we filed out of the room one by one, leaving Logan and Cadie to talk to the doctor.

Once in the hallway, John pulled out two plane tickets. “Devin, Liv, and I are going to drive the Tank back. You take these tickets to get Mia home. There’s a flight to L.A. and then one back here. I want you to take that Harley back to Howard

and arrange a video conference call with his grandson. Blake, was it?”

“Yes. I have a good feeling about this kid. If he’s anything like his grandfather, he’s definitely OPS recruit material.” Alex hesitated before taking the tickets. “And thank you.”

John put a hand on Alex’s shoulder and pulled him in for a hug. “Excellent job, Alex. I’ll send one of the team guys to meet you at Howard’s.” Then he clapped him on the back.

“You too, Mia. You’re family now. Let me get my paws around you.” John surprised me as he squeezed a breath of air from my lungs.

“Oh, wow,” I laughed.

Liv giggled, “Easy John. I don’t think she was ready for that.”

Devin and Alex smiled wide as I put a hand up, “I’m ok. I’m just not much of a hugger.”

“You are now.” Devin nudged me with an elbow.

This family had a lot of love. I was a better person in their presence. A more honest and vulnerable person than I had ever dreamed I would be. And apparently, now I was a hugger.

We said goodbyes and Alex and I walked in silence to the Tank. Our plane would leave soon, and I needed to pack the few things I had. I’d be home in a few hours. Back to a life where I never questioned my mother’s love. A life where all my fear and anger were validated by a stack of evidence. Agent Kelly would stop at nothing to see Arthur and my father pay for their depravity.

Once back at the safe house, we hurried through packing and preparing for the short flight to L.A. Alex brought my bag to the front door.

“The driver will be here within ten minutes.” He slid his phone into his back pocket. I leaned against the corner where the hallway opened into the living room and stared at him. His cocky, arrogant sense of humor, his endless teasing, the way he

handled me like a Rubix cube he'd mastered ... I would miss it all.

“You know this isn't goodbye.” He slipped his hoodie over my head. “That's better.” Alex wrapped his arms around me, and I enjoyed the smell of his clothes and the safety of his hug.

“You could stay with me for a bit.”

“I can't. I have an apartment. A life. I have to stay focused on the bar exam.” I closed my eyes to keep from crying.

He traced my lips with his thumb and kissed me. If he would have asked me one more time, I may have said yes. But he didn't. And I didn't. We just held each other and a piece of me hoped that I would find my way back to him. Alex was a kind of magic I had never known. When he held me the whole world disappeared. And it scared me. I wasn't ready to be this vulnerable. The biggest exam of my life was only a few months away. If I couldn't focus on the bar exam, I would lose everything. And if I let that happen, I would resent Alex. I couldn't think around him, and that was both a blessing and a curse. If it was meant to be, then he would still be waiting for me after the exam. All I needed was fate and a little luck.

ALEX

CONFESSION

The last three months had slowly crawled by. Cadie, Liv, and Greyson had fully recovered, and things were close to normal. Greyson went on a well-deserved vacation and I helped with his contracts. The last thing I needed was time off. I had to stay busy— keep my mind off things. All I thought about was Mia.

“Quit staring at that whiskey and drink it.” Devin came through his office door and tossed a black leather jacket on the wall hook.

“That took longer than you thought.” I sipped from my watered-down whiskey, instantly regretting how long I let it sit.

Devin filled a zip-lock bag with ice from his minibar and plopped down into his desk chair. His black shirt decorated with dark blotches of blood, undoubtedly not his. He held the bag against his swollen knuckles. “The fucker made me run. I hate running.”

I laughed, knowing some punk was probably missing teeth, fully regretting his poor life choices.

Devin’s eyes narrowed as he studied me. “What are you doing back here? Why aren’t you waiting for me at the bar?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t feel like being around people tonight.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You didn’t want to be out at the bar on a Friday night? With that

little hottie that Liv hired last week?” He sat back. “Lies. Tell me what’s up.”

I took another sip from my glass. “I’m serious. I told Liv I would be on my best behavior and I’m a man of my word.”

Devin let out a roar of laughter. He removed the bag of ice to point a finger at me. “You’re fucking with me, right?” He paused. “Is this about Mia?”

“Yes, but no.” I shook my head, finding myself at a loss for words.

Devin leaned back in his chair. “Have you told her how you feel?”

“She’s studying for the bar exam. She came up once, and it was amazing. We talk all the time, but she’s not the kind of woman you pressure. I don’t want to distract her from such an important exam. She’s literally studying ten hours a day with her friend Sarah. There’s a thirty seven percent passage rate in the state of California. She needs to study, and I don’t want to interfere.”

“Or she thinks you’re not that into her.” He shrugged. “You gotta straight up tell her.”

I interlocked my fingers behind my head. “Trust me. She knows I’m crazy about her. She’ll come around if she needs me.”

The door opened slowly. “Alex?” the soft voice of Liv called out. She pushed the door completely open. On sight of Devin, she rolled her eyes and put a hand on her hip. “He ran. Didn’t he?”

“Yup.” Devin pouted with puppy dog eyes. “Can I get a whiskey, baby?”

Liv shook her head at Devin. “I’ll give you a whiskey if you get out of those gross clothes.”

Devin looked at his shirt as if he just realized the dude’s blood was splattered across him. “Fine.” Devin pulled his shirt off and shot it into the garbage can against the wall. “Is that

better?” With his Norwegian tattoos on full display across his chest, he smiled in defiance.

Liv rolled her eyes. “And you.” She pointed at me. “You didn’t tell me Mia was coming in tonight.” Liv put her hands in the air. “I would have got extra coverage at the bar so I could hang out.”

I stood in surprise. “She didn’t tell me she was coming.”

Liv tilted her head. “Well, she’s at the bar and looking for you.”

I left the watered-down whiskey on Devin’s desk and rushed out of the office. I found Mia sitting with Cadie at the end of the bar. She wore her hair down and soft. Her pouty red lips smiling when she saw me. Cadie waved above her head as I turned the corner of the bar.

“Hi, stranger.” I kissed her on the cheek as I stood behind her. She spun around and wrapped her arms around my neck, kissing me firmly on the lips.

“Can we talk?” She asked, her arms still around my neck.

“Of course.”

Cadie stood to give me her seat. She rubbed Mia gently on the back and walked past us into the crowd.

Liv popped over from behind the bar just as Cadie walked away. She slid a whiskey on the rocks toward me, “What can I get you to drink, Mia?”

“Just water, please.”

“What’s going on? Why didn’t you call before you came up?” I had more questions, but I stopped there.

“I ...uh ... I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed lately. I needed to see you, so I got in the car and started driving. Then I ended up here.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That’s a ten-hour drive, Mia.”

“I just needed to get away. Can we go back to your place?”

“Absolutely. How about a little dinner and then I’ll take you.” I waved at Liv and she bounced over on cue.

We spent the rest of the night talking about her homework, my recent contracts, and how we wished we could see more of each other. She told me about Tasha taking a job at the rehab facility and deciding to pursue a career as a counselor while she finished her treatment. We were both so proud of her progress. Mia looked drained from late nights studying. She fell asleep on the car ride to Reno. I carried her into my flat, overlooking the Reno skyline. She woke up briefly but fell fast asleep when I tucked her into my cozy king-size bed. I fell asleep next to her, wondering what was really going on.

The first rays of light woke me at dawn. I pulled the curtains across the balcony window in my bedroom to let Mia sleep. I flipped on a fire and heated up June’s leftover cinnamon rolls in the oven. A few clients had some preliminary research that was needed for upcoming contracts. I sat on my couch and busied myself with work. The sound of my typing fingers competed melodically with the crackling of the fire.

A door closed inside my bedroom. She must have woken and decided to shower. A few minutes later, a wet-haired Mia wearing one of my shirts appeared in the doorway. I put my laptop on the table and opened my arms, beckoning her to me.

She glided across the room and sat on my lap, laying her head on my chest. I pulled a folded blanket from the arm of the couch and wrapped her with it.

Mia inhaled deeply. “That smells like the work of June.”

“It is.” I rubbed her arm as she nuzzled into me.

“I have a confession.” She said, staring into the fire.

I knew she would talk when she was ready. “Let’s hear it.”

“I think about you all the time.”

“Same here. But I don’t want to pressure you into taking time off from studying. I know how focused you are on the bar exam ... and how distracting I can be.” I stroked her hair, moving a piece behind her ear.

“I’ve been stressed about more than the bar exam. There’s something else.” Mia sat up and ran her hand over the edges of my shoulder. She bit her lip, then brought her eyes to mine. “I’m pregnant.”

I couldn’t hide the look of shock. My eyes widened, and I stopped breathing for a few seconds. Remembering to breathe, I gulped in a lung full of air. “A little Alex ...” the words barely made it out of my mouth.

She brought her shoulders up and tilted her face. “Or Alexandria?”

I stood, swooping her up as her legs wrapped around me. “This makes me so happy.” I kissed her hard on the lips, holding her above my waist. Her wet hair fell around our faces.

“I’ve been so worried about telling you.” The vulnerable Mia was a treasure. I held onto these moments for as long as I could. After hugging her for a minute, I released her and she slid down my body to her feet.

“I’m not great at saying I need things.” She looked at the floor. Before I could answer, she looked up at me with hazel eyes that could rip my heart out. “I need you.”

“Listen, Mia,” I paced, searching for the right words. “You belong here, with me and your new OPS family.”

I put my hand on her belly, and she covered it with hers. “Baby McCallister.”

“If it’s a boy, we name him Alexander.” She smiled.

I kissed her forehead. “And if it’s a girl, Giada.”

~Six months later~ (Mia)

Cadie and I sat at the kitchen table watching the men outside. The table was set, and I was hungry as ever. The sun was bright, but the May air was chilly. Logan had insisted on barbecuing and these days I never said no to food.

“It’s kinda cold to be out there, isn’t it?” Cadie shook her head. “When he gets a craving for something, he doesn’t stop until he eats it.”

I laughed and rubbed my round belly. “Me too.”

We giggled together. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. “Girl, I can’t laugh too hard.” I tried to stop smiling, but Cadie was practically drooling over Logan’s ass while he grilled.

“It’s not a bad view.” I laughed again, and we both took a drink of water.

“You’re going to love living in the Sierras. I still can’t believe that you and Alex were able to get the property next to us. We’re going to be neighbors!”

I pushed my lips together and crinkled my forehead. “We’re like three miles away from you.”

“True. But still our closest neighbor.” There was a small pause in the conversation. “So, any talk about marriage?”

Just then, Logan pulled the deck door open, and the smell of BBQ ribs filled the house, instantly making me salivate.

“What are you ladies talking about?” Alex followed Logan in, clinking the grill tongs like a big kid.

“I asked if you guys were going to get married.”

I choked on a mouthful of water, not expecting her to actually say that.

Logan shook his head, disapproving of Cadie’s nosy question as he walked behind her to the kitchen.

Alex was unphased. “Not until I’m one hundred percent sure that she can handle all my bullshit.” He kissed the top of her head and followed Logan to the kitchen.

“And there really is so much bullshit.” I teased. Alex knew I wanted to wait until after the baby to get married. He never pushed me into anything, and I loved him for it.

“Speaking of bullshit.” Cadie stood up and pulled a file from the counter. “John was hoping you could help with a few legal issues with these cases. He made notes on the margins.”

I took the folder and briefly looked through the documents. “Perfect. I’ll look into it by Monday.”

Cadie sat back at the table. “It’s been great having a lawyer around.”

“I love helping out. It’s a nice change to the boring contract work I’ve been doing lately.”

Logan put a plate of ribs and a bowl of green salad on the table.

Alex put a hand on my knee. “Maybe you should work for OPS full-time? I think John has enough work to offer Sarah a job too if she’s still looking for a position.

“John never has a shortage of legal issues in California.” Logan huffed as he stabbed a rib and plopped it onto his plate.

I squinted in thought. “It’s not a terrible idea. Sarah does love talking about OPS work, she’s trustworthy and a powerhouse.”

“That sounds like a ‘yes’ to me.” Alex tapped my knee twice. “I’ll talk to John tomorrow.”

“Wait. I didn’t say yes, and I have to talk to Sarah.” I touted.

“Kinda sounds like you did say yes.” Cadie showed her teeth in a big McCallister smile, “Plus, I talked to Sarah that time she called looking for you. I think she’ll be excited.”

I shook my head. “You two are incorrigible.”

Logan chimed in, “Agreed.” and stabbed another rib on the platter.

The next hour was filled with laughter and clinking plates. We joked about hiking through three miles of snow to borrow sugar and how Alex would teach our little girl to fight. My heart was as full as my tummy. My whole life, I had protected myself from my family. Now, I had a family who protected me. I gently rubbed circles over my growing belly. At that moment, I made a promise to give more than I took. I would work for OPS and join their mission. A heaviness I had never

noticed before lifted from my shoulders. I was exactly where I was meant to be.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your continued support.

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