

TOP  
SECRET  
COWBOY

WEST  PROTECTION

*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EM PETROVA

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WEST Protection

Book 12

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## **West Protection**

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[GUARDED BY THE COWBOY](#) Boone's Story.

[COWBOY CONSPIRACY THEORY](#) Mathias's Story.

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[CLOSE RANGE COWBOY](#) Landon's Story

[ZERO DARK COWBOY](#) Judd's Story

[TOP SECRET COWBOY](#) Jace's Story

[COWBOY UNDER SIEGE](#) Jaren's Story

**This bodyguard will do anything to protect a brainy businesswoman...even if it means pretending to be her fiancé.**

After Jace Abel experiences a low in his career, he's back in the saddle—and behind the computer screen. As an agent for the cybersecurity division of the WEST Protection team, he's ready to investigate a system hack in San Francisco. But his skills are put to the test when the founder of the tech corporation receives a death threat. Good thing he's also trained to guard the smart and savvy businesswoman's life—and pretending to be her fiancé gives him a good reason to keep her close.

Bronte Burns knows more about binary code than threats and bodyguards. Now she's taking a crash course on both while trying to keep her company afloat. Not to mention dealing with her new bodyguard, a pushy know-it-all who insists on pretending they're engaged. His bold kisses are stretching her nerves to the breaking point, and don't even get her started on how he makes her teeth grind—and other body parts too—each time he puts his big, rough hands on her.

When Jace isn't arguing with Bronte, he's guarding her lush curves and digging deep to find out what sensitive information her hackers got. Bronte just wants everything to return to normal...but she's also shocked to find a kindred spirit in the man protecting her. All these fake kisses are starting to make her think crazy thoughts. Is it possible for *both* of them shut off their brains long enough to find love?

***A fake relationship collides with steamy action and adventure when the next WEST Protection bodyguard goes down swinging for the woman he's protecting. Is there a code for falling in love?***

# **Top Secret COWBOY**

**by**

Em Petrova

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# Chapter One

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Jace Abel dropped to one knee and peered down the sight at his target. Shooting practice always ended in some healthy competition between him and his four brothers. But now that they worked for the WEST Protection team, the rivalry sometimes got out of hand.

A shrill whistle ripped through the air as one of Jace's teammates attempted to throw him off so he'd miss the target.

Shaking off the disruption, he refocused on the playing cards tacked to the target.

"It's just a friendly game of poker, Jace," came his older brother Judd's drawl. "I know you can hit all four aces on that wall."

He squinted at the card deck pinned to the wall in random order and locked in on the ace of hearts. His finger gently squeezed the trigger and he took the shot. He couldn't see exactly where he hit, but he was aiming for the A.

In rapid succession, he shot three more times, hoping for the four of a kind that would earn him top marksman at the training. He was up against some stiff competition. The WEST team was the best of the best.

But they didn't know how competing brought out the best in Jace.

He snapped to his feet and holstered his weapon.

Judd let out a whoop and clapped him on the shoulder. "Damn good shooting, brother."



Their boss Ross Wynton, the W in WEST Protection, gave Jace a curt nod. "Let's go take a look."

They set off away from his teammates lined up on the edge of the shooting range.

Loud laughter sounded, and Jace smirked as he sauntered across the course to reach the target. He caught his boss's crooked grin too.

"You know what the ladies say about a cowboy and his Wranglers, don't ya?" Ross asked.

Jace scuffed a knuckle over his jaw. "What's that?"

"Only thing better than a cowboy in Wranglers is a cowboy out of Wranglers."

"Is that what your wife lives by?"

Ross threw him a grin. "That's my business, but you keep visiting the bar on Friday nights and you'll find out for yourself."

He issued a chuckle. "Got no complaints from the ladies of Stone Pass yet."

"Guess you had lots of practice back in Georgia before making the move."

They arrived at the target. The cards were all in perfect, unmarked condition except for the four aces. Ross touched one, where the corner with the *A* hung from a sliver of paper.

"Damn good shootin'."

Jace cocked a brow. "Better than the others?"

"I won't say that, but I'll be buying you a steak dinner tonight."

"Hell yeah. Bring it on."

Together, they turned and strode back to the others. The guys silenced and looked to Ross, waiting for the final decision.

"Perfect shooting from Jace," he announced.

“Maybe the tight jeans kept all the blood in his trigger finger,” his teammate ribbed.

Jace spread his first two fingers and pointed at his eyes. “It’s all in the perfect vision.”

“Jace! Heads up!” Madeline, one of the owners of the facility used to train the WEST team and other security teams all over the country, caught his attention.

He glanced up in time to see a wad of black fabric soaring through the air at him. He lunged forward to field the item. As he unrolled it, a bunch of guys crowded in to see his prize.

Across the front of the T-shirt in blocky letters it read: Group Therapy. The rings of a target had several printed bullet holes to represent a tight cluster of shots.

Jace held it up to his chest. “Perfect shooting on the course and all I got was this dumb T-shirt.”

They all laughed, including Madeline. The woman dealt with their bad humor every six weeks when they had to complete a round of training. Staying sharp was important for their team, especially when they rocketed to the top to become one of the best in the country in such short time.

Jace tossed Madeline a grin. “Thanks.”

“You earned it.” She showered the group with a disapproving momma look. “Plenty more shirts in the box. There’s no good reason why all of you aren’t wearing one. Now go grab a drink before the next session.”

As they all headed to the coolers at the side of the course, Judd bumped a shoulder into his. “Not bad shooting for the nerdiest man on the team.”

Jace shoved him. “You’re just jealous because I got all the brains *and* the skill.”

“I can still put together a bike engine faster than you.”

Overhearing their conversation, Silas joined them and planted a hand on each of their shoulders. “But can you ride a horse? That’s where the real skill lies.”

Judd and Jace traded a look across Silas's body. They weren't raised in the country like the rest of the WEST bunch.

Judd thumbed his white Stetson. "The hat's been enough of an adjustment without me jumping on the back of an unpredictable animal."

"It's only a matter of time before we make you Abel boys into ranchers." Silas dropped his palms from their shoulders and lengthened his strides to hurry away.

Judd threw Jace a look. "Bet I can beat you to the cooler."

Jace shook his head. "When are you gonna realize you'll always come in second?" As the words left his mouth, he took off in a dead sprint. Judd's boots pounded the ground beside him, and they dashed to the coolers, neck and neck.

The guys jumped out of their way, and Jace skidded to a halt before he plowed into his other brother, Jaren.

Jaren jerked out of his path, a scowl on his face. "You two can't behave for a minute, can you? I know our momma taught you how to act right."

Judd settled his hat more firmly on his head. "Just because we still know how to have some fun."

Jaren cocked a dark brow. "Tell me again which brother doesn't know how to let it all hang out now that he's got a woman?"

Oh, damn. That was a red flag in front of a bull. For Judd, dissing his new relationship with Ari was a line nobody crossed if they didn't want to get into a brawl.

"You jealous? You've been attacking me ever since Ari and I moved in together."

Jaren huffed a laugh and crossed his arms. "Only thing I am is annoyed by how high and mighty you've been acting."

"Guys, stop." Jace pushed his way between them.

Judd settled a hand on Jace's chest to make him back off, which he did. But he'd seen his brothers get into enough tussles to know what was coming next.

Judd got in Jaren's face. "You must not like having all your teeth."

Jace jumped in again before there was a dirty brawl, something the team hadn't yet got a taste of, but fights between Jace and his brothers broke out often enough that their momma had several different ways of coping with her boys.

First, she'd try the spray bottle filled with water. Squirting them in the face like a naughty cat only lasted before they all figured out that being sprayed with water in the hot weather wasn't so bad. Jace actually got pretty good at fielding the spray and catching the water in his mouth.

Then their poor mom turned to the wooden spoon. Rarely did she ever strike any of them, even though they all deserved it at one time or another. But just seeing her wield that spoon made all their balls shrivel in fear.

Until they got a little older, that was. Then the only thing left for her to do was keep them from working in the garage on their dirt bikes and when they got older, motorcycles.

Judd and Jaren shot insults back and forth, and the team egged them on. But then Jaren took it too far—he put a hand on Judd's chest and shoved him back a step.

Jace saw it coming like a tornado across a plain.

Judd lowered his head and rushed Jaren. They flew backward and hit the coolers. Ice and bottled water went flying as they sprawled in the grass, bodies locked in a siege.

"Oh, shit!" Jace jumped in and grabbed Jaren's shirt. He twisted from his grip, so Jace made a grab for Judd next.

Shouts erupted from the group as the pair wrestled on the ground for the win. But they were all close in size, and since puberty hit the youngest, none of the brothers had an advantage.

Jace leaped in again, the cusses flying from his mouth sounded too damn close to his momma's. If his other two brothers weren't still in Georgia, they'd never let him live *that* down.

“Enough!” Ross barked at the two going at it.

Suddenly, ice cubes and melted ice water splashed over them, Jace included.

The brawlers rolled apart, and Jace jolted to his feet to see Madeline holding an empty cooler. She set it down on the grass and, with all the calm of Momma Abel, walked away.

Ross jerked his head at Jace. “I’ve got an assignment, and since you have the fewest bruises, you get the honors.”

Jace was still aware of his brothers getting to their feet, righting their cowboy hats and dusting grass off their clothes. “An assignment?”

“You’re going to San Francisco.”

Jace groaned. “I’m not a city guy, Ross. Isn’t there someone better suited?”

“You’re part of this team, so you go where I tell you.”

The city was filled with people who had more money than sense, and from what he heard, arrogance and superiority complexes accounted for at least three quarters of the population.

A hand came down on Jace’s shoulder. He looked up at Silas, who was grinning. “Take the assignment. You get all the sun while we deal with mud season on the ranch.”

He turned his attention back to Ross. “What’s the assignment?”

He might be able to shoot and brawl like the best of them, but his wheelhouse was rooted in technology.

“A company with a security leak, not quite our normal job but it’s right up your alley. They believe some important information was stolen—but they can’t pinpoint what. That’s what you’ll be finding out.”

He nodded. “I’ll go.”

“Good. I’ll get a hotel booked for you.”

“I won’t need a hotel. I won’t be there long enough. I’ll get in, find the leak and get out. I’ll be on the red-eye back to Montana same day.”

Ross snorted. “Maybe you can use some of that ice Madeline dumped on you to un-swell your big ego, Jace.”

They all laughed. Ross scooped a cube off the ground and tossed it at him. When he lunged forward to catch it in his mouth, he heard a loud *riiip*.

Dammit. It seemed his Wranglers *were* a little on the tight side.

\* \* \* \* \*

The flared cuff of Bronte’s red retro blouse with little white polka dots trailed across the document as she signed her name with a flourish. *Bronte Burns*. Over the years, she’d written her name countless times but never was it *this* important.

She was sealing a deal. In ink. In front of her lawyer and a witness.

She glanced up at her personal assistant, who whisked the paper away and added it to the stack Bronte just signed for her company. Seeing that letterhead instilled her with so much pride. She never thought she’d be running her own tech company.

And she definitely never believed she’d be protecting her assets from her partner. At one time, her friend. But Angelica had stomped all over their friendship with her betrayal.

Bronte’s lawyer offered a smile and tapped the end of the pen on the tabletop to close it. “See? I told you that would be quick and painless. I’ll get these papers filed in all the right places.” He pushed back the executive chair and stood. “I won’t take up more of your time, Miss Burns. I’ll be in touch if I need anything more from you.”

She shook his hand and walked him to the office door. “Thank you. Have a great afternoon.”

She watched him leave before she slowly closed the door and melted against it.

Kimmy, her assistant, threw her a sympathetic look. “I know that was difficult, but now you own the majority of shares in Artemis, and the papers you just signed will protect your personal assets.”

Bronte lifted a hand to brush her long bangs off her forehead. The deep red strands could use a trim. “I know I did the right thing. I just didn’t expect it all to hit me again.”

Their gazes met.

“You know...what Angelica did.”

Kimmy nodded. “It shocked all of us. We never thought she’d steal from the company you both put your hearts and souls into.”

Pushing away from the door, Bronte walked over to the table serving as her workspace and sat down behind it. Kimmy sank into a seat too. How many times over the past week since Bronte discovered her partner’s treachery had she and Kimmy sat here hashing it all out?

She reached across the table and squeezed Kimmy’s hand. “You’re such a good friend to me. Thank you.”

A blush crept up Kimmy’s sun-kissed cheeks and made her complexion even more glowing. She looked like a true California girl with her tan and short blonde hair that always appeared windblown. Bronte would forever look like the transplant from Portland that she was. Even the retro wardrobe she preferred never seemed to fit in with the carefree aesthetic going on in San Francisco. Times like these, Bronte wished she wasn’t so different.

But what did she expect, being raised by parents who put all their time and energy into art, music and literature? Even Bronte’s name spoke of their passion, and she guessed they passed that on to her.

Kimmy squeezed her hand in return. “Of *course* I’m your friend. I’m here for you.”

Bronte arched a brow. “Even if I ask you to pull all the files on MemoTech and copy them twice?”

Her assistant gave a little mock shudder of horror. “Well, maybe not *that*.”

They shared a laugh. Kimmy performed all her assistant duties with sunshine and cheer but she despised filing and copying. Luckily, she didn’t need to do those things when almost everything was digital.

Bronte settled her palms on the table. “Now that this is all out of the way, I need to start focusing on Trade Con.”

With a nod, Kimmy pulled a computer tablet closer to take notes. Usually when Bronte got on a roll, the ideas flowed and her assistant knew to jot everything down.

“The trade show is my chance to find a partner to distribute my software to hospitals.” Bronte threw a look at the vacant chair her partner occupied until last week. “Now I’m dealing with this BS. I can’t help but wonder what Angelica stole. What if our software isn’t so secret anymore? What if she already shared it with our competitor after she hacked our system?”

Kimmy lowered the tablet and gave her a sympathetic look. Exactly what Bronte *didn’t* need. When she shared that Angelica had taken company secrets and that the only way to protect Artemis was to buy up all the public stocks and become the majority shareholder so she could officially fire Angelica... Well, Kimmy gave her that look.

So had her parents when she video-chatted with them. They also offered her financial backing if she needed it, but she refused to run to Mom and Dad for rescue. In a few months, she would be thirty years old. She owned a trending tech company with an expensive office space in one of the most expensive cities in the country. It was time she stood on her own two feet.

Kimmy pitched her voice low. “What do you think Angelica really stole?”

She shook her head. “There’s no way of knowing. Not that I can see.”

“There’s always the FBI. I bet they can find out.”



Bronte shook her head. “I don’t want to turn her in for corporate espionage. Not yet, at least. It means prison time, and well, she might have tried to ruin *my* life, but I’m not a person who ruins others’ lives. Even if they deserve it.”

Kimmy gave her a smile.

“Maybe I *should* have turned her in while I had the chance. But I wanted to save the company and the stockholders’ investments.” She dropped her face into her hands and sighed. “There isn’t a manual for your partner going rogue and stealing company files.”

Kimmy made a soothing noise. “If she did already sell Artemis’s secrets, then I think the FBI is your only choice.”

“I know. Thank god I got the company switched from public to private after I bought those stocks, though.”

“And your personal assets are separate now that you signed the paperwork.”

She brightened. “There is that. Everything I did was about saving Artemis. Now if only I wasn’t so worried I’ll be a laughingstock at Trade Con after I present ‘old’ software that everyone already knows about, thanks to Angelica.”

“When does the WEST Protection agent get here? Surely he’ll find out what Angelica took from the system before you attend the show.”

Bronte glanced at the time on her phone. “His flight should be arriving soon. If I want to be prepared for this trade show, I don’t have much time to spare.” She stood and smoothed her palms over her red pencil skirt.

Kimmy made her way to the door, tablet in hand. “Is there anything else I can do for you, Bronte?”

“Actually, yes. Would you see if you can make me an appointment to have my hair trimmed before the con?” Having her hair hanging in her eyes wasn’t helping her feel like a confident, in-control businesswoman.

“Sure thing.”

“And Kimmy, please show the WEST agent straight to my office when he arrives.”

She couldn't wait to find out *exactly* what her ex-partner stole from the system.

## Chapter Two

---

Great. A big city. Traffic.

*People.*

Jace had always been a small-town guy, but when did he become a country boy?

He stepped out of the Uber and looked around. Immediately, he noted the striking differences between the Montana mountains and the bustling city. Like the weather. When he left Montana, it was damp and overcast, which meant about three thousand bugs swarmed his face.

There didn't seem to be so much as a fly in front of the Artemis office building. And it was warm but lacked the humidity of Montana. That was new, especially given he grew up in the South where the air was as thick as pudding in the summer.

This assignment really better not take too long. He hadn't been joking when he told Ross he'd be on that red-eye flight back to Montana tonight, and hating the city wasn't his only reason for wanting to make this quick.

He had a lot of plans to make if he was going to hit his goal.

A goal he'd managed to keep hidden from his brothers for the past two months. No small feat, when Judd and Jaren were up in his business like one of those swarms of Montana mosquitoes.

He'd been spending a lot of time talking to the workers on the Wynton Ranch where the WEST Protection office was located. They were all hyped for the annual Stone Pass rodeo

coming up in a few weeks. A couple of the guys even planned to compete. Since they were Jace's friends, he couldn't wait to see them crash and burn on the back of a bull or mustang. Just like when his younger brothers raced motocross back in Georgia.

That brought him to his second goal...to buy his own horse.

Judd and Jaren had no idea that he'd been working on his riding, something he'd never done before. But hanging around cowboys in his downtime had rubbed off on him in more ways than tight jeans.

He spent his free time researching horses and auctions. He had money set aside, and there was no way he was missing the upcoming auction in a week's time.

Oh, his family would have a good laugh at his expense, saying he'd gone to the dark side by embracing his new life. But owning a horse didn't mean he was giving up all the things he loved from his old life, like rebuilding motorcycle engines or riding through the mountains with the wind in his face.

A horn blast from the street at his back reminded Jace that he was in San Francisco and he'd better get a move on if he wanted to leave tonight.

The Artemis office was located on the fourth floor of the building he stood before. When he researched the company, he was surprised to find the tech company rented a space in one of the historical buildings. The entire front consisted of glass and metal with ornate balconies from bygone days.

If he were into architecture, he might say it had a little charm.

When he walked up to the entrance, he told the security officer he was expected at Artemis. The man nodded and pointed the way to the elevator.

The entire ride up to the fourth floor, Jace played over the details of the assignment. The woman in charge of the company feared that her former partner removed files from the

system. Just the kind of sleuthing he loved, but he didn't expect it to take him long.

He exited the elevator and approached the glass doors with the Artemis logo. Though small tech companies popped up almost every day, this one was actually on his radar before the assignment from WEST. They were up-and-coming in the world of software.

As soon as he entered, a woman looked up. Her expression morphed from polite smiles to one of appreciation—the kind he saw when he occupied a stool in the Stone Pass bar. She gave him a once-over that took a little longer than normal.

Pretty, blonde and petite. Just the type he'd go for back in Stone Pass. But he wasn't here for a fling, and besides, he didn't mix business with pleasure.

She leaped up and rushed around the desk to greet him, hand out. "You must be from WEST Protection."

He gripped her hand. "Jace Abel."

"Welcome to Artemis. My name's Kimmy, and I'm Miss Burns's personal assistant. If you need anything at all"—she released his hand and twisted a lock of short blonde hair—"come find me. I'll help."

He smiled at her, putting a pink blush in her bronzed cheeks.

She turned. "I have orders to bring you directly to Miss Burns. Follow me."

He purposely kept his gaze from dropping to her backside and swung his head left and right, checking out the office instead of the assistant. The place had modern furnishings and the latest models of computer equipment. He looked up, checking for cameras, and sure enough, saw one in every corner.

At least the owner had her bases covered when it came to security. But who knew what kind of safety measures had been placed on the system. If the ex-partner managed to download files and make off with them, they weren't very good ones.

Kimmy paused at a door and knocked. When a voice within answered, she led the way into the office.

Jace stared at the woman seated behind a big, modern glass table with metal chairs that looked to be out of a decorator magazine. She, however, was a sharp contrast to the office.

She dressed in a red blouse with hearts and little frills on the sleeves and a matching red skirt that hugged her full curves like a second skin. Her hair struck him most, though, because it had a punk edge with a part in the front dyed cherry red and the rest was dark brown.

“Bronte—I mean Miss Burns—this is Jace Abel from WEST Protection.” Kimmy’s announcement brought the woman forward.

If he’d managed to keep his eyes off the assistant’s ass, he couldn’t stop his gaze from dropping over Miss Burns’s shapely calves to her small ankles that ended in black shoes with a strap across her foot.

“Mr. Abel. I’m so glad you made it.” She reached for his hand.

He took it and looked into her eyes. Brown, with very dark lashes framing them. “Call me Jace.”

“And you can call me Bronte. Miss Burns is too formal for this office.” She sent a look over his shoulder at Kimmy. She froze a moment and then gave herself a small shake. “I’m sure you’re eager to get started. But first, maybe you need refreshment. A drink? Snack? We have a breakroom with a lot of options if you’re vegan or...”

She looked him over as if realizing that a man of his size and build ate beef six times a week and chicken wings on Sundays, and if he ever encountered a soybean, he’d flick it away from him.

“I don’t need anything, thank you,” he told her. “Why don’t you show me to your system? I can hook into it with my laptop while you fill me in on everything.”

“Yes, let’s do that. This way.” She strode across the room, her shoes making a flapping noise on her feet.

Oh, no. If Jace had any pet peeves, it was noisy shoes. Flip-flops made him want to crush rocks with his bare hands. The tapping noise of high heels on tile floors haunted his nightmares.

Bronte wasn’t wearing either style of shoe, but they slapped the soles of her feet when she walked and it set his teeth on edge.

She led him across the spacious office to a long table on one wall. A computer monitor and keyboard were set on top, and he homed in on the tower located underneath the desk.

“This was my partner’s workstation. We shared an office.”

He pushed out the ergonomic chair and crouched to study the computer tower.

“Uhhh...” Bronte backed away to give him room.

He glanced over at her and saw her wide eyes fixed on his thighs.

He wasn’t in danger of ripping another pair of tight jeans. Today he had on his trusty Levis, old and faded and his most comfortable pair. He wore a plain black T-shirt, his boots and the Stetson that he’d adapted to wearing much faster than either of his brothers.

Aiming his attention at the setup again, he said, “Just checking the connections in the back.”

“Oh. Absolutely. Feel free to hook into anything you need to.” Her stare hit his. “I know you can be trusted. WEST has such a good reputation.”

“Well, I’m new to the team. Been with them only six months or so. But I have enough experience for what you need from me.”

She nodded, and the long piece of cherry-red hair tumbled over her forehead. She lifted a hand to push it away. “I guess you need to know a little about what you’re looking for.”

He gripped the back of the chair and rolled it in front of the monitor. Then he opened his laptop case and pulled out his device, along with some cords he'd use to directly access the hard drive of the Artemis computer.

She paused.

“Keep talking. I can listen while I work.”

She came to stand a few feet away, watching him as he uncoiled a cable and fed it into a port in the back of the tower, running it to his own laptop.

“I received a notification that some locked files had been accessed.”

“How did you know it was your former partner?” He flipped open his laptop and set his fingers to the keys. “The cameras picked it up?”

“No. I just had those installed, after she came into the office after hours. Building security saw her.”

“Gotcha. And you believe she stole files.”

“Yes.”

“What kinda files? New tech? Something secret?”

She shifted to lean against the workstation next to him, bringing the scent of cherries and vanilla. The notes hit Jace, reminding him of sundaes at the local ice cream joint back home in Georgia and warm summer nights after baseball games his team lost more often than not. But his parents always took him for ice cream anyway.

“We were working on a new program, something bigger and beyond anything we attempted before.” She leaned over him to point at a series of files that popped up on his screen.

He directed his attention away from how she smelled and how that skirt pulled perfectly over her round ass and focused on his screen.

“These are where the files are stored. If you can find anything at all...” She turned her head to look at him, giving him a closer view of her creamy skin.



“I know where to find you.” He tossed a glance over his shoulder at the table where she’d been working when he entered.

“Where are you from? I hear a drawl in your voice.”

“Georgia. Have you always lived in California?”

“No. I’m a transplant from Portland.”

“I see.” He turned back to his laptop.

Straightening, she gave him a nod and without another word, headed back to her own workstation, shoes flapping the entire way.

His momma’s voice popped into his head. *Well, bless her heart*, she’d say to that slapping noise.

Jace settled in with the system, checking over security and firewalls. When he looked at the history, he found it had all been erased so no one could see what was accessed that day.

Bronte’s phone rang. She took the call and paced as she talked. Then she took two more calls.

Her shoes were starting to drive him nuts. He considered stuffing earbuds in and blasting some Keith Urban, but it went against Ross’s rules. He had to be present at all times with a client, *especially* if she was his ward.

Bronte Burns wasn’t in need of a bodyguard, just someone who knew all the back doors of a complex system, but she was still a client.

*Slap, slap, slap.*

Vanilla and cherries hit his senses, and he looked up.

She stood next to him, one arm banded across her tiny middle and the opposite hand cupping her jaw in a thoughtful pose that added more to her sexy schoolteacher look. “Having any luck?”

He tore his gaze away from her. “Enough.”

“Enough,” she repeated flatly. “What does that mean?”

He sat back in the desk chair and tugged the brim of his hat. "I can't see any history, and there isn't even a trace left of what was accessed."

"You can't see anything?" Her eyes widened.

He shook his head. "Your program was built too tight. Which can be good, but not in this case."

She dropped her arms to her sides. "What do we do now? I need to know what Angelica took."

"I can only give my best guess that it had something to do with the encrypted files."

Bronte planted her hands on the workstation and let out a rush of air. "No!" she rasped.

"You knew she wasn't downloading a calendar of scheduled lunch breaks."

She closed her eyes. Those thick, dark lashes fanned over her creamy cheeks. Then she opened them and nodded. "I know. I just hoped we would have a real answer."

For the first time he realized how much time had passed. The sun had sunk low in the sky and the office was filled with shadows.

"I put in a few more security measures in case this happens again, but she wiped the history and added a measure of protection to wipe out any record of when. I don't think there's much more I can do to help you find out that information, Bronte."

Plus he wanted to grab a bite before boarding the next flight back to Montana.

She straightened to her full height, which wasn't more than five and a half feet, about the size of his own momma. And he knew all too well how easily he could tuck someone her size under his arm. His momma squealed often enough whenever he did it.

"Thank you for giving your best. I was afraid of this, but I don't think it was a wasted expense to have you fly out and

check the system. It gives me peace of mind that I did everything I could.”

He nodded. “I’ll just close out here and be on my way.”

“I have some shutting down to do too.” She flip-flopped her way to her desk.

Minutes later, he had his laptop bag zipped up again. Bronte met him in the middle of the room, a purse hooked over her shoulder. A tiny gold frog charm swung from the handle.

“I’ll walk out with you,” she told him.

Together, they left the office. She locked up using a security code she concealed from him. As if he couldn’t hack the code.

On the way out, he noted who was still in the building working late. Nobody paid them any attention. Then they rode down the elevator and she said goodbye to the security guard on the way out the door.

Once they stood on the sidewalk, they faced each other. He tugged on his Stetson. “I don’t usually do this with a client, but I was going to grab something to eat. Would you care to join me?”

Surprise registered in her deep brown eyes. “Oh. Thank you for the offer. I’m going home to feed my—”

Something exploded from their right. Jace didn’t even think—he leaped at her.

As he hurled her to the sidewalk, he broke her fall by cradling her in his arms. His training kicked in and he plastered every inch of his body over hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

What the heck happened? One minute she and Jace were talking on the street like civilized human beings and the next, he threw her on the ground and jumped on top of her.

His heavy weight pinned her. She couldn't even wiggle her pinky finger. The man seemed to cloak every inch of her body from head to foot.

Suddenly she noticed one of her kitten-heel mules had fallen off. Her foot was bare but she couldn't move it either. When she tried, her big toe brushed the denim of Jace's jeans.

Bronte tried to inflate her lungs, but his weight crushed her, making breathing difficult. Though the breath she *did* manage to drag through her nostrils smelled *good*. Woody and green, like he'd just hiked through a national park.

Okay, maybe this wasn't so bad, being pinned to the ground by a good-smelling man. If Kimmy were present, the woman would be waggling her brows to indicate how hot he was, just like she had back in the office when Jace turned his back.

Bronte couldn't just lie here in the middle of the sidewalk, though.

Twisting her head, she cracked an eye to see Jace's head facing toward the street.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Saving you."

"Saving—! What are you talking about? Saving me from what?"

"Didn't you hear that explosion?" His gritty tone matched his scent—manly and a little wild.

But he was insane.

"I heard a car backfire," she said in a calculated way as if speaking to a child.

"Bronte! Is this guy bothering you?"

Jace jerked overtop of her, and she whipped her head up as far as he'd allow to peer at the man who asked the question.

Before she could grunt "*let me up,*" Jace pushed off the pavement. Long fingers wrapped around her waist and he

lifted her. Not giving her a chance to get her bearings, he hauled her against his side.

She stared at him in shock, then remembered the man who asked if Jace was bothering her.

“Anthony. Hi.”

One of her best clients eyed her as if waiting for her to say the word and he’d call the police. She must look like a wreck too, but Jace’s strong grip on her didn’t allow her to do more than lift a hand to smooth the hair out of her eyes.

Anthony waved a hand, questioning how she’d come to be locked to a strange man’s big, muscled body. “Is everything okay? Do I need to call the cops?”

She felt Jace’s body tense.

“Why would you need to call the cops?” His voice had a hard edge.

“I saw you throw her on the ground. Are you trying to mug her?”

Oh god, this was really getting out of hand.

Jace’s entire body seemed to bristle against her side. “We just got a little frisky. Bronte,” he said in clipped syllables, “doesn’t need rescuing from *me*. I’m her fiancé.”

Fi—what? *Did he just say fiancé?*

Shock tore through her. When she saw the expression on Anthony’s face, dismay oozed from her pores. Sweat broke out on her neck.

“I didn’t realize you were engaged, Bronte. Congratulations.” Anthony offered her a smile.

What could she even say? If she shoved off Jace’s heavy arm banded around her waist and told her client that the man was a liar, the situation would only digress into finger-pointing and things she had no explanation for.

Such as who Jace *really* was. She couldn’t exactly clue her client in that Artemis had big trouble when her partner left.

“Thanks.” Jace directed his stare to her, holding her gaze for several long... uncomfortable... heartbeats. “We haven’t officially announced it yet.”

She felt Anthony’s eyes on her and tore hers from Jace’s. Maybe WEST Protection wasn’t as solid as she believed. How well did they vet their employees? One could have slipped through the cracks and they’d sent a psycho to help her.

Anthony arched a brow, silently asking if everything was okay. Then a long finger loomed in front of her face and Jace tapped her on the nose.

“Bronte’s made me the happiest man alive,” he announced.

*Oh. My. God. He did not just boop me on the nose!*

Anthony grinned, and she died a little more inside seeing that he was amused by that childish gesture. “Well, allow me to take you both to dinner. We need to celebrate your engagement.”

*No, no, no. I need to get away from this guy and alert WEST Protection that their agent is insane.*

“That’d be mighty nice o’ you,” Jace drawled in his syrupy Southern accent. “We’d love that, wouldn’t we, sweetness?”

*Sweetness? Oh hell no. We are not doing pet names now!*

Anthony waited for her answer. How did she even respond to this catastrophe? If she told her client that everything Jace said so far was a lie, he’d think Bronte was a liar too, since she could have denied the fiancé claim from the beginning. But since she’d been too stricken with stunned disbelief, her tongue—and her brain—were both paralyzed.

“That would be...really nice?” she squeaked out, a lilt of a question at the end.

“How does Max’s sound? It’s a short walk from here.” Anthony waved toward the end of the block.

Panic swept through her. She couldn’t be seen at Max’s. It was the Artemis lunch hangout. She and her team held

meetings there. She couldn't risk any of her employees spotting her with this big cowboy who wouldn't let go of her for even a second—or possibly overhearing his tall tale about being engaged.

Her quick mind came up with an answer that was *sure* to send the country boy running. "I'm in the mood for sushi." She looked between the guys. "What do you say?"

Anthony perked up. "I'm all in."

She looked to Jace. He didn't appear green at the mention of raw fish. In fact, he was giving her a smile that turned *her* stomach—with a little flip.

"Perfect."

Anthony turned and led the way to the opposite corner. She had no choice but to follow, especially with Jace's broad palm protectively on her lower back, propelling her to the end of the block and across the street to the Japanese restaurant.

The sleek black front of the establishment would surely intimidate Jace. After all, he probably didn't dine in many places where you didn't order a number off a menu board. But he reached for the steel and glass door first and held it open for her to pass through, followed by Anthony.

Fine. The upscale wood and glass interior would definitely drive him out. But when a hostess showed them to a table, she realized that wasn't happening.

*Wait until he sees the menu and realizes he can't order a big old burger.*

With a private smile, she moved to slide into a chair, but he was already there, holding it for her.

Now he was a gentleman too? He must be putting on an act for Anthony, but what was the point? She needed to end this ruse.

The server appeared and took their drink order, then handed them menus with luxe black covers made out of linen.

As Jace opened his and glanced over the small font, she ducked her head, waiting for him to run for the door. But he

simply closed his menu and set it aside with a smile.

“You already know what you want? That was fast,” Anthony commented, still looking over his menu.

“I know what I like.” Jace gazed into her eyes when he said this.

Her insides shimmied but her brain was sending out flashing alerts complete with screeching alarms. How was she ever getting away without appearing to be a raving lunatic in front of a client who spent *a lot* of money with her company?

She set aside her own menu just as the server returned. Anticipation rolled through her. She couldn't wait for Jace to admit this place was way out of his league.

His eyes crinkled when he smiled down at her. “Ladies first.”

“Thank you,” she breezed out, and placed her order.

The server turned his attention to Jace. “And you?”

“I'll have the tai sashimi.”

She almost choked on her tongue but managed to compose herself until Anthony ordered. After the server left, Anthony lifted his glass.

Oh no. Not a toast. She couldn't pretend any—

Jace lifted his as well, which left her no choice but to follow suit.

“To great relationships,” Anthony toasted.

She tried not to look like she was about to puke when she met Anthony's stare and repeated the phrase that definitely included their business relationship. Her affiliation with WEST Protection? Not so much.

They all sipped.

Anthony was a clean-cut guy. His suit jacket and button-down shirt fit with the restaurant's vibe. But Jace looked like a fish out of water, right down to his dark beard that was a little



too long for her liking. Actually, she disliked any facial hair on men.

“So how did you two meet?” Anthony asked.

She started to speak, but Jace cut her off.

“Funny enough, in a Japanese restaurant.”

Anthony’s smile spread. “Is that so? Well, it’s good luck that we came here then.”

She had to get the conversation off their fake relationship. And off herself at all.

“I hear that Beyonce visits this restaurant every time she’s in town.”

“Is that so? I hadn’t heard,” Anthony said.

Jace remained silent. Bronte couldn’t believe it—she’d finally shut him up with pop culture.

They chatted a little more about celebrities and their favorite hangouts in the city. When their food arrived, she held her breath as the server placed a platter in front of Jace.

He took one look at it and pushed it away.

“Is there a problem, sir?”

“That isn’t tai.”

The server grew flustered. “Of course it’s tai. Perhaps you should have a taste.”

Jace reached for the fish and picked it up with his hand, which didn’t go against Japanese custom but made him look more out of touch with his surroundings. She watched his lips close around the bite of fish. He chewed and then set the food back on the platter.

“That’s not tai. It’s whitefish, a cheap substitute.” He sat back in his seat and eyed the server until he took the platter.

“I’ll return this to the kitchen.”

“I’d like to speak to the chef.” Jace’s declaration made her eyes go round.

This disaster was like a blimp on fire, and it was about to hit the ground in a ball of flames. She couldn't have her client thinking she chose a pushy, bossy know-it-all like Jace Abel—especially when she didn't choose him at *all*.

She and Anthony's eyes met. She gave an awkward little shrug and pushed her bangs out of the way.

In seconds, a small man in a chef's uniform approached the table.

"Is there a problem?" he asked in broken English.

"Yes. You're charging far too much for the tai sashimi if you're using cheap whitefish."

He stared blankly at Jace.

Then, to her shock, Jace continued the conversation in Japanese. The chef seemed just as surprised. Anthony grinned, but Bronte wanted to crawl under the table. They conversed for several minutes, then the chef bowed to Jace and walked away.

Jace picked up his drink and sipped. "I'm giving him another chance to bring me the dish I asked for."

Bronte almost plastered her hands to her face but resisted. "You...never told me you speak Japanese."

"Still some mystery in our relationship." He shot Anthony one of those looks men exchanged when they were right about something.

She picked up her chopsticks, not about to eat with her hands like him. "Where did you learn to speak the language?"

"I spent some months in Japan. My little brother was stationed there during his time in the Marines. I visited and spent some time sightseeing."

Anthony glanced between them. "I can't believe you two met in a Japanese restaurant but it never came up that your fiancé can speak Japanese. You know, I feel stupid. I never caught your name."

Jace stuck a hand across the table. “Name’s Abel. And the restaurant where we met was nothing like this.”

Oh god, what was he going to say next? She couldn’t put the bite of sushi in her mouth.

“It was one of those little dives in the airport. We were both traveling. I had a long layover.” He looked deep into Bronte’s eyes again. “It was insta-love. I finally bit the bullet to end the long-distance relationship and came to San Francisco to be with Bronte.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“You two have a great story,” Anthony said.

She saw Jace’s index finger drifting toward her nose and snapped her hand around it before he could tap her nose again. She wrestled his hand under the table and bent his finger backward, satisfied when she felt him jerk.

“We have a very interesting story. Isn’t that right, *Abel*?”

## Chapter Three

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Okay, so Jace might have taken things with Bronte too far. But when that guy popped up on the street right after that explosion—or what he'd believed to be an explosion—his gut instinct was to shield Bronte from any danger.

And Anthony definitely seemed to be about to start trouble by calling the cops and reporting a mugging. The story about being engaged just rolled off Jace's tongue. He always was great at coming up with excuses on the fly, but this one might win the Abel Family Award, and that was saying a lot when he and his four brothers told enough tall tales over the years to build a beanstalk up to the sky.

He flexed the finger that Bronte tried to snap. He couldn't blame her for wanting to do him bodily harm, and he was sure to get a reprimand from Ross after she called and reported what he'd done.

There was also the problem Bronte would be left with, explaining to her client that they'd broken off the engagement.

None of this stifled Jace's appetite, though, and he had to admit now that the chef had sent out the right type of fish, the tai sashimi was some of the best he ever had. He conveyed this to the server with his compliments to the chef.

After the meal, the three of them left the restaurant. He shouldered his laptop case that doubled as his go-bag. He never traveled without a change of clothes and a toothbrush inside it. A person never knew when a flight would be cancelled and he'd be stranded in a strange city.

Anthony and Bronte were saying their goodbyes. She promised him she'd be in touch by email later in the week about some support he needed for the software he purchased from Artemis.

“Nice meeting you, Abel.” Anthony extended a hand. “Thank you for the meal too. I feel bad that you paid for dinner after I invited you.”

“My pleasure. We'll have to do it again sometime.”

A bony elbow jammed into Jace's ribs. When he looked down at Bronte, she was smiling.

Anthony took his leave. As soon as he was lost in the crowd on the sidewalk, Bronte whipped her purse off her shoulder and smacked Jace in the chest with it.

“What. Did. You. Do. That. For?” She punctuated every word with another hit.

“Oww! That little frog charm hurts. I know I deserve it, but stop.”

Her eyes flared wide with outrage. “Stop? You could have stopped any time between saying you're my fiancé and practically inviting my client out for another meal with us! Argh!”

She pivoted and stormed off a few steps. He caught up to her. “I don't suppose you can give me a ride to the airport?”

She whirled, daggers in her eyes. “Give you a ride? We're supposedly about to get married! Why don't you buy me a car?”

He stared at her. “You don't have one?”

“It's the city. Parking costs a fortune.”

“How do you get around? Trolley?”

She rolled her eyes. “Why does every tourist who comes to San Francisco think we all hop on a trolley? I have a driver.”

He eyed her. “Then can he give me a ride?”

“Oh my god. You know what? Fine. Anything to get you out of my hair.” She clapped her phone to her ear and spoke to someone for a minute. Then she stowed her phone back inside her handbag. When she zipped it, the little frog charm swayed.

“He’s on his way. We’ll drop you off at the airport and then he can take me home.”

In a short time, Jace had adopted the habit of thumbing the brim of his Stetson as a show of agreement, respect or gratitude. In this case, all three.

Without making eye contact again, she stared out at the cars going by on the street. Having grown up with a feisty momma, he knew when to back off. Obviously, he’d pushed Bronte to her limits.

He put a couple feet of space between them and thought about why *that* lie of all lies had tumbled out of him. All he could claim was that his gut told him to get the dude to back off. And Bronte went along with the ruse, probably to keep her company’s trouble under wraps and to avoid explaining why an agent from WEST Protection was with her.

Any clue as to him being there could point to company-wide security problems—very bad when the software she was known for supplying to other companies was built on privacy and trust.

He threw her a look from the corner of his eye. Even after being thrown onto the ground and pinned down by his body, then dragged through a dinner where she practically trembled with anger, she still looked stunning.

The red blouse and skirt silhouetted her curves, and that streak of red in the front of her dark hair gave her an alternative, quirky edge.

She really wasn’t his type, but she was easy on the eyes. Each time he glanced her way, he spotted another reason to look closer. For instance, her lips. They were tiny, but the top bowed in a heart shape and her bottom lip was much plumper. She also wore lip gloss with a tint that he could make an educated guess tasted like cherry.

Bronte wasn't the nerdy type he preferred. But she didn't look like a woman who ran a trendy software company either.

"Bronte."

She threw up a hand. "I don't want to talk right now. Oh, here's the car."

A silver sedan pulled up to the curb. She reached for the door handle, but Jace beat her to it. When she slid inside, she maintained a stiff, upright position.

"Hello. Where's Troy?" she asked the driver.

The driver threw her a look in the rearview mirror. "Out sick. I'm filling in."

She settled against the back of the seat. "We need to make a stop at the airport before you take me home, please."

"Sure thing."

A few minutes passed with them making slow progress through traffic. Jace noted how she bunched her hands together in her lap. A few times, she bounced her knee.

He looked at her harder. Was she still miffed about the fake fiancé thing or was he picking up another reason for her nervous body language?

The crawling feeling low in his gut wasn't indigestion from the good meal.

He caught her eyes and widened his own in question.

She widened hers more, until the deep brown irises were ringed by white.

Ducking his head, he opened his mouth to ask what her problem was, but she made a cutting motion with her hand.

Keeping a close watch on the driver, she extracted her phone from her purse and pulled up a text screen.

He glanced away to give her privacy, but that sharp elbow struck him in the ribs again.

He looked back and saw her holding out the screen for him to read.

*Something's wrong. This isn't my driver, and it isn't the way to the airport.*

Adrenaline waterfalled into Jace's system. He placed a hand over hers and leaned forward to speak to the driver. "You didn't tell us your name."

"Denny."

"This seems like an odd route to reach the airport, Denny."

The driver didn't give any outward response that he heard Jace.

He squeezed Bronte's hand and released it so he could ease a hand around his back. When his fingers brushed the warm metal of his weapon lying against his spine, some of the tension flowed out of him.

He pitched his voice louder. "Maybe you didn't hear me, Denny. I asked you why we're taking this route to the airport."

Because he was watching the driver so closely, he noticed the eyelid twitch. His hands clamping on the wheel was another dead giveaway that something was not as it seemed.

"Pull over, Denny. We're getting out."

The driver stomped on the gas and weaved around a car.

Bronte let out a cry as Jace lunged over the seat. He hooked his forearm around the driver's throat and made a grab for the wheel. Denny dug his fingers into his arm and ripped it away.

"Jace! What are you doing?" Bronte screamed.

Trying not to kill them in a car crash. Denny held down the gas pedal as if he had nothing to left to lose. Jace looked up to see the vehicle speeding toward the back of a delivery truck.



He balled his fist and punched the man in the face. The blow had enough strength behind it to knock Denny out, and he slumped.

“Jace!”

He dove over the seat and thrust the limp man’s leg off the gas. Practically sitting on his lap, he attempted to get control of the car, but there wasn’t enough time.

Brake lights rushed at him through the windshield.

“Hold on!” he barked at Bronte as the car hit the back of the truck. The airbag shoved Jace back, which shoved Denny to the side.

Then he felt a hard object poking him in the ribs.

It wasn’t Bronte’s bony elbow either. Denny was conscious again.

In a defensive move, he knocked the gun Denny aimed at him to the side. It fired and the windshield shattered.

With the airbag, he didn’t have the space to wrestle over a weapon, and definitely not with a ward in the backseat.

Yes, she was his ward now, like it or not. Fiancée was optional.

Denny whipped the weapon around and fired again. This time the bullet sliced through the airbag and slammed into the dashboard. When the airbag deflated, it gave Jace more than enough space to fight.

With a roar, he threw himself into tearing that gun away from the fake driver. Bronte screamed at the top of her lungs, each peal more piercing. Jace got in a few good punches and battled for the gun.

It fired again and blood bloomed on Denny’s chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

This day could *not* get any worse, and it was all Jace Abel’s fault. First the man failed to find out what files her ex-partner

took...even though that might not be his fault as much as system security.

But he had *no* excuse for the whole fiancé thing *or* the scene he made at dinner.

Now there was a dead man being rolled away from the vehicle on a stretcher.

With a shaking hand, she pushed the hair off her face and watched the scene that resembled something on a movie set. The street was blocked off by rescue vehicles, with traffic stopped in both directions since the crumpled remains of the car were shoved underneath the back of the delivery truck like an oversized silver accordion.

Police crawled all over the place. Lastly, a firetruck and a few additional rescue units with flashing lights were the cherry on top of this shit-cake she called a Monday.

She swung her glare toward the man wearing the white cowboy hat, then she spotted the sheet draped over the dead driver and quickly jerked her stare away.

Someone had tossed a blanket around her shoulders. Despite it being relatively warm, she huddled inside it, glad of the comforting weight. The sun was sinking out of sight and soon it would be full dark.

At a slamming noise, she searched out Jace again. The dead man was gone, stowed inside the coroner's van on the way to the morgue. Jace's broad shoulders faced her, as wide and impenetrable as a brick wall, but she saw he was speaking with two cops. One took notes on a tablet.

She sucked in a breath. Until now, she was in too much shock to realize that she was going to spend the rest of her Monday in a prison cell. That was *definitely* Jace's fault. True, he hadn't meant to shoot the driver, but everyone knew wrestling over a loaded gun usually ended in catastrophe.

She lifted the corner of the blanket and scrubbed it over her face, not knowing whether to cry or vomit up her sushi. Her head ached from the horn blasts of angry drivers who couldn't see the situation on the road up ahead of them, and

somehow the clamor got mixed in with the memory of Jace speaking perfect Japanese back in the restaurant.

How the *hell* did she end up here?

She was trying to convince herself this was all a bad dream when Jace swung around and looked straight at her. One of the cops took a step in her direction.

Bronte braced herself for the officer to come over and question her. Then Jace said something to him, and the officer stopped. They resumed their discussion.

Another minute later, the cops walked away and Jace started toward her.

She studied his face. His cheek looked a little swollen, but that was a small injury compared to what could have happened to him. She'd seen that car—and the driver.

As Jace neared her, she noted the concern in his eyes.

She took a step forward on legs that were both wobbly and stiff at the same time. “Do I need to go to the police station and give a statement?” she asked.

He came to a stop in front of her. “No. I took care of it.”

“You took care of it,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

She shook her head. “What about the driver? He was shot and killed. They must need a statement.”

“I told you I handled it. Already gave the report.”

Why was he speaking in terse sentences? What happened to the man who'd charmed his way into being her fiancé?

He placed a hand on her arm. She met his gaze. A thousand questions rattled through her mind, but the biggest thing she noticed about this whole situation was how Jace took charge. Of everything.

“Come with me. We need to stay out of the way so the tow truck can get through. I'm going to make a call to my boss.”

He led her to a spot away from the onlookers but kept her close—close enough to tackle at the first sound of a car backfiring. Now that her driver was dead, Jace jumping on her didn't seem so odd.

He pulled out a phone and dialed.

*Good idea.* Maybe she should call someone too.

Rummaging in her purse for a minute, she came out with her device. She didn't even get it to her ear before it was slapped out of her hand.

Her brand-new phone hit the sidewalk and skidded into the street—right under the tire of a rescue unit.

She let out a cry. “Why did you do that?”

“Trust me. You can't use that phone.”

She gaped at him, mouth opening and closing like a fish on dry land. She hardly registered the few low, gritty monosyllables Jace uttered at whoever was on the other end of his phone line.

She looked on through a haze of fog, distantly realizing she was in shock.

She didn't like the way he was glancing around as if looking for another armed man masquerading as her driver. He gripped her by the elbow.

“Where are we going?” she asked as he pushed her along the sidewalk like a vacuum cleaner.

“We're picking up a car.”

“Seriously? Where are we getting a car now?”

“Trust me.”

“You keep saying that, but I don't trust you, Jace! My driver is dead!”

“He wasn't your driver anyway. Did you really get attached?”

She sputtered, trying to come up with a response to his ridiculous question. “I'm not attached to that guy. He tried to

kill us! But a man still died.”

He led her across a busy street to a corner. Then he pushed her under the canopy of an awning, positioning his body in front of hers like a shield.

She stared at his bulky shoulders in front of her face. It cut down in a chiseled *V* shape that ended at the waist of his jeans. She followed the thick line down to his weapon tucked along his spine.

A shiver rolled through her. Maybe it *was* a little hot to have a take-charge man in this situation. He’d already attacked one person to protect her. She shuddered to think of what that driver intended for them.

She attempted to wiggle past him from behind, but he threw out an arm to trap her between him and the building.

“Where are we getting a car again?”

“My team’s sending one.”

“Here?”

“Yup.”

She didn’t ask how such a thing could take place. His team was at the top of their game. Naturally they had contacts everywhere.

Next thing she knew, a small car pulled up to the curb in front of them.

“An electric car? You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Jace muttered.

The driver got out and circled the vehicle. Jace grabbed Bronte’s arm and dragged her toward the passenger door. He practically stuffed her inside and jumped behind the wheel.

He twisted to check the lane before pulling out into traffic. “Give me your home address.”

She was still clutching the blanket around herself. “Why do you need that?”

“You can tell me or I can get it from my team.” His jaw flexed, the tendons tightening in a sexy, I’m-going-to-rip-someone’s-head-off manner.

She was losing her mind. Only Kimmy would think things like that.

“You’re not even going the right direction,” she argued.

“Then tell me where to go and I’ll put it into my phone.”

If he drove much farther, he’d be mired in traffic and she’d be stuck with him even longer. She rattled off the address. He brought his phone up and told the virtual assistant to give him a route.

Bronte couldn’t focus on the streets or the robotic voice giving directions. Her brain felt like it was pulsing with fire. All she wanted were a couple painkillers and her bed.

When Jace pulled up in front of her condo, she blinked. Then she slowly reached for the handle.

“Uh...thanks for the lift?”

He stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “You don’t think I’m going to let you just go in alone, do you?”

She pushed out a weary sigh. “Of course you’re coming in with me.”

All the way to the front door, he kept maneuvering in front of her or behind her. At one point, her neighbor walked out of the building and Jace practically shoved her against a wall. As if her retired neighbor was any threat to anything but the deep-dish pizza he had delivered every Friday night as a treat.

She threw her neighbor an apologetic smile at Jace’s behavior and then hurried to enter her passcode into the door lock.

After they were inside, Jace swung left and right, his hand inches from his spine where that deadly weapon rested. The blanket she carried flapped around her calves all the way to her condo door.

She paused with her hand hovering over the numerical lock pad. “I have to warn you . . . .”

He cocked a brow. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a husband or boyfriend just waiting to beat me up.”

“No. It’s worse.” She stabbed the code and opened the door. “It’s my cat.”

## Chapter Four

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Jace had heard of attack dogs, but he'd never encountered an attack cat before.

When the white-and-gray ball of fluff lunged at his face, his reflexes kicked in and he caught it midair.

Thankfully before it could claw his eyes out.

Bronte let out a gasp. "Don't hurt him!"

"I'm not hurting him. The thing launched itself at me." He held the furry creature in front of his face and met a pair of wide green eyes. Its face was smashed flat and the long white-and-gray fur was already coming off on his shirt.

Bronte threw off the blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders and reached for the cat. "Give him to me. He hates strangers."

He twisted out of her reach. "Is that why he's purring?"

Outrage showed plain in her eyes. "Hemingway *never* purrs for strangers."

"Listen for yourself." He held out the vibrating cat as Bronte inched closer, head bent toward her pet.

Suddenly, she wrenched the animal out of his hand and twisted out of *his* reach, cradling the fluffball against her chest. "He's just caught off guard. I don't have many visitors."

"Sure, that's it." Now that he wasn't in danger of losing an eye, he focused on securing the door and lowering his laptop bag to the floor.



Bronte spoke to the cat in a soft crooning voice and stroked his back. The puffy tail waved like a flag in the air.

“How did you know he was going to leap at me?” Jace asked, looking around for other entrances he needed to lock or windows someone could climb through. A hotel couldn’t be locked down as easily as an apartment or house, which was why he’d insisted they come here.

She waved at a tall table beside the door. “He likes to sit there and jump into my arms as soon as I walk through the door.”

“Oh, so he wasn’t going for my jugular.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you do *anything* without drama?”

He smirked. “Growing up with four brothers, I had to get some of the attention somehow.”

She groaned.

She lowered the cat to the floor, and he shot around a corner. When Jace started moving around her place, checking window locks, Bronte tagged along behind.

“Everything’s secure here. You can leave now,” she announced.

He swept his gaze over some photos in matching gold frames lined up on a side table. He picked up one of an older couple. The woman had a mop of short curly brown hair and wore a paint-streaked smock, while the man at her side grinned through a trim beard.

Jace stroked his own beard in thought. “Your parents?”

“Ohhh, *what* are you doing? Why are you touching my things?” She took the frame out of his hand and set it back on the table. Then she faced him, hand on one hip that jutted outward. He’d seen that look plenty of times on his momma too—enough to know that Bronte was about to give him a piece of her mind and he had to get his point made fast.

“Look, I’m not leaving. And I need to know more about you if I’m going to be guarding you.”

Her jaw dropped. “Guarding me? From what?”

He shook his head, amused by the dismay crossing her features. He had a hard time looking away. “Bronte, someone tried to hurt you.”

She scrubbed a fingertip between her brows. “I don’t know about all that. I think the driver might have been in some trouble and trying to get away.”

“By kidnapping us as passengers?” His tone oozed with incredulity.

“Exactly. He was making a statement.”

He started to shake his head when she burst out, “You can go to your hotel now. I’ll talk to you in the morning.” Dismissing him, she headed for the kitchen.

Jace stepped in front of her, blocking her path and forcing her to tip her head back in order to meet his stare. “There won’t be a hotel, Bronte. I’m staying *right here* where I can protect you.”

She shook her head. “It’s not okay for you to stay here with me. I never have men stay the night.”

He couldn’t help the grin spreading over his face. “Remember sweetness...we’re engaged.”

With a pointed glare, she sidestepped him. “Yeah, about that.”

“The engagement idea is genius really, and I didn’t even know it when it popped out of my mouth.”

She hurried across the small kitchen and went on tiptoe to reach a high shelf. When her fingertips only grazed the basket, he reached over her head and plucked it from the shelf, placing it into her hands.

She stared at it as if he’d performed a magic act. “Thanks,” she said absently and started rummaging around the contents. She pulled out a bottle and shook two pills into her palm.

He watched her, taking in her reaction to him and to the situation. He was trained extensively to recognize signs of distress in a ward. It didn't take a degree in psychology to see that Bronte hadn't fully processed what happened to her back in that car or just how close she'd come to losing her life.

And she definitely hadn't begun to consider who was targeting her or why.

She walked to the refrigerator and held a glass under a water dispenser set in the door. As she swallowed the pills, she eyed him. "Tell me again why it was genius that you told my client we're engaged?"

"If your head hurts, you should lie down. I'm going to check out the rest of your condo." He took off to search the place, his first priority making sure the condo was an impenetrable fortress.

When he circled back to the living room, he found Bronte seated on a pink leather sofa with the cat in her lap. Her hand moved from his head, over his back and to his tail, which she let slide through her palm before doing it all over again.

Her gaze locked on Jace, and guilt flooded through his system. The burn of worry in her eyes and the pucker between her brows showed him just how frightened she was.

He crossed the hardwood floor and stepped onto a plush area rug marking out the seating area. Sinking into a low-slung chair the color of creamy milk, he leaned toward Bronte, elbows on knees.

"We need to talk about what happened."

She opened her mouth and snapped it shut again.

He waited, one brow arched. When she didn't speak, he took the lead. "Someone replaced your driver, and the guy attempted to hurt you, Bronte."

She shook her head. "He couldn't have been targeting me."

Denial. He'd heard of wards going into denial before but hadn't personally encountered it.

“He knew he was coming to pick you up.”

“Maybe he only intended to rob us.”

He tightened his lips. “I don’t think so.”

“But who...?” Big deep brown eyes landed on his. “Why?”

“That’s what I aim to find out. The condo will need a few tweaks to make it secure enough for my liking, but I want you to know that I’m here to protect you.”

She wagged her head as if in disbelief.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked. “Get you more water or feed your cat?”

Why did the last bit sound so damn dirty coming from his lips? He hadn’t meant for it to sound like a euphemism in his Southern drawl. His brother Jaren would be laughing his ass off if he’d heard Jace say such a thing to a ward.

Her voice was soft. “No. Hemingway has a full food dish in the kitchen at all times.”

“Then I’ll just let you go about your evening while I make some calls. Okay?” He studied her closely. She didn’t appear upset on the surface, but he didn’t know her very well. Some people were good at masking their emotions, but up until now, Bronte seemed to have no trouble letting him know how irritated she was with him. Now she was a bit too quiet.

She scooted to the edge of the sofa and the cat leaped off her lap. “My head still aches, so I’m going to lie down for a while.”

He nodded. “Sleep if you can. I’ll take the guest room.”

She blinked at him.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Bronte. I have high clearances.” He’d been sent to protect a lot of people more important than the CEO of a smaller tech company, from celebrities to government officials.

He’d only failed once.

He didn't tell her that. The part of his past still stung because it meant he and his brothers lost their security company. He was only working now because WEST Protection had given him a second chance. One he wouldn't waste.

She stood up, and he did too.

"After you've rested, we can talk more about what happens next," he told her.

She gave him a nod and drifted off toward the hallway where the bedrooms were located. He watched her enter one and close the door.

Whipping his phone out, he called in to the office. One of the guys answered, but Jace wasn't clear about which Wynton brother it was.

"This Boone?" he asked.

"Noah."

"Hey, Noah. It's Jace. Calling with particulars on my case."

"I'm ready. Fill me in and I'll pass on the information so we can do what we can to support you."

He spent several minutes giving Noah details on the events of the day, beginning with the work he'd done on the Artemis system and ending with the dead man being carted away.

"Goddamn. He died right in front of your ward? That's rough," Noah said.

Jace nudged the brim of his hat up and massaged his forehead. Bronte's headache must be contagious.

"How's she holding up?" Noah's question threw him.

It took Jace a few heartbeats to respond. "She isn't totally present in the situation yet."

"Normal behavior at this stage of the game."

"Yeah."

“Keep watch over her. Be on the lookout for any signs of distress and call us if you need counsel.”

“Will do. Thanks, Noah.” He aimed his stare upward at the ceiling. Not a security camera in sight. “I’ll be in touch.”

As soon as he ended the call, Jace jumped on a website and placed an order for a security system that came complete with cameras for every room and one he could install on the front door to look into the hall outside her condo. There were already cameras on the front of the building he noted on the way in, which he could hack and keep an eye on people coming and going.

Not a peep came from Bronte’s room, and he took it as a good sign that she felt safe enough with him to sleep.

After leaving Montana at dawn, his energy was flagging, and that guest bed called to him. But he had a long night ahead.

Something brushed his ankle, and he looked down to find the cat hooked around his leg. He was purring. *Well, at least her cat trusts me.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte had always been a good sleeper. Her parents claimed she slept through the night and never made a peep from the age of six weeks old. She always woke refreshed and ready to attack her busy to-do list that day.

In this case, sleeping well might be a bad thing.

As soon as she pried her eyes open, all the memories flooded back. The WEST Protection guy, the whirlwind sushi dinner and how badly that had backfired...right up until the end when Jace told her he was staying in her guest room.

Unable to handle another disruption, she’d crawled into bed and was out cold the minute her head hit the sustainable bamboo and featherdown pillow.

She picked up her head and strained to hear any bumping or thumping coming from the other rooms of her condo. When beautiful silence met her ears, she breathed a sigh of relief.

At least he wasn't prowling outside her bedroom door waiting to rush in and rescue her from some unseen threat. He didn't snore either.

A glance at her clock showed her she wasn't going to make it to the office on time. She'd dash off a text to Kimmy letting her know she'd be late...except she didn't have a phone.

Another problem she needed a solution for ASAP.

Quickly, she hopped out of bed and slipped on her old threadbare robe. The vivid jade green patterned silk was getting frayed and ragged at the sleeves and hem. She knew she should throw it away but it was comfortable and cool during the hot San Francisco nights and she practically lived in the thing on Sundays when she allowed herself more downtime.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway, the scent of coffee overtook her senses. Following her nose to the kitchen, she let out a happy sigh. Thank god the WEST team sent a man who knew how to make a pot of coffee—and then made himself scarce.

Since she didn't hear anything coming from the guest room, and Jace was nowhere to be seen, she could only guess that he'd made coffee before he left for home. He had a few brain cells in that hunky head of his—enough to realize she was under no threat and yesterday's events had all been his fault.

She grabbed her favorite mug, one with a literary saying on it, and poured herself some coffee. Hemingway meowed at her feet, and she smiled down at him. "Did you have a good night's rest, my beautiful boy?"

He meowed again and padded over to his food dish. While he nibbled, she drifted to the tall window and looked out while sipping her coffee.

Just as she raised the coffee to her lips again, the soft thump of the front door closing had her whipping around and

the hair on her nape standing up. A clatter followed. Someone was in her condo.

*Jace didn't leave after all.*

She was standing here in her ratty bathrobe, with only a bra and panties on underneath.

She set down her mug and yanked the ends of the belt tighter so nothing popped out or slid open. At that moment, Jace wandered by the kitchen doorway carrying a ladder.

Her eyes bulged.

A toolbelt filled with tools hung low on his hips and he wore a tight black shirt like guys wore at the gym.

His torso rippled with muscles.

Her mouth hung open as she watched him vanish from sight.

She rushed out of the kitchen and spotted Jace setting up the ladder in the corner of the living room. He paused, gripping the ladder, giving off sexy-guy-in-toolbelt vibes.

Oh damn, what else did she need repaired? Her brain raced through her condo to find something—a squeaky closet door, a dripping faucet, *anything* that he could fix.

He offered her a smile which stole the last firing cell from her brain. She gaped at him.

He pointed at a stack of boxes on the floor. “I ordered some cameras and they arrived overnight, so I got to work immediately. I just needed a ladder to install a few on the ceiling but I had to wait for the maintenance guy in the building to wake up so I could get a ladder and tools off him.”

She blinked.

“Don't worry,” he rushed to say. “You were locked in safely while I stepped out. Plus, I had eyes on your bedroom door through the security app.”

She sputtered. “You have eyes on my bedroom? Why would I need such a thing?”



He abandoned the ladder and stepped toward her. Waving a hand at the sofa, he said, “Have a seat. It’s time we have a discussion.”

Slowly, she turned toward the sofa. Was it her imagination or did she feel his hot gaze boring into her back? Well, he certainly wasn’t looking at her the same way she’d been looking at him a minute ago. Not in her ratty bathrobe with her hair a mess. She hadn’t even brushed her teeth and was *not* adequately caffeinated for this conversation.

He sat in the adjacent chair and met her stare. “How are you feeling this morning?”

She straightened at his question. She wasn’t expecting to start there. “I’m fine. Headache’s gone. I need to get to the office soon. I’m going to be late, but I don’t have any way to call. I guess I’ll have to shoot Kimmy an email.”

“You’re going to be *very* late, Bronte. Now listen to me. What happened yesterday with the driver—that sort of stuff doesn’t happen unless it’s planned. And it was.”

“What does that mean?” She wet her dry lips by sliding her tongue across the bottom one. Jace tracked the action.

“Your usual driver was found unconscious in the garage where the car is housed.”

“Oh my god! Is he all right?”

He nodded. “The driver who died...they still don’t know his identity, but his prints are being run through the police database. So until we know whether this was a direct shot aimed at you or coincidence, I’m staying right here to protect you. Starting with this.”

He pushed out of his seat and landed beside her on the sofa. Seeing his firm, muscled thighs clad in black denim against her baby pink faux leather sofa was totally out of place.

And manly as hell.

He held a phone in his palm. She directed her attention to the screen.

“This is the app that runs your security system.” A callused thumb with a neat, trim nail brushed across the screen. “These are your settings.”

She rolled her eyes. “What do you think I am? I’m a millennial. I know how to operate technology.”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Dang. His thigh was almost touching hers. Why hadn’t she realized how close he was sitting? She nervously smoothed the robe over her leg.

Jace opened a setting. “Humor me in setting this up. First, your name.”

“Bronte Burns. No diaeresis on the *E*.”

“Dia-what now?”

She swallowed a complaint. “The mark placed over a vowel to make it into a separate syllable. Like naïve. Or Brontë. Mine doesn’t have the symbol.”

“Okay, is there a reason for that?” He thumbed in the letters of her name.

“My parents are very eccentric. They love all the arts, from music to art and literature. My mother’s favorite poet is Emily Brontë, but they didn’t want to make it harder on me by saddling me with an even more pretentious name. So they left off the diaeresis.”

“Okay...” he drawled. “Bronte with no dot thingies.”

“How very educated of you. I’m glad I wasted my breath explaining.”

She started to expel a noisy sigh of exasperation but stopped.

Why did he smell so good? Shouldn’t he be all sweaty and gross after installing an entire security system in her condo while she slept like the dead?

Awareness washed over her, caused by his close proximity coupled with how rugged he looked in that toolbelt and how he still smelled like the woods.

She had to get a grip. She had real problems in her world, such as the not-so-small issue of her former partner committing corporate espionage and the fact that she'd witnessed a man's death the previous evening while trying to get Jace to the airport so he could *leave*.

Suddenly, Jace stiffened next to her. Then he bolted off the sofa, which caused Hemingway, who'd been traitorously cozying up to his boot, to catapult across the room.

*No pun intended.*

Jace had leaped up just as a knock sounded on the door. "It's your assistant. Answer it but don't tell her what happened last night."

With her eyes wide, Bronte's mind shot ahead to what was about to go down. Such as her assistant finding her wearing nothing but a robe and Jace looking like a man-snack.

Bronte shoved her hair off her face—she really needed a haircut—and hurried to answer the door.

She stopped to stare at the place where formerly only one lock had been. Now there were three.

Spinning on Jace, she hissed, "When did you do all this?"

"Told you. The boxes arrived in the middle of the night, and I got right to work installing everything."

She untwisted the first two locks and slid a third lock to the side before opening the door.

Kimmy stood there, eyes melting with relief. "Thank god you're okay! I couldn't get you on your phone."

"Yeah, about that. I need a new one. Same settings, please." She stepped aside to allow Kimmy into her space.

The woman gave her a once-over, taking in her shabby robe with the frayed hem. Then she froze, eyes huge as she took in Bronte's guest.

"Uh...hi," she squeaked out to Jace.

Bronte did not need this.

“Jace is installing a security system in my condo. I thought I’d put him to work on it since he was already in the city,” she rushed to say.

Jace gave Kimmy a nod, which had the woman smoothing a hand over her shiny blonde hair that hung in waves to her shoulders.

A beat of silence went on far too long.

“Did you need something important? What brought you to my condo?” Bronte asked.

“I was worried. You were late and you’re never late. When you weren’t answering your phone, I thought I’d better come over and make sure you’re okay.” She sent an appreciative look at Jace. “Things look *very* okay.”

Okay, this was getting out of hand.

“Well!” She gestured to the door for Kimmy to leave. “Thanks for checking on me. Please have my phone ready for me when I come into the office in an hour or two.”

Kimmy never removed her doe-eyed stare from Jace as she nodded. “Okay.”

She had to get her assistant out of here. With Jace bringing all the bad luck down on Bronte, who knew what might happen next.

“Is that all?” she prompted Kimmy.

The woman twitched as if startled. “Oh. Yes. But since I’m here, could I also borrow that book you told me about?”

Bronte held back a groan that shook her internal organs. Why did she feel like Kimmy was stalling even more?

“Sure. It’s on the bookshelf under the number 158.”

Jace turned to Bronte, brow hiked up high. “You have your personal library catalogued in Dewey?”

*He* knew the Dewey Decimal System of cataloguing a library? She thought only geeks born from literary parents and named after famous poets knew stuff like that.

Bronte ignored the question, and Kimmy was almost panting.

“Isn’t 158 for self-help books?” Jace pressed her.

Kimmy walked up to him, a big smile on her face. “Yes, it is. Bronte told me about a book for healing self-worth. You know, because we’re both workaholics whose worth hinges on our productivity.”

*Oh god.* What was Kimmy yammering about? Jace was going to think her assistant was insane. And that Bronte was insane. Maybe they both were insane. But guys didn’t like crazy women, and that would work in her favor. Jace would run as soon as he deemed everything safe in Bronte’s world. Right?

“Actually, I totally understand the productivity and self-worth question,” he breezed out.

Was he actually launching into a conversation about this? With Kimmy? Now?

Bronte waved a hand to the bookshelf. “I have a lot to do before I come into the office, Kimmy. If you don’t mind grabbing that book and heading out to the phone store, I’d *really* appreciate it.”

“Oh. Sure.” She hurried to the bookshelf and selected the book from the section Bronte specified. As she moved to the door, she threw Jace a cutesy little wave.

He waved back.

Before Kimmy walked out, she spun to Bronte. “I almost forgot! I was going through your emails and found one about the upcoming show.”

“Okay, what was it?” Bronte waited.

“Someone called The Broker would like to talk to you about a potential deal.”

## Chapter Five

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Jace jumped in front of Bronte, shoving her behind him in one swift sweep of his arm.

His instinct was to pin her between the wall and his body. Then he realized her assistant wasn't causing the alarms going off inside his brain.

The Broker was the real threat.

Bronte dodged around him to speak to Kimmy. "Tell The Broker I'm not talking deals until after the show."

"Actually, can you set up a meeting with The Broker for this afternoon?" Jace interjected in a strained voice.

"Sure thing. I'll see you at the office, Bronte." Kimmy threw him a backward glance as she left the condo.

Bronte slammed the door behind her assistant and whirled on Jace, her features twisted in anger and daggers shooting from her velvety brown eyes.

He stepped forward and did the only thing he knew how to do—he rubbed her arms, sliding his hands down her shoulders to her elbows and then up again.

"Why are you doing that?" she snapped.

"It's a tactic to calm a person down."

"It won't work on me! Not after all the highhanded things you've done since we met!"

He gave her arms another little rub before releasing her. Jesus, what next? They had a hell of a lot more problems if she was getting messages from The Broker.

He yanked his phone out of his pocket and strode several steps away from his outraged ward. He had bigger problems to worry about.

Clapping the phone to his ear, he barked out an order. “Judd. I need you to put me on speakerphone with everyone in the office right now.”

From the corner of his eye, he spotted Bronte and turned his attention on her. “Get dressed. We’re leaving for the office after I make this call.”

Those daggers she’d been shooting his way morphed into missiles that left no doubt they were aimed directly at him.

In a huff, she spun and hurried down the hallway. Her bedroom door slammed, and Jace returned to his call, relieved that she wasn’t listening to what he was about to say to his team.

His brother’s sharp tone projected into his ear. “What the hell’s going on, Jace?”

“Am I on speaker?”

“Yes. With Silas, Mathias, Jaren and Boone. Corrine just stepped out to talk to someone about buying one of her horses. Talk.”

“My ward just received a message from The Broker.”

Dead silence filled the airwaves. Hearing the statement aloud even rocked Jace—how the hell was his past coming around to haunt him *again*?

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Judd grated out.

“I’m not. Bronte’s assistant just came to her condo to deliver the message that he wants to make a deal with Bronte.”

“Jesus Christ. I thought we got that guy three months ago. We know for a fact that The Broker is no longer a threat.”

“Well, he’s back. Don’t ask me how. But I can guess what kind of deal he’s trying to do with Bronte’s company.”

“Clearly we didn’t get the right guy,” Silas said in a particularly dry tone.

“You mean the Russian mafia didn’t cart away the right guy,” Jaren added.

“I can’t imagine the mafia makes many mistakes,” came Boone’s ominous response. “Either someone else is calling himself The Broker in his place or there was always more than one. Do you have a plan, Jace?”

“I agreed to a meeting with him, to be set up as soon as possible. I’m going to draw the bastard out.”

More silence reigned. Finally, Judd said, “We’re sending you backup.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jace returned.

Jaren spoke up. “I might be totally off base, but why do I get the feeling that The Broker’s really targeting the Abel brothers?”

“You may be on to something, but it’s more likely that he works for someone targeting tech businesses. We know his past.” Judd was usually the voice of reason.

Jace considered his words for a moment. Judd was right. Their former company, Abel Security, had been contracted to protect a congressman’s daughter. Only after the woman lost her life—and they lost their company—did they uncover that The Broker had been pressuring the congressman to toss out a bill that would shut down tech company monopolies.

Then The Broker popped up again and threatened another company owner—who happened to be Judd’s girlfriend now.

Judd said what Jace was thinking. “Both events revolved around tech companies. It might be a coincidence that we brothers are involved.”

“Or it might not,” Jaren cut in.

“Either way, we’re sending people to you, Jace. Expect them tonight. Meanwhile, I suggest postponing that meeting,” Boone said.

He threw a look at Bronte’s bedroom door. She hadn’t emerged but as soon as she did—hopefully wearing something



besides that sexy, silky green robe that clung to her curves—they were having another conversation.

“I’ll do what I can,” he told his team on the call. “Meanwhile, someone needs to dig into that dead driver’s background, see if he has any connection to The Broker or Bryan White.”

Bryan White. The man the Russians had carted away, and three months before, they all believed to be The Broker.

The team agreed to research the driver and they ended the call. Jace reached up for the brim of his hat, a nervous habit he’d developed over the course of his months at WEST. But he wasn’t wearing the Stetson. He *was* wearing the toolbelt.

He only needed a minute to install those cameras on the ceiling. It would give Bronte time to get ready for the day and him time to process the situation.

How the hell did so many seemingly unrelated events unfold in such a short span of time? They must all be connected, but there were too many shadows he couldn’t see beyond yet.

As he climbed the ladder to work on the camera, he mentally flipped through Bronte’s troubles with her former partner. The woman helped build Artemis. She knew the company secrets and all the ins and outs of the business. Then she got caught entering the office after hours. They knew she removed files, but he couldn’t see what they were.

Was it possible The Broker had gotten to her? He was known for making threats, most recently against Judd’s woman.

Jace needed to find the ex-partner and question her.

While he mounted the base of the camera on the ceiling, he battled with whether to go forward with any meeting Kimmy could set up with The Broker or to keep Bronte locked up in her condo.

He didn’t like the idea of leaving her, even if he had the place secured. She was safer with him. Besides, a bodyguard didn’t walk away from his ward unless he was relieved by a

trusted partner. As of this minute, he was the only one on the job, so she had to accompany him to the Artemis office.

He installed two cameras before she emerged from her room. She stepped into the living room wearing a pair of loose black pants and a sapphire blue top that hugged her breasts. From his vantage point balanced on the ladder, he had one hell of a view down the deep V at her cleavage.

She gaped up at him too. Neither spoke.

He forced his attention back to the camera. After spending some time checking the phone app to ensure the cam was aimed at the half of the room not covered already by the first cam he installed, he climbed down the ladder.

Bronte looked him over. “I’m really late. Do you have much more to do here?”

“All finished.” He reached for the buckle keeping the toolbelt around his hips. The heavy unit loosened, and he set it on the floor next to the ladder.

She stared at him as if she’d never seen a man in her life.

“Before I move you—”

“Move me?” Her exclamation came with the same brand of outrage he’d seen when he started bossing Kimmy around.

“It’s just a term, Bronte, for when a bodyguard is in transit with a ward.”

She shook her head.

He gripped her arm again. The memory of that green silk slipping over her skin had his gut tightening. He stroked her forearm.

“Look, whatever you’re doing with my arm isn’t necessary. I don’t need to calm down. I do need to know what the heck that about The Broker was.”

He compressed his lips. First rule of protecting a ward was knowing how much to tell them. In this case, Bronte had a right to know what he’d agreed to on her behalf when he told Kimmy to organize a meeting.

“This guy, The Broker. I know of him.”

Her full lips pursed. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not. You need to trust me.” He held her stare, intent. “With *everything*. If I say we’re moving, we’re moving. I order you to jump, you jump.”

“Order me? I’m not sure I can get on board with all this, Jace.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to see just how damn serious he was. He was *not* about to lose another ward. Not on his watch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte forced herself to breathe normally and not start panting at Jace like a dog in heat. She wasn’t one of those women whose heads emptied at the sight of rugged features or a muscled body. She was a business owner with laser focus.

It was just that her focus was on all the wrong things at the moment.

Like how his eyes were an unusual shade of dark gray.

With Jace giving her that I’m-the-boss glare from those very gray eyes, her insides were performing flips like trained dolphins.

“Bronte, this is serious. I’m not fucking around. We’re not leaving this place until you give me your word that you’ll do everything I say.”

*Holy hotness.* Somehow even the F bomb sounded sexy when dropped from Jace’s lips—and doubly dirty delivered in that deep, gritty tone.

“Fine. I’ll do what you say. Haven’t I been going along with you this entire time? You threw me on the ground when a car backfired, Jace.”

One corner of his lips twisted in a bad-boy rendition of a smile. “You didn’t have any choice in that. I was going to protect you whether you agreed or not.”

“So why is it so important you gain my cooperation now?”

She suddenly realized his stare had dropped to her mouth.

And he wasn't looking away.

It made for a change from all the men who preferred staring at her breasts, but it still left her feeling...bubbly. Like sparkling water. Or champagne with too much pressure behind the cork.

She mentally rolled her eyes at her own thoughts. Why did her parents have to instill the love of reading in her to the point where she couldn't have a normal thought without using some literary device? Couldn't she just be normal?

No. With Alice and Geoffrey Burns for parents, there was no such thing as normal. In the evenings instead of watching TV, they had poetry readings of Emily Brontë and Robert Burns, who her father had traced his ancestral roots to. Bronte didn't have a chance.

Jace's hands still lay heavy on her shoulders, making her very aware of how much power was in those long fingers... and did she have to remember how her stomach fluttered when he rubbed her arms before? She struggled to suppress a shiver at the memory of his callused fingers moving down the sleeves of her robe to her bare forearms.

She swallowed to compose herself. “I'll do whatever you ask. Well, nearly.”

He ducked his head to peer into her eyes. “Nearly. What does that mean?”

“I won't compromise my morals or beliefs. If I feel you've crossed a line, I'll draw one in the dirt. Does that satisfy you?”

His eyes narrowed the slightest degree, but the warm gray depths appeared to be holding some electric current that left her feeling hot and sweaty again.

He released her and stepped back. “I'll return the tools and ladder to the maintenance man later. I just need a minute

to wash up and we can head to the Artemis office.”

She couldn't wait to get back into her comfort zone. At least at the office she'd feel more herself. Balanced. Since the minute Jace Abel walked into Artemis, her life had been one big, confusing disruption.

Jace went into the guest room, which meant Hemingway remembered she was alive and his owner. When he came to wind himself around her ankles, she issued a coo of delight and scooped him up to cuddle against her chest. He nuzzled her, and she peppered the top of his head with kisses.

She was so caught up in her morning cuddles with her pet that she didn't notice Jace standing there staring at her until he cleared his throat.

Her stomach dipped at the unfamiliarity of seeing not only a man in her space, but a gorgeous, rugged cowboy. He was completely different from any of the men she found herself attracted to, but now she wondered why she didn't go for his type. He certainly ticked off all the boxes on the manly list.

When he gave a little tug on his hat brim, her insides heated another degree.

“Do you always look like you're ready to fight off a league of bad guys?” she blurted.

He cocked his head. “What do these bad guys look like in your mind? Nunchuks and swords?”

The image brought a bubble of laughter to her lips. She bent to lower Hemingway to the floor and then crossed the room to the small table by the door. She rummaged in a drawer and came out with a lint roller.

Jace drifted closer and watched the roller move up and down her shirt front. Over her breasts.

Realizing that she was getting the wrong kind of attention, she quickly stowed the roller in the drawer and grabbed her handbag, which she'd already switched out to match her outfit today. If her parents revered sculptures and oil paintings, Bronte's passion lay in Chanel and Hermes.

“I’m ready now,” she said.

A little flustered that he’d been so intently watching that roller move over her top, she quickly spun to the door. She reached for the handle and stopped at the fortress of locks she had to work open before she could leave.

“I need to check that it’s all clear before you go out.” Jace shouldered his way in front of her, bringing the scent of woods and man.

She took a deeper breath than necessary and held the scent in her nose for the time it took for him to check the hall cam on his security app and then open three locks.

He stuck his head out, looking up and down the hall. Then he waved a hand for her to step out first.

“This is making me jittery,” she muttered to him.

“Protocol.” He started to close the door but stopped. “Hemingway, get out of the way.”

She twisted to see what was going on. Her jaw dropped at seeing her cat trying to follow Jace out of the condo.

“Let me just...” She crouched and gave the cat a gentle nudge through the cracked door. He let out an irritated meow in response.

Straightening, she narrowed her eyes on Jace. “What the heck did you do to my cat? He never tries to follow me out the door.”

His lips twisted, making her stomach knot.

“Do you have catnip in your pockets?”

He grunted. With a smug grin, he closed the door and punched a code into yet another new lock on the exterior.

She glanced around. “Is this all really necessary? All those locks? Cameras?” She waved at the ceiling and the tiny orb hanging above her door.

“I don’t take chances. Not with my wards.” He took her arm. Warmth spread through her elbow and up into her shoulder as he walked her to the elevator. Every step she took,

he mirrored. The entire way, he swung his head right and left, searching for danger.

Once the elevator doors shut, she withdrew from his grasp. “This is crazy, Jace. I realize you’re just doing your job, but I’m not in danger.”

He braced his feet wide. “Denial.”

She almost stomped her foot. “The only thing I’m denying is that we’re engaged. So don’t get any ideas about spreading that rumor around Artemis!”

His eyes gleamed despite the shadow of his hat. “What makes you think Anthony didn’t already send a memo?”

“He doesn’t work for me. He can’t send memos,” she hissed, wishing she had her phone so she could text the client about the misunderstanding.

Even if she had her phone, what would she even say to Anthony? It was all a big joke?

Her highhanded bodyguard thought a car backfiring was a shooter threat?

Jace really escaped from the asylum?

They rode the rest of the way to the ground floor in charged silence. She wanted to bash him over the head with her handbag but didn’t want to risk putting a mark on the leather. So she settled for ignoring him.

Before the doors opened, he slipped his hand around his back. Her stomach bottomed out. He was putting his hand within reach of his weapon.

WEST Protection really took their job seriously, even if the only threat so far had been back in that car when Jace and the driver wrestled over a loaded gun. But this was a big city and crime happened every day. She still wasn’t convinced it had anything to do with her. She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As he walked her through the lobby and outside, she took in how he maneuvered himself into the line of fire, always shielding her with his big body.

The car was still parked where it had been the night before.

“You got a parking ticket,” she said, pointing to the windshield.

He snatched the parking ticket off the windshield as he opened the passenger door for her and made sure she got securely inside. “I hate cities. This isn’t even a car. It runs on electricity. Cars run on gasoline. It’s how car pioneers planned it back in the old days.”

“I can drive if you hate the car so much.”

He ignored her as he slid behind the wheel. He took a moment to plug the office address into his phone.

“I can just give you directions, you know.”

“I got it.” He set his phone in the cup holder. “So we need to get some things straight, Bronte.” He pulled into traffic.

“What else is there to say? I’m in danger, blah blah blah, something about The Broker.”

He jerked his head to pierce her in his stare. “Not ‘something about The Broker.’ That’s everything, Bronte. The man is dangerous. We’ve dealt with him twice now. One woman he threatened ended up in the hospital, and the other...”

He cut off and directed his attention to the windshield again.

Apprehension skittered down her spine. “What happened to her, Jace?”

When he didn’t answer, she whispered, “She died, didn’t she?”

“I’m not sure it’s related or that he even was responsible. Only that he made a threat against somebody close to her, then she lost her life.” He looked at her again. “This is serious, Bronte. I need you to treat it that way.”

“Okay. I’ll take it more seriously. It’s just so...shocking. I hired you to find what Angelica took from the system, not



guard my life.”

“No one can know I’m your bodyguard. We don’t want to raise any flags. So as much as you dislike me being your fiancé, that’s what I am to the world right now. Got it?”

“It’s not necessary to shout that out to my employees and all our clients. We’ll keep why you’re here on the down-low. If anyone questions me, I’ll tell them I’m having you install some new security measures in the system.”

He nodded, but the flex of tendons in his jaw had her wondering just what was going on in that mind of his. So far, Jace Abel had surprised her at every turn. Not only was he quick-thinking and knew how to fight, but he understood the Dewey Decimal System, spoke fluent Japanese *and* was handy around the house.

On the other hand, he was too attractive for his own good. Kimmy practically drooled every time she got near him, and Bronte had noticed far too many times just how good Jace smelled.

But the most unforgiveable thing about him? Her cat had gone to Team Jace.

## Chapter Six

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It seemed Jace had finally broken through to Bronte about the severity of the situation. Or maybe she was just stewing until the right time to blast him for doing his job.

The woman kept surprising him with her intelligence but when it came to her own safety, she wasn't taking it seriously enough. That was where his training kicked in to make sure she didn't get hurt.

Or worse.

In the back of his mind, he was still trying to work out how The Broker was getting involved in Bronte's business. Jace wasn't much of a betting man unless it was against his brothers, but he'd place his money on the partner.

He allowed Bronte to walk a half step ahead of him and tried not to get distracted by her. The legs of her pants were loose. They didn't even hug her shapely legs. But they did cup her ass, which, he realized on the way to the car, was an upside-down heart shape.

And goddamn, that lint roller moment... The *whoosh-whoosh* of sticky tape moving over her fitted top and those full breasts... If it were any other woman, he'd just shrug and walk away. With Bronte, his jeans were feeling a bit like they might rip in the fly instead of the butt.

He preferred nerdy girls. The geek squad, as his brothers liked to call them. The chicks who wore anime T-shirts and had *Star Wars* memorabilia collections at home. Hell, even glasses sliding down a cute little upturned nose got Jace's engines revving.

Bronte was doing a damn good job of piquing his interest even if he hadn't seen a single *Star Wars* poster in her condo.

And that thick streak of cherry red in her bangs shouldn't be so damn cute enough to make him lie awake in her guest bed because his mind kept revisiting how it waved over her forehead.

Besides being adorable and sassy, she had one of the most interesting minds he'd encountered in a *long* time.

Her only downfall so far? He glanced down at her feet. Her choice of footwear.

She had on yet another pair of shoes that slapped the floor when she walked. He ground his teeth all the way up to the Artemis office. When they walked to the glass double doors, he damn near tossed her over his shoulder just to make the flapping noise stop.

He allowed her to enter the office ahead of him. With his hand within reach of his sidearm, he was prepared to hurl her to the ground again at the first squeak of trouble. On this job, trouble could mean any number of things. Right now, the biggest question was would The Broker show his face for this meeting?

As soon as they entered Artemis, Kimmy popped up from her desk chair and came rushing toward them. "Bronte, I'm glad you finally made it! I've been fielding so many phone calls. And speaking of phones..." She plopped a brand-new device with a red case into Bronte's outstretched hand. "Just like you asked for—all the same settings. And I got you the latest upgrade on the case."

Bronte beamed. "You're the best assistant I could ever ask for, Kimmy. Thank you." She ran her thumb across the screen and immediately started checking her messages.

Jace reached around her and plucked the phone out of her hand. "I'll be taking that."

She gaped at him. Kimmy's eyes rounded. Several moments of silence ticked by.

Finally, Bronte squinted her eyes at him before turning to Kimmy. “Southern guys are so funny, don’t you think? Jace is so *cute*, wanting to keep *all* my attention for himself.”

Her index finger waved in front of his face. Then it zoomed forward and she tapped him on the nose.

*Oh hell no.* Nobody tapped him on the nose. He was a big tough guy who’d broken ten bones racing motocross before the age of twelve. Then he got into the big leagues with motorcycles. Next on his agenda? Horses.

He wasn’t a nose-booping kind of guy.

Kimmy let out a low snicker, and Bronte’s grin was far too wide, even if it was dazzlingly beautiful to behold.

He could almost hear Ross’s voice in his ear now: *She’s the client. Do not cross any lines.*

He always warned the guys of that, and nobody listened. Hell, even Judd had fallen for his ward.

He mentally responded to his boss. *I’m not crossing lines. I never could. She wears the most annoying shoes on earth. And we’re not really engaged—just FAKE engaged.*

Ross would still argue the point. *Well don’t REALLY fall for her. I know how this works.*

*Not gonna happen.*

All this flashed through his head in a blink and he looked down to see Bronte still happily smiling at him because she’d gotten under his skin and knew it.

He pocketed her phone. “Kimmy? Join us in Bronte’s office so we can discuss the meeting you set up.”

\* \* \* \* \*

How dare Jace commandeer *her* phone and tell *her* assistant what they were doing about that meeting?

Anger boiled in Bronte, so hot that she was surprised the pool water she was cutting her way through in long strokes

wasn't bubbling. She reached the wall, did a somersault and pushed off the wall to swim the next lap.

Doing laps helped her decompress. It also helped with stress. A perk of having a condo in this building was access to the pool.

She powered through the water and reached the other end in good time, even though she wasn't here to best her personal record. She needed this time alone, away from her bodyguard...and she'd had to sneak out to get it.

He was going to be so pissed when he realized she gave him the slip. But the minute he set up his laptop to do some digging into her problems, she took the chance to leave. Even though those stupid cameras picked her up and he probably saw everything—even things he had no business seeing—she'd managed to get in five laps so far.

She reached the wall and turned in another somersault. She pushed off and headed back across the pool. With every stroke, she shoved all her frustration into making her muscles work harder.

This whole thing was so out of hand. She'd call the WEST Protection office if she had a phone. Oh wait—she did! It was being held hostage by a highhanded cowboy who also wouldn't give her any time alone to make such a phone call.

Well, next time they went to Artemis, she'd be calling his boss, even if she had to do it right in front of him.

What would she say? *Your bodyguard is working too hard to keep me safe? He's not only going the extra mile, but an extra ten?*

From a boss's standpoint, that only sounded like accolades.

From her point of view, the man had plopped himself right into her life and taken over every aspect, from what she ate and where she was going to how many locks were on her door.

She didn't even want to think about what he was doing on his laptop.

Or the fact that her own cat seemed to have fallen for him like everyone else.

As she reached the end of the pool again, she popped up for air and almost choked.

Jace was crouched on the edge, a scowl darkening his handsome face. "Time to talk," he ground out.

Panic swept her, and she executed a quick turnaround and propelled herself away from him as fast as she could go. Then she realized the faster she reached the other end, the faster she'd need to swim back.

She switched to a butterfly stroke so she could keep the end of the pool in sight. It would be just like him to walk down there and meet her. But she reached the end and he wasn't there.

With all the reluctance of a kid faced with a plate of brussels sprouts, she started back. In the middle, she stopped swimming and just floated. For a minute, she considered doing the dead man's float until he left.

Or she could crank up the speed, push off that wall and escape him again.

She selected option number two and hauled ass to the end. She started into a flip, but two big hands plunged into the water, grabbed her by the upper arms and yanked her out.

Any fury that faded with exercise tripled inside her. She sputtered with outrage as he dropped her onto the side and held her there. She glared at him. He glared back.

"You shouldn't have left the condo."

"I wasn't going to ask your permission. Besides, I know you probably have eyes on every corner of this building."

"I knew where you went, yes. But the relationship between bodyguard and ward is built on trust, Bronte."

"Meaning I trust you and remain silent while you make all the decisions without my input?" She slicked her wet hair back and twisted to wring the water from it.

He let out a growl. “I know you’re a smart woman, Bronte, but you’re being dim right now by not taking this threat seriously.”

“What threat? Nothing has happened yet. Nobody’s directly threatened me. I received a message that someone named The Broker wants to make a deal. And that driver might have been high or drunk or mentally disturb—”

“He wasn’t. He was hired by The Broker.”

His statement cut off her tirade.

She met his eyes, and he gave her a solemn nod.

“Dry off and we’ll talk.”

When he walked over to her robe and towel, left folded on a lounge chair, she couldn’t help but stare at him.

Okay, he was right. She hated that he was, but she wasn’t so stubborn that she couldn’t admit she was wrong.

He grabbed her towel and returned to her. She accepted the terrycloth like a peace offering and lifted it to her wet skin. Jace stood there watching for a heartbeat before spinning away. He strode to the lounge chair and sat sideways on it, elbows on his knees.

Bronte slowly approached and slipped on her robe.

Jace’s chest gave a heave but he didn’t look at her as she took a seat on the chair opposite him.

“I apologize,” she said quietly. “My parents raised me to be independent. I was taking the city bus by age fifteen, going to art exhibits and concerts alone. I started Artemis in the kitchen of my old apartment, staying up late at night to work on it before I forced myself to grab four or five hours of sleep to get through my day job as a low-level worker in another tech company.”

She peeked at his face. He was staring at the concrete between his boots.

“I’m sorry I didn’t take all this seriously, but I see now that I’m wrong.”

His gaze landed on hers, and he twisted his lips with genuine skepticism. “I’ve explained the rules and what needs to happen. I won’t insult you by explaining again. But I will ask you a second time—or maybe it’s the third?—if you’ll follow my lead in all things until this threat is neutralized and you can return to your life.”

“Is this where I solemnly pinky swear?” She crooked her little finger for him.

He snorted. “Let’s go back to the condo and after you get dressed, I’ll coach you on the meeting Kimmy set up.”

“About that.”

His brows shot up.

“I don’t exactly have time for a meeting right now. I have a trade show to get ready for. So much goes into just a few days at one of these things...” Her voice faded off as she saw his expression.

“Okay, okay. You’re right. Get the meeting with the dangerous guy over with first. Then I suppose I have to block out time to worry about my former partner sharing company secrets before I can reveal them at the trade show I spoke about.” She bobbed her head. “Yep—definitely a busy schedule this week.”

Jace let out a noise that bordered on a laugh. She eyed him, wondering if she’d smoothed things over enough to continue.

A thick pinky finger hooked in front of her face. With a sigh of relief, she wrapped hers around it. Their gazes locked. As she sank into those stormy gray depths, she finally figured out what Kimmy and her cat saw in the bodyguard.

He was a protector. He would do bodily harm to anyone who so much as looked at her wrong. Heck, he’d already killed to keep her safe.



## Chapter Seven

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“Let’s go over this one more time.”

Jace swore he heard Bronte roll her pretty brown eyes all the way from the passenger seat of the car.

She folded her hands in her lap so a couple of her chunky rings clacked. For a small woman, she sure made plenty of noise.

“I don’t know what your other wards are like, Jace, but I can remember something after you tell me once. I don’t need any more coaching on this meeting.”

“This won’t be a normal meeting with a client like Anthony, Bronte. I told you what The Broker’s capable of. The fact that he refuses to even use a real name with you should be a huge warning.”

She fell silent. “You’re right.”

“I’m—” He almost choked on air. Then he nodded. “I am right.”

“You don’t need to sound so smug.”

He threw her a grin, and this time she really did roll her eyes.

“Okay, so we get to the café,” she repeated the plan. “Outdoors, so you have more room to move in if something goes sideways.”

“Sideways? You *were* paying attention.”

“I might have a full schedule, but that doesn’t mean I don’t take time to listen,” she said in a singsong way.

“You know, my momma would love you.”

She tipped her head, eyeing him. “Really?”

“Yeah. She isn’t one to sit around taking orders either.”

She started to argue.

“But!” he interjected. “You’re listening to me now. And so would my momma if she were the one in danger.”

Bronte went silent again, and he’d been watching her long enough to know that her brain, which never slowed down, had something to mull over.

After a moment, she spoke. “You believe this guy will present a deal to me. Then I tell him I’ll consider the offer.”

“That’s right.”

“What if that doesn’t happen?” Worry crept into her soft voice.

Jace’s chest tightened at the sound. He much preferred her strong girl-boss talk to the unsure Bronte.

“If he tries something, I stop him. I’ll be sitting at the next table with eyes on you the entire time.”

She nodded. “I suddenly have to pee.”

He blinked. “Now? Do I need to stop somewhere?”

She waved in dismissal. “No, it’s just a nervous problem I have. Actually, a lot of women do. Let’s just get to the café and get this over with.”

They rode for the rest of the short trip in silence. He parked on the street rather than the nearby lot in case they needed a quick getaway.

As Bronte climbed out of the car, she said, “You’re going to get another ticket.”

“Company will cover it.”

“Must be nice to fall back on them. To have a safety net in case you get in trouble.”

He caught her arm and swung her back to him. “You have that too. Me.”

Her lips popped open. For a crazy moment, all he could think about was how her plump red lips would feel under his. How she’d make less noise if he kissed her.

Or maybe more noise.

His gut clenched with a need he’d never experienced on the job before, and he encountered a lot of beautiful women in his travels. Many of them threw themselves at him too, but he never cared to jump at the chance.

If he stood here much longer with her, staring into those warm eyes like two pools of melted chocolate, there was no telling what he’d do.

He released her arm. “Let’s get this over with.” *So I can get you safely back to your condo and your cat.*

*And strip that silky green robe off you.*

Holding back a groan, he led her across the street to the café. He’d purposely arrived forty-five minutes early so there would be little chance The Broker would be there first and see Jace with her. He’d also taken measures to alter his appearance. Since he didn’t have luggage with him, and only owned a spare set of clothes, he’d hit up the lost and found box in the corner of the laundry room in Bronte’s building.

He managed to grab a plaid shirt and a ball cap so he looked less like a WEST bodyguard and more like an average guy grabbing a drink after work.

When they reached the tables, she took a seat. He positioned himself only two steps away if he needed to reach her fast. While he had eyes on Bronte, The Broker’s back would face him.

A server came over right away to take her drink order. She nervously asked for a water. But seeing how her knee bounced under the table and her eyes darted around, Jace thought she could use something a little stronger to take the edge off.

When the server asked what he wanted, he ordered a sweet tea for himself and an Irish coffee “for the lady at that table.” Maybe the splash of alcohol would help her nerves.

He zeroed in on her hands and saw her fiddling with the chunky rings she wore, spinning them around and around her slender fingers.

If she wasn't his ward and he wasn't on the job, this might be nice. Sitting outdoors with the scent of good food filling his nose and staring at a beautiful woman.

What was the matter with him? Did he need more mental arguments with Ross?

His attention shifted when the server returned with a tray of drinks. He set the water before Bronte, followed by the coffee Jace ordered her. The server said something to her and her eyes flicked up at Jace.

Then the server took something else off the tray and held it out to her. A phone.

Alarm hit her eyes, letting him know he'd have to walk her through this. Jace leaped out of his seat and bounded the few steps to her table.

“What's this about?” he demanded of the server, aware he'd blown his cover.

Or been drawn out.

The server's eyes widened. “I'm only doing what I was told. Someone told me to deliver this phone to the table outside.”

“Shit!” Jace burst out as Bronte paled. Seeing he needed this person to move away as fast as possible, he reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills. He pressed them into the server's hand. “Thanks.”

Jace glanced around. Nobody was in the vicinity, and he could see straight through the restaurant windows. Only an older couple at one table.

Safe for the moment.

Bronte stared at the phone with sheer terror on her face.

He snatched the burner phone and tapped a button to bring up the screen. Front and center was a notification.

“A call’s coming in.” He gritted his teeth and put it on speakerphone.

A male voice sounded. “Miss Burns?”

“Uhh...yes. It’s Bronte Burns.”

Jace pointed at his chest and mouthed: *Introduce me.*

“And my fiancé is here with me as well.”

“I see. Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the meeting. But you know how business is.”

Bronte’s brows puckered. “Of course.”

“I wanted to discuss a prospect on the table.”

“I’m listening.” Her voice took on more confidence.

“I have a client who is interested in having some updated software. A program that I know you already have built.”

Bronte’s wide eyes hit Jace’s in panic. He read the questions there. Could it be the system that she planned to introduce at the upcoming show? Possibly the files her former partner stole?

“I’ve probably stunned you with what I know, Miss Burns,” The Broker continued. “I will tell you there’s very generous compensation involved.”

Black fury moved through Bronte’s eyes, flickering intermittently with the fear in them. Jace needed to calm her down quick before she said something that would ruin their chances of catching The Broker at last or would bring more threats down on her.

“How much?” Jace blurted out.

A beat of silence followed. From the next street came the whiz of tires on asphalt.

“The fiancé, I presume?” The Broker asked.

“Yes.”

“And your name?”

“You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.” He was ready to throw the phone on the ground and stomp it into bits. Then rush Bronte far away from this café—this city—and hide her away in the mountains of Stone Pass where no one could find her again.

Too late he realized his error in drawing attention to himself. He couldn’t help it—he felt strangely protective of the woman seated across from him.

A chuckle lilted over the phone. Bronte’s anger returned in the form of a scowl.

“Tell me what this generous compensation is,” she demanded.

“One million dollars and you continue to work for the client, building new software as she needs.”

Jace and Bronte’s stares locked. “That’s not generous,” Jace responded. “Come back with a real offer.”

“I agree with my fiancé,” Bronte spoke up with nothing but steel in her tone.

“I see. This isn’t our last conversation. Keep the phone in case I need to reach out again.”

The phone went silent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte’s knees were knocking and she couldn’t think straight as Jace raced her to the car and across town to her condo. She had no memory of getting to her floor or Jace unlocking the door, but suddenly Hemingway leaped at her face.

Jace snagged the cat out of the air before it struck her, then he passed him into Bronte’s arms.

“Do you like egg rolls?”

The calm, offhanded question didn’t make any sense to Bronte. She looked at Jace around the fluff in her arms.

“What?”

“Egg rolls. Do you eat them? I’m going to order us dinner in.”

He ran through the arsenal of locks on the door and pulled out his phone.

“Are you checking the security app?” she asked.

“No. I have it set up to notify me if it picks up anything. What do you say about wonton soup too?”

She blinked at him.

Suddenly, he lowered the phone and took a step toward her. “Bronte, you’re too quiet. You’re scaring me.”

“I’m scaring *you*? After what just happened back at the café? Getting a phone delivered with my drink? This guy knows my every move, Jace!”

He moved in and started rubbing her arms again. Up and down, up and down, from shoulders to elbows because her arms were still full of cat.

Her pet pushed his head under Jace’s hand.

“Are you getting ignored, Hemingway?” He stroked the feline’s ears and he responded with a loud purr.

“Here!” She thrust the cat at Jace. “He likes you better. I’m going to check my mailbox downstairs. I was so frazzled I forgot.”

He held her by the arm. “Maybe you’re still too frazzled if you already forgot what you said about The Broker knowing your every move. I’ll get the mail. Okay?”

He handed the cat back to her. “Lock the door behind me. The only person who gets through these locks is me. Don’t let anyone else in. Got it?”

Trapping her lip in her teeth, she nodded.

As soon as he closed the door, she hurried to lock up after him. Then she leaned against the door, face buried in Hemingway’s fur. “I have to get a grip.”

The cat meowed, either in agreement or because he was sick of being cuddled so tight.

She lowered him to the floor and moved to her laptop where it was set up on her desk in the corner. The beautiful sunlight poured through her space—another of her reasons for buying this condo. But right now, she couldn't see beyond the shadows following her.

She had to get a hold of herself. Now. There was no time for making mistakes like going downstairs to fetch her mail. Jace was here to keep her safe, but that didn't mean she could turn into an airhead.

She did still have a business to run, a trade show coming up fast...and a big issue with Angelica.

Sinking to the desk chair, she pulled up her inbox and skimmed through her company emails. Nothing stuck out to her as pressing—or something Kimmy couldn't handle in her efficient way.

Bronte was just closing out of the email when the front door opened.

Jace entered, and gone was the carefree bodyguard who asked if she wanted Chinese takeout. His brows were lowered. Even the plaid shirt he'd swiped from the lost and found box in the laundry room seemed to stretch too tight around his broad shoulders.

She stopped in the middle of the floor. "What's wrong?"

He held a small pile of mail. Without a word, he walked into the guest room. She trailed behind, questions slamming through her mind.

"What's going on, Jace? Is there something in the mail? Or did you see someone suspicious on the app?"

He grabbed his laptop bag and stalked out of the room and into the kitchen. There, he set the mail on the table.

She started to reach for it.

"Don't touch that!"



As if he'd slapped her, she yanked her hand away. Heart pounding, she looked at the normal stack of mail she'd get any day of the week.

He rummaged in his bag and came out with a small kit. Shocked, she watched him crack open a small plastic case and actually dust the letter on top for fingerprints.

She swallowed the dry lump lodged in her throat. "What...is that letter?"

"A threat."

Her eyes zeroed in on his face. The dark beard on his jaw coupled with the glare in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. This man wasn't playing around with her life. He would defend her to the end.

"Who s-sent it?"

He didn't glance away from the envelope and was now using small pieces of tape to transfer the black powder to a slip of paper from his kit. He took out his phone, snapped five photos and then set everything aside.

"Jace, this is scary. My business could be at risk."

He circled the table and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Your business? What about your life, Bronte?" His eyes took on a wild gleam.

"Wh-what is the threat?"

"It's warning you to take the one million offered by The Broker's client."

Her heart thudded. "And if I don't?"

Jace's hand worked around her shoulder to her spine. When he dragged her up against his chest, she immediately curled against him like Hemingway would.

"If you don't, they're going to find you."

"They already know where I am."

His arms flexed around her, drawing her tight against his body. "And dump you off the Golden Gate Bridge."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jace's body couldn't pick a worse time to wake up and realize *just* how much he wanted the woman in his arms.

As he locked her against his chest, his fly started getting a little too tight. Then she wiggled closer, plastering her hips to his.

Dammit, his zipper would explode any moment. She was sweet-smelling and soft in all the right places. He tried to remember that she was a very trying woman. Some would even call her difficult.

But he enjoyed seeing the flare of irritation in her expressive dark brown eyes.

Though her footwear left a lot to be desired.

Still, she had great style, sexy but not slutty like the ladies who hung out at the bar in Stone Pass.

Her partner had screwed her over. Bronte was trying to protect her company from bad press—and boy, did he feel that after the shit that went down at Abel Security.

The Broker would not stop until he got what he wanted from Bronte, which only left Jace with a primitive need to protect her more than any ward he ever had.

A shiver ran through her. Jace slipped his other arm around her and squeezed tighter. "It's gonna be all right. You're safe. I got you."

"I can't believe it got so out of control so fast. I feel like you showed up at my office a month ago, not yesterday."

He issued a gruff chuckle. "I'm offended by that."

His joke, however small and lame, did what he hoped and pulled a snuffling laugh from Bronte.

"I only meant that so much has happened," she said.

"Don't try to take it back now. The insult was made."

She twisted her face against his chest and let out another giggle. Before he realized it, he slid his hand up her spine to

cradle her head. The silky strands of her hair against his callused fingers made his heart thud harder.

Bronte tipped her face up to his. Their gazes clashed and those sparks he'd been denying he felt since the moment he stepped into the Artemis office and spotted that streak of edgy red hair flickered into flames.

He searched her eyes. She searched his back. He dropped his gaze to her full red lips.

They parted on a gasp.

“Bronte,” he roughed out.

She hooked her hand around his nape and yanked him down as she surged onto tiptoe. “Jace!” she cried out before her lips crushed against his.

His insides gripped with need. God, he hadn't desired a woman this much for a long, long time.

She tasted so sweet, with a hint of something fresh and herbal. His head flooded with her scent and flavor and he couldn't hold back.

Pressing his mouth down on hers, he gave her time to pull away, to refuse him. But she only twined her fingers in the hair on his nape and threw herself into the kiss.

*Slow down, Abel.*

*You can't do this. She's your fucking WARD.*

*You'll scare her and she won't trust you when she needs to.*

*Goddamn, she tastes good.*

He angled his head, deepening the caress, moving in slow, tender passes until they were both gasping and clutching at each other. He swiped his tongue across her lips, and she opened to him on a soft cry that tangled his guts up even more.

Plunging his tongue inside, he bundled her against him. Her hips rocked, and he issued a primal sound.

Jace was good at a lot of things, but his specialty was knowing how to drive a woman crazy for him. Locking one hand on her hip, he used the other to explore the dip of her waist, the sleek line of her torso...and cupped her full breast.

She cried out, and he sucked in the sound, feeding her his tongue and dragging more and more moans from her as he pinched her hard nipple. What would it take to get her clothes off quick? It'd be seconds before he had her bare and stretched out on her big bed with the metal bars perfect for a woman to grip while he ate her pussy.

*Meow.*

*Meow.*

*MEOW!*

The sound broke through his lust-fogged brain and he realized it was Hemingway wrapping himself around Jace's ankles.

Something sharp sank into his leg. Five somethings. Five claws, in fact.

He tried to shake the cat off but didn't slow the kiss.

"What...was that?" Bronte asked between flicking her tongue over his.

"Your cat clawing my leg."

She jerked out of his arms and stumbled back a step, nearly tripping over Hemingway. "Oh god! I'm so sorry. I-I practically threw myself at you just now."

He tilted his head to better see the pink in her cheeks she was trying to hide from him. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, unable to shake off the shape and feel of her nipple hardening at his touch.

"I didn't exactly fight it." His voice was like sandpaper.

She wrapped her arms around herself. "It was wrong of me. You're my employee. And you're not even my type."

His brow shot up. If she was trying to insult him, it worked. What *was* her type? And what exactly was wrong

with *his* type?

She raked her gaze over his body, and his cock pummeled his fly with the need to lay her down on the closest soft surface and show her just how damn much he was her type.

“I mean, you’re totally wrong for me,” she sputtered.

Okay, that stung. He wasn’t a guy who chased a woman who wasn’t into him, but Bronte couldn’t kiss him like that without feeling the same burning attraction he’d been fighting since the start.

He squared his shoulders and straightened to his full height, giving her a good look at all he had to offer. “What about me don’t you like?”

“Uh...you’re cocky, for one.”

“Confident, you mean.”

“You’re wearing a shirt out of a lost and found.”

“I can take it off.”

Her eyes seemed to dilate as she stared at the line of buttons running down his chest. Then she started back to listing reasons why he was wrong for her.

Which he was. Why was he trying to argue when he was crossing lines he swore he never would?

Hemingway gave another loud meow and swished around his boots.

Bronte looked down at the cat and then whipped around. She stomped across the kitchen, her shoes flapping on the hardwood. Then she made even more noise by banging a cupboard door. When the clatter of dry cat food hit a dish, Hemingway abandoned Jace’s ankles and shot after Bronte.

Jace didn’t know whether to curse the cat for interrupting them or thank him for stopping him before he really lost his mind.

Either way, he and Bronte needed to talk. He followed her to the kitchen, pulled out a chair at the table and waved at it. “Sit down.”

She threw him an exasperated glance before slip-slapping her way back to the cupboard. Of course, she had to slam the door shut.

“We need to talk,” he said.

She faced him. “You need to stop bossing me around. And I’ll stand, thank you.”

“Bronte-with-no-snake-eyes-over-the-*E*, please sit down.” He hoped the “please” would have the same effect it would on his momma.

She rolled her eyes. “Snake eyes? That’s new.”

He pointed to the chair and then took the other one. She didn’t sit, only gripped the back, keeping the wood chair as a barrier between them.

He wasn’t going to get what he needed from her, which was total trust and cooperation, until he fixed the issue at hand.

“I’m sorry I kissed you,” he said.

Her fingers tightened on the wood. “I kissed *you*.”

“But I’m not your type.”

“No. Not usually, anyway.”

“Well, you’re not mine either.”

Her eyes narrowed into an almond shape. If she knew how crazy that look made him, she would never do it again.

She gave her shoulders a haughty twitch. “What is your type? I suppose it’s cute and blonde like Kimmy—”

“No. I like smart girls.”

“Well, I’m smart.”

He gave her a single nod.

“So why aren’t I your type?”

“You make too much noise.”

She blinked at him, clearly thrown for a loop. “Noise? What kind of noise?”

“You bang cupboard doors.”

“I was feeding Hemingway.”

“Your shoes are noisy, too.”

She glanced down at them. He saw the toe of one shoe lift and waited for her to stomp around just to spite him, but she didn't.

To his surprise, she circled the seat and plopped onto it.

“Have you ever received a letter like that before?”

“Never.” She drew upright and twisted her fingers in her lap.

“I dusted for prints on the envelope, but a lot of people touched it. I sent some of the prominent ones off to my team through a special app made to enhance what a regular camera won't.”

She nodded.

“My team will run them through the database.”

Again, Bronte nodded.

“In the meantime, it's best to go about as normal a routine as you can. With that said, you never answered me about the egg rolls.”

The corner of her lips twitched but she didn't smile. She stood and started out of the kitchen. “Why don't you order for us? I'm going to put on something more comfortable.”

He watched her ass shake on the way to the kitchen doorway. “Make sure you get rid of the shoes.”

She tossed a look at him over her shoulder. “I'll dig out some flip-flops.”

He groaned as she walked out.

## Chapter Eight

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Bronte closed the bathroom door and steadied herself against the small shiver that worked through her.

She didn't know if it was a hot shiver or a cold shiver. Her body warred between reacting to her frightening situation and her smoldering attraction to her bodyguard.

It hadn't exactly hit out of nowhere. She'd been stuffing it down ever since he threw her on the sidewalk and she learned how amazing his weight felt on top of her.

Leaning on the door, she closed her eyes and spent long heartbeats reliving that kiss. God, it was the hottest thing she'd experienced in her life. And she'd dated some quality men who knew their way around a woman's body.

Jace had only touched her through her clothes, but it felt like he *branded* her.

She realized she was cupping her breasts to dispel the heavy ache in them and dropped them to her sides.

Nothing could happen between them—she was *paying* him by the day, and that meant he was her employee. She didn't cross boundaries like that, or take risks with her company. Artemis already had enough issues thanks to Angelica.

Quickly, Bronte washed her hands, hoping the cold water would help cool off other body parts. When she kicked off her shoes, her lips curled at what Jace said about her footwear being noisy. She'd never thought about it.

Then she dropped her clothes in the wicker hamper in the corner and walked into her adjoining bedroom to find some



comfy clothes. When she got sick as a child, the first thing her mom had her do was put on PJs. She wasn't sick, but she needed the same kind of comfort.

Since she wasn't about to be seen by Jace in such casual attire, she opted for stretchy leggings and an oversized T-shirt with the Artemis logo.

Before she walked out of her room, she located her slippers under her bed and slipped them on.

As the soles slapped the floor, she smiled to herself. Jace was scrolling on his phone and looked up at her entrance. His gaze shot to her feet. She thought he might have grimaced before forcing a blank expression onto his face.

She plopped onto the sofa and reached for a pillow. Cradling it in her lap, she covertly eyed her bodyguard.

Now that she knew how his lips felt, she couldn't keep her gaze from returning to them again and again. And that beard scruff—so soft yet bristly. Her inner thigh muscles clenched at the memory of how it felt against her skin.

When she was listing reasons why he wasn't her type, she forgot all about her no-beards rule. She preferred her men more clean-cut.

As if he heard her thoughts, he raised his knuckles to his jaw and rubbed them thoughtfully over the bristle. The light rasping sound shouldn't cause her insides to heat like that. What was he doing to her?

A scowl crossed his face at whatever he saw on his phone, and her stomach took a deep dive just like when he told her what that letter said.

She should read it. It was addressed to her, after all. But part of her shied away from even touching the thing.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Hemingway slinking toward Jace. She'd seen that behavior before—right before he pounced on a toy or one of her hair ties, which he loved playing with.

Her attention shifted from Jace, who was still glaring at his phone screen, to her cat.

Hemingway leaped—right into Jace’s lap.

Landing straight on his nuts.

“Oof!” He crumpled forward and slapped a hand over his privates. Hemingway refused to leave Jace’s lap and stretched out on his blocky, muscular thighs.

Bronte stifled a giggle. When Jace swung his stare to her, she crushed a hand over her mouth to stop the amusement from bursting out. Just like in the bathroom, she felt hot and cold shivers. She was sitting here with the guy protecting her from someone who wanted to throw her body off a bridge while finding complete amusement in her cat jumping on Jace’s balls.

He set his phone aside and started stroking Hemingway’s back. “You put him up to that.”

She laughed. “Do you know cats at all? They don’t take commands from humans, let alone this cat.”

Hemingway’s loud, happy purr reached Bronte from several feet away. She watched Jace’s long fingers work down the cat over and over again, wishing it was her body he was touching.

“Did you order food?”

“Yep.” He returned to his phone, and she twisted on the sofa to get into a more comfortable position. She stretched her legs out and cuddled the pillow instead of her cat, who had forgotten she existed now that he had Jace.

Suddenly, he dumped the cat on the floor, earning a grumpy yowl, and strode to the door. Panic swept over Bronte, and she jumped off the couch at the same time Jace stood.

Whatever he saw on her face made his soften. He took a step toward her and did that arm-rubbing thing again.

What the heck? It was starting to actually calm her down.

“The delivery guy’s in the lobby.”

She nodded.

He looked at her harder. “You’re really jittery, and I’m not helping things.”

“It’s hard not to be jumpy with all that’s going on. Get the food, but try not to shoot anybody.”

His lips quirked upward at her joke, then he moved to the door. She locked it after him before returning to the couch to cuddle her pillow while Hemingway sat staring at the closed door.

“Your new master will be back in a minute,” she said with sarcasm, but not even being snarky with her cat distracted her from the threat hanging over her.

When Jace returned, he let himself in and locked up the fortress, a takeout bag hooked in his fingers.

She watched him. “So when does the portcullis get installed?”

He didn’t miss a beat when he answered, “Tomorrow morning. They had to finish up the metalwork.”

She sat up straight on the sofa. “You actually know what a portcullis is?”

Staring at her as if she’d grown an extra head while he stepped out, he said, “The gate in the entrance of a castle.”

“I didn’t realize your education was so well-rounded.”

“Just because I’m a small-town Southerner doesn’t mean I didn’t read everything I could get my hands on in between motocross races.” He brought the food to the coffee table and set it down. Hemingway tagged behind, tail fanning back and forth.

Rather than Jace returning to the seat he seemed to prefer, he sat next to Bronte on the sofa. While he opened the bag and removed containers, she eyed his hot, carved body. Her eyes lingered around his chest. Now that she knew how it felt pillowing her cheek—her breasts—she wanted to feel it again.

He handed her a takeout box, but stopped to look at it. “What kind of material is this? It’s not cardboard.”

“Sugar cane. Compostable. More sustainable. You’re in San Francisco.”

He made a grunting noise that was far too manly for her body to ignore. While they dug into the food, her mind kept returning to that toe-curling kiss. Her emotions were going haywire. She wasn’t one of those women who threw themselves at guys. It had to be the fear taking over. Jace’s arms felt so safe, his embrace so protective.

“Bronte.”

She brought her attention back to find him staring at her, a crease between his dark brows.

“Are you okay? I said your name three times. And you’ve hardly taken a bite.”

She dropped her egg rolls into the container. “I guess I’m just not hungry.”

He took the box from her and set his aside too. Hemingway came to investigate, but Jace gently shooed him away.

“I have an idea,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Do you play video games? I have an online account and we can use our phones as the controllers.”

She perked up. “I’ve been known to play at parties.”

“Why does that sound like the tech nerd version of being a social smoker?”

A laugh burst from her. “I guess it is. But if you’ve got *Dark Ops*, I’m ready to kick your butt.”

“*Dark Ops*? Who knew you were a tough girl on the battlefield?”

“Bring it on.” She stopped short. “But first I need my phone.”

He eyed her. “I’ll give it to you, but only if you promise to *only* use the controller app.”

“Fine.” She held out her hand, eager to show him up with her gaming skills.

When he handed it to her, she studied his face. His gaze lifted to hers. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t understand how you can be so calm.”

He gave her his total, unshifting focus. Liquid heat spread through her. Five heartbeats ticked by, then six.

Jace’s chest heaved uncomfortably. “Protecting people is my job, Bronte. I’m here so that you can stop worrying. You’re safe with me.”

She nibbled her lower lip. She felt safer in his arms. With only a few inches separating them, she could easily slip into his lap and pick up where they’d left off. She didn’t know she was wiggling so much until his gaze speared her.

She went still, aware that he was feeling the same desire. When they were making out and he was pinching her nipple with the perfect, brain-spinning pressure, she’d felt his erection and knew she affected him just the same.

Suddenly, he produced her phone from his pocket and held it out to her. “Let’s play a round or two of *Dark Ops*. I feel like blowing something up, Bronte 823.”

Taking the phone from him, she was careful not to allow her fingers to brush his. “I feel exactly the same. And...why did you call me Bronte 823?”

The man’s crooked smile tugged at a string directly attached to her pussy, nipples and everything between. A glimmer of amusement hit his eyes. “It’s the Dewey Decimal call number for English fiction.”

Happiness flooded in to mingle with the heat burning in her core. Jace really was a different breed of man. And she was beginning to think he was *exactly* her type.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jace had been sitting on a pink faux leather sofa for two hours with an erection of pure, throbbing steel. It didn't get better when Bronte leaped to her feet and bounced up and down in a victory dance that made her perfect breasts jiggle.

He didn't know how much longer he could be a saint. All his good intentions flew out the window the minute Bronte kicked his ass in not one level of *Dark Ops* but two.

What he'd come to think of the perfect woman wasn't wearing a *Star Wars* T-shirt, but one with her company logo. And her nerdy glasses were exchanged for a red streak of hair that kept tumbling into her eyes. He'd been so distracted by her swiping it away in her moments of deep concentration on the game that he'd actually lost all his player lives and she had to give him one of hers to save him.

If he wasn't her bodyguard, he'd be sweeping her off her feet right now and carrying her to bed.

She tossed her phone down on the sofa and fist-pumped the air.

He couldn't help but grin at her—and his own success in distracting her from the fear that wouldn't leave her eyes after he told her about the threatening letter.

Seeing his smile, she batted her hair out of her eyes and started gathering up the empty water bottles they'd accumulated while gaming. He got up to help her. Together they walked to the kitchen and dropped everything into the recycling bin.

With nothing left to do, they faced each other. A weighty silence filled the air. All he had to do was take her in his arms and he knew she'd go on tiptoe to kiss him again. But he had to lay down some boundaries.

“Well, it's late. You'd better get some rest,” he said.

“What's the plan for tomorrow? If I'm not allowed my phone or to go into the office...”

“We'll discuss it tomorrow. After you've had a full night of sleep.”

She looked at her feet in the slippers he was actually starting to think were cute, even though they smacked the floor when she walked. He got the feeling she put them on just for that reason. She liked getting under his skin as much as he'd enjoy getting inside her.

He cut off all thoughts that might make him think of sinking his cock into her pussy and making her scream his name long into the night.

“I’ll just...go to bed. Goodnight, Jace.”

“Night, Bronte.”

He walked her back into the living room, and she continued to the hallway. When she reached her bedroom door, she paused and looked back at him, her eyes pools of desire and her hair loose and disheveled after she got so involved in the game.

Each moment that ticked by, the pressure inside him built until it reached volcanic proportions. He cut his hand through his hair, but the only thing that would alleviate the pressure would be to lock himself in the bathroom for a quick and dirty jackoff session.

She stood frozen for another long second before opening her door. He waited to hear the click of it closing before he dropped his head back and closed his eyes in a silent prayer for control—anything to keep him from throwing open her door and jumping into the sack with her.

“Jace?” The soft, feminine voice shredded through him.

He opened his eyes and dropped his gaze to Bronte standing outside her door, now wearing only the T-shirt.

A growl burned on his lips.

“Do you need something?” He tried to pry his jaw open but the words were forced out through his clamped teeth.

“I was just going to say that Hemingway might want to sleep with you tonight. If you want him in your bed...”

Christ, he wanted someone in his bed, and she didn't walk on four legs and have a stupid smashed face.

Bronte dragged in a deep breath that caused the T-shirt to ride higher up her thighs. “If you want him in your bed, just keep your door cracked.”

Before he could stop himself, he was striding down the hall. Bronte’s lips parted.

He reached for her. She hooked her arms around his neck and turned her face up to his.

He slammed his mouth over hers, slanting across it, tongue plunging, drinking from her. He lifted her, and she locked her ankles around his back.

She tore at his hair as he carried her to the bed. They fell to the mattress, bodies entwined. With a rough sound, he delved a hand under that T-shirt that shouldn’t be at all sexy, skimming up her smooth outer thigh, over the slim strap of her panties.

He issued another primitive noise like a wild animal while she tore at his shirt buttons and worked the borrowed fabric off his shoulders. When her hands brushed his skin, she let out a little moan.

Fuck, that sound was fingernails down his spine. He couldn’t be more turned on.

Throbbing, he ran his hand upward, exploring Bronte’s curves. As he reached her bra, he slipped his fingers beneath it.

Full bottom lip trapped between her teeth, she arched into his touch. Locating that nipple he hadn’t stopped thinking about since he touched it the first time, he circled the bud with a fingertip. It puckered for him.

She let out a gasp and hitched her thigh higher on his hip. He took advantage of the angle by grinding his erection into the *V* of her legs. Heat waved through him. Closing his fingers on her nipple, he watched bliss shatter her beautiful features.

“Jace!”

He captured her mouth while he teased the straining bud. Minutes or an hour might have passed. All he knew was how



good this woman made him feel, and she'd only run her hands up and down his chest and back.

At last he moved on from teasing her breast. After all, there was another that needed the same attention. And that wet heat he felt through her panties was another conquest.

Rolling to the side, he brought her with him. Half lying on top of him, she was in control. The woman ran a trendy new company. He wanted to see what she'd do to him.

A shock hit as she lowered her mouth to his neck. The soft caress grew firmer, more insistent as she worked down his chest, pausing at his pec to swipe her tongue across his nipple.

He let out a low moan and clasped her head against him for a brief moment before she continued her exploration of his body. God, her lips were hot fire burning a path down his abs.

Unable to let her go too low, he grasped her arm and flipped her into the mattress again. A surprised cry escaped from her, which he squelched with his kiss. Wedging his thigh between hers, he pressed it upward.

She rocked into the muscle. Blinding need took over so he had no recollection of removing her bra or dividing his attention between her beautiful, pink nipples until she gave a full-body shudder.

Stunned, he looked at her face. Her eyes were lidded, her lips parted on an *O* and a flush crept over her skin. She shook again, pushed into his thigh.

He realized she was either coming or about to. And he hadn't helped her along nearly enough.

Throwing himself flat on the bed, he tore off her panties. Her slippery folds and sweet scent pulled him in until there was nothing left to do but give in to the attraction.

He covered her clit with his mouth.

## Chapter Nine

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Bronte's body had been quivering on the brink while Jace's wet tongue played over her nipples. Rocking against his thigh would have been enough to get her off.

But now she realized, compared to his mouth on her pussy, it *never* would have been enough.

She teetered on the precipice, bucking into his mouth. Letting out a gasp, she whirled in dizzy ecstasy. But when he plunged his long, thick fingers inside her, she splintered.

The orgasm struck hard, stealing her breath, her mind. Hot juices spilled from her pussy with each contraction he pulled from her. Each pass of his fingers through her sheath felt deeper, harder.

She envisioned the thick erection he'd pressed against her sliding inside her and another cry bubbled in her throat.

Inner thigh muscles seizing, she rode his hand and tongue until the furious, mind-spinning end. She collapsed to the bed, panting.

Reaching down, she found the strands of his hair. Her stomach jumped when he drew his fingers free, slicked them up her pussy and circled her clit.

A throaty moan left her. He answered it with one of his own. The edge of need echoed in his tone, bringing her back to her senses.

She opened her eyes and skidded her hand over his bulky shoulder. "I want more, Jace. I want you inside me."

A pair of deep gray eyes drilled into her for a long heartbeat.

Flexing his arms, he did a pushup off the bed. “That’s as far as it goes, sweetness. I already crossed too many lines.”

The bed dipped beneath her. She jerked upright, hand banded across both bare breasts as the realization hit that he wasn’t going to finish the job.

He stared down at her, and the air charged with the desire pounding through both their systems.

He bent and strummed his thumb along the line of her jaw. She swallowed hard.

Then he moved in and pressed his lips to hers in a lingering, drugging kiss.

When he withdrew, she opened her eyes and found her room empty. Jace was gone.

Her insides clutched. *Oh god.* The things he’d done to her body had blown all her hopes and fantasies, but he left her wanting too.

She didn’t even want to think about the torture he must be experiencing after not getting off.

Flopping back on the bed, she threw out her senses beyond her bedroom and listened to Jace moving around. For a heart-stopping moment, panic swept her that she’d been the one to cross the line and he’d drop her as his ward.

She listened hard for any indication he was talking on the phone, requesting backup so he could pass her off to someone else on the WEST Protection team.

She only heard a soft thump she knew well as her cat leaping off some high place to the floor, followed by the guest bathroom door closing down the hall.

The noise of the shower made her squeeze her thighs together. Rolling onto her side, she envisioned her bodyguard stripping off his jeans, his underwear and stepping naked into the water. All those glorious, carved muscles wet from the spray.

A shudder rippled through her, and she slid a hand between her legs. Planting a fingertip over her still-hard, throbbing clit, she let her fantasy run wild.

She had no doubt Jace was trying to run away from his lust with a cold shower.

What was she lying here touching herself for when there was a hot man battling his want for her in the other room?

Bronte wasn't a dreamer—she was a doer.

In a flurry, she scrambled off the bed and strode to the bathroom. When she gripped the handle, she wondered if he'd locked it, but it twisted smoothly in her hand.

Vapor floated in the air. So he *wasn't* taking a cold shower. It was hot.

Eyes hitting the glass door shielding him from her, she gulped.

Jace was half-turned away from her, his arm jerking in a slow rhythm that had her pussy spilling juices down her inner thighs.

She must have made some noise because he whirled. Her gaze was fixed to his hand that had stopped mid-stroke on his cock.

“You don't want to do this, Bronte.”

Yes, she damn well did. She'd never wanted something so much in her life.

She took a step toward the glass door.

“Sweetness...” His hoarse endearment sounded as a plea.

Unable to stop herself, she whipped open the shower door and stepped in with him.

Gray eyes locked on hers. His chest heaved. She followed the path of water cutting down his shoulders, over his chest that was speckled with dark hair, to soak a love trail running like an arrow straight to her biggest desire right this minute.

He gripped his cock at the base, and she looked her fill, taking in the tendons corded in his forearm that stood out from his holding back, to the long, tanned fingers wrapped around his impressive length.

He was thick and heavy with need. The tip flushed dark red.

“Don’t do this, Bronte.”

Oh, she was doing this.

She closed the small gap between them and plastered her body to his.

He let out a groan and slammed his lips over hers. Dark need swirled from his tongue to hers, and he fed her the dirty little rasps that had her nipples puckering with desire and her pussy throbbing.

Flattening her hand over his lower abs, she moved it down slow inch by slow inch to cover his own. When he gave his cock one slow pump, a thrill went through her.

“Let me,” she whispered against his lips in a stalled kiss.

His throat clicked on a swallow.

She grazed her fingers over the back of his hand, inching toward his ridged cock.

Next thing she knew, he spun her around, forcing her to the wall. Harsh puffs of air escaped her as she waited for what he would do. Excitement curled inside her like a wisp of steam.

She twisted her head to the side to look at him.

He loomed behind her. The silky tip of his cock slid over the top of her buttocks, and she arched, guiding him toward her soaking center.

“I don’t have a condom.”

“I’m on birth control. And I’m clean.”

A low laugh rumbled from his chest, sparking every nerve in her body with electric need. “I have no doubt of that,

sweetness. I am too. But if I claim you without any barrier between us...”

Her breaths came faster. “Yes?”

The heat of his words rushed over her ear. “I don’t know if I’ll ever stop.”

Need spiraled through her insides, tugging at her pussy and her nipples and curling her toes into the shower floor.

She’d never done anything this bold, this crazy. But what did she have to lose in this deal? Nothing at all. As far as she could see, they’d both win.

Pressing her hands against the wall, she thrust her ass his direction again. “I don’t want you to stop, Jace. I need to feel you inside me.”

Another low growl broke from him, vibrating through her, as he gripped her hip and guided his thick length into her from behind.

When his mushroomed head stretched her opening, she cried out. He tunneled deeper and deeper until he was rooted inside her. Her pussy pulsed around him.

His lips hit her neck, just under her ear. Her squeak was cut off by his dirty words. “Don’t move. Just feel how deep my cock is right now. So. Fucking. Deep.”

She whimpered.

He palmed her breast, causing the nipple to tighten more.

“Do you want me deeper?” he murmured in her ear.

“Yes!”

She’d thought she had every inch inside her but he filled her more—to the hilt.

“Fuuuuck,” he grated out, grinding his cock against her innermost point.

Her juices flooded over him. He let out a guttural snarl and started to move. Water splashed off his body over hers. His mouth suctioned to her neck in slick passes up and down

the column while he angled her ass up with his grip on her hip and teased her nipples with the other hand.

Her senses were on overload. Her body on fire. Quivers morphed into quakes until she was rocking into his every hard, mind-blowing thrust.

“So...close!” she keened.

He stiffened. “Fuck, I’m coming. Come with me!” He reached around her body and pressed his thick finger between her lips and over her clit. He pressed it into her body while he plunged in with fast, jerky thrusts that left her sailing.

Jace’s rough cry broke over her. Hot spurts flooded her pussy, shooting her higher. She’d never been with a man this way and doubted, after he finished on the job, she ever would experience it again.

Dropping her forehead against the tile wall, she rode out the last of her release until the hard, pounding waves became gentle swells.

Jace nuzzled her throat, his beard bristly on her overly sensitive skin. “I don’t want to leave your pussy yet.”

“Then don’t,” she rasped.

“I have to.” In contradiction to his words, he thrust inside her again. She cried out.

He kissed her neck very softly before withdrawing. Her body missed him stretching her as soon as he left it. But he turned her into his arms and kissed her long and deep. She didn’t realize she was shivering until he stroked his hands down her arms over and over.

When they broke from the kiss, she searched his eyes. They gleamed with a light that made her stomach dip.

“I don’t want to sleep alone tonight,” she murmured.

He brushed his lips between her brows in a tender kiss. “You can always leave your door cracked for Heming—owww!” He cut off when she sank her nails into his hard ass.

She made a move to exit the shower, but he hauled her up against him once more. Amusement danced in his eyes. “So what do you say, Bronte? Am I your type now?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jace sloshed coffee into a mug and brought the strong black brew to his lips. After the night he had, he needed more than caffeine—he should probably start updating his resume because he’d be out of work the minute his boss found out he slipped up and slept with his ward.

Then again, half of the WEST team had committed the same infraction. What was one more?

It bothered *him* though. He had better ethics. He’d never fallen in love, and in lust rarely.

And he never spent the night with a woman. It was a rule of his, one that kept him out of trouble. He’d watched his brothers fuck up enough to know that when a woman woke up beside a man, they got all the warm fuzzy feelings. If the woman happened to be crazy, getting away from her was a pain. His younger brother Jennings had dealt with the repercussions of one-night stands at least twice, and those were only the instances that he shared with his brothers. There could be more.

A brush of hair tickled his bare foot, and he glanced down to see Bronte’s cat swishing his tail back and forth on his leg.

“I slept with your owner,” he told the cat.

He looked up at him, his big eyes and smashed face more endearing than Jace wanted to admit.

Just like Hemingway’s owner.

When Bronte told him she didn’t want to sleep alone, it was as if she cast a spell over him. His protective instinct to keep her safe tripled and he’d given in to guarding her even in sleep, when a cat at the foot of her bed would have done the same thing.

Instead, he woke up several times with the beautiful woman tangled around him, a curvy thigh slung across his



groin so his cock was about to burst. And when he finally did manage to drift off, he woke to a hot, wet lick across his nipple.

Expecting to find the cat in bed with them, he instead looked down to see Bronte sleeping peacefully with her head pillowed on his chest. She'd licked him in her sleep.

Of course his cock was still hard enough to pound nails this morning, and his thoughts weren't helping.

He knocked back more coffee and watched the sun rise over the city. He'd witnessed a lot of sunrises in his life, and while the one rising over the mountains in Stone Pass held a place of honor in his heart, he couldn't deny this one was pretty in its own way.

After finishing his coffee, he had a better grip on reality. Today he needed to tell Bronte that she wasn't going into the Artemis office. Or even working from home. The Broker knew where she lived, where she worked and probably knew her schedule too.

Jace didn't believe for a minute that the man terrorizing Bronte, who'd attacked his brother's woman Ari and been connected to the death of a congressman's daughter, wasn't responsible for that attack in the car. He didn't have proof as of yet, but he had confidence that his team would find the link.

Speaking of WEST, what was taking them so long? He set aside his mug and pulled his phone out of his back pocket. Montana's time zone was an hour ahead of California's and he knew Corrine Wynton would already be up with the roosters to feed her prized horses and now in the WEST Protection office, hard at work.

Just as he expected, Corrine answered his call. "Talk to me, Jace," she said in her no-nonsense way.

"Mornin', Corrine. I'm calling to see if there's any news on the driver."

"We've got an ID match with prints and facial recognition. His name is Steven Moyer. Arrested twice before, once on drug charges, once on theft."

“So he was probably working for money.”

“That’s our take too. We’re still digging into any connection he might have with The Broker. But since we don’t know *his* identity, it might take a while. In the meantime, Jaren and McCoy are in San Francisco and will be in contact with you soon.”

“Great.”

He could hear her typing in the background. Corrine could multitask like a pro, managing to speed-type while talking on the phone.

“How’s your ward holding up?” Her question caught him off guard.

His mind stuttered over what to tell her.

*She got freaked out by the threat sent by mail and ended up in my arms...then somehow my cock ended up in her.*

He released a trickle of air through his nostrils. “She’s holding up. How do things look with the horse I have on my radar? It still listed in the auction?”

“As of yesterday, she’s still listed in the catalog on the site. Do you think you’ll be finished with your op in Cali in time to bid on her?”

He stifled a groan. Damn, he didn’t want to miss out on that horse. The mare was everything he wanted—a strong bloodline and great for difficult mountain trail riding.

On the flip side, his gut churned at the thought of leaving Bronte. She was a long way from being safe.

“There are far too many loose ends here. The partner could still be involved. And The Broker knows too much about Bronte.”

“Bronte,” she repeated slowly. “An unusual name. It’s missing the dots over the *E* if you typed it right.”

“Yeah...” Something he enjoyed teasing her about. Though what she lacked in her name, she made up for in every other way.

“I’d appreciate it if you could keep tabs on the horse for me.”

“There’s a possibility you can place an absentee bid.”

“I’ll take that path if it comes to it. But it’s my first auction. I’m hoping I don’t miss it.”

“When you first signed with the team, I never pegged you for a horse lover, Jace.” The noise of typing paused and he detected a smile in Corrine’s voice.

“Sometimes you don’t know what you’re missing in your life until you’re introduced to it.”

The soft clack of footsteps on the hardwood floor reached his ears. His insides stirred at the knowledge that Bronte was awake and coming this way.

“Keep me informed, Corrine.”

“Will do.” Without another word, she ended the call, in the same no-nonsense way she began it.

Jace placed his mug in the sink and drifted toward the doorway. His gut jerked at the sight of Bronte walking toward him, fully dressed in a fitted white blouse, a skirt that skimmed over her curves...

And red stilettos.

Fuck, was she *trying* to get him fired? Maybe she wanted him to rip open that frilly blouse and send all the buttons flying.

Her gaze met his. A spark ignited between them.

Well, so much for their attraction fading in the light of day.

Bronte cut her gaze over his bare chest, to his jeans hanging low on his hips and finally his bare feet.

He looked down at hers too, and his dick jerked behind his fly at how damn sexy she looked in them.

She smelled like vanilla and cherries again too.

“You’re up early.” His tone came out too gritty.

“You too.” Hers was a throaty rasp that hooked him in the groin.

“I’m surprised you’re already dressed.”

“Habit, I guess. I wake early and get into the office before everyone else.”

“I see.”

She searched his face. “We’re not going in to the office today, are we, Jace?”

He sliced a hand through his hair. “No, we’re not.”

“I figured. That’s why I emailed Kimmy to bring over some documents I need to sign.”

“You should have told me you were getting on your computer.”

She breezed across the kitchen to the cupboard where she kept Hemingway’s food. The cat ran immediately to his dish, ready to chow down on little fish-shaped bits.

“Why do you feed him that stuff?” he asked.

“What stuff? The cat food?” She bent over and rummaged around for the food bag, which shoved her round ass toward Jace and just about ripped away any control he’d managed to find.

Her ass wiggled slightly as she located the bag and straightened.

He passed a hand over his face, hoping to wipe the lust off it.

“Yeah, the food,” he managed to pick up the thread of conversation. “From what I see, Hemingway only pushes the kibble out of his bowl and spreads them around the kitchen to make it look like he ate some.”

“Oh, I know,” she said with a lilt of the optimism he was starting to see as one of her best traits. “It’s just that the vet wants him to eat more than canned food.”

“I see.” All he could see was the image of that sumptuous ass imprinted on his brain.

And how damn hot it was to look down and watch his cock disappear into her pussy from behind.

She dumped some food into the bowl, and Hemingway began to nose half of it out on the floor.

After Bronte replaced the bag in the cupboard—and bent over again—she click-clacked to the coffeemaker and grabbed a mug off the shelf above.

“What’s with the shoes?” Jace had never been interested in women’s footwear or their feet. He was more of an ass guy, obviously. But those high heels made Bronte’s ankles and calves sleek and mouthwatering.

She poured some coffee. “The shoes go with the outfit.”

“But if you guessed you’d be at home all day, why not wear something more comfortable?”

“Dressing the part of a CEO helps me perform better.”

Christ, did she have to use that word? He could think of a dozen ways to make her perform for him right this minute. One of them was on her knees in front of him.

She peered at him over the brim of her mug. “You still don’t have any clothes.”

“Got some on the way. Should be delivered within the hour.” He scuffed his knuckles over his beard. “I’m a country boy through and through, but I could get used to placing an order and having it delivered in a few hours.”

“What happened to your luggage? Was it lost?”

“No. I didn’t plan on staying in the city longer than a day.”

She lowered her mug and eyed him. “You were confident it wouldn’t take you more than a few hours to find out what my ex-partner took from my system?”

“I didn’t bring a suitcase, did I?”

She shook her head and started to speak, but the door buzzer sounded.

He snatched out his phone and stared at the security app. “It’s Kimmy.”

“If I buzz her up, are you going to frisk her at the door?” She shot him an arch look as she click-clacked her way to the door and pressed the buzzer on the wall to admit her assistant to the building.

He clenched his jaw. He didn’t want to scare her by saying she shouldn’t have allowed Kimmy to come here at all, knowing that The Broker had eyes on her building, but they couldn’t go back now.

He continued to stare at his phone screen and watched Kimmy enter the building. The doorman spoke to her, and she paused to talk to him. A minute later, she continued on her way to the elevator.

Jace hurried to throw on his shirt, hoping leaving it untucked would help cover the bulge in his fly. The noise of Bronte’s heels was driving him nuts. They were click-clacking all over his libido.

He let Kimmy into the space. She was juggling a heavy-looking bag with files peeking out and a couple boxes.

“The doorman handed me these boxes to bring up.”

Bronte started to reach for them, but Jace cut in front of her.

“I’ll take them.”

He checked the labels on the packages. One was addressed to him. The other was for Bronte.

“Are you expecting something?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “I receive orders all the time.”

“She has a shoe addiction,” Kimmy piped up.

Both Jace and the assistant glanced down at Bronte’s feet. One look at her ankles and the pronounced line of her calf muscle had his gut lurching with need again.

“Wow, those are great heels, Bronte! Are they new?”  
Kimmy cocked her head to eye the footwear.

“Yes, actually, they are. But I don’t *only* receive packages of shoes. Hemingway has a food subscription.”

Jace stepped forward. Kimmy still stood in front of the closed door, but it was bothering him that it wasn’t bolted. Anyone could bust in. His sidearm was a warm weight tucked along his spine, but the last thing he wanted was to need it.

Kimmy paused in admiring Bronte’s shoes and tipped her head back to meet Jace’s stare. “Uhh...”

He offered the woman a smile. “Excuse me. If you don’t mind, I’d like to lock up.”

She blinked and seemed to come back from whatever vacation her brain had gone on. Suddenly, she realized he needed her to step aside.

“Oh, sorry. Sure.”

He quickly worked the locks into place and grabbed both boxes, stacking one on top of the other. His had some weight to it, since he needed several outfits, as well as socks and underwear. The one Bronte received was light.

Leaving the ladies to talk business, he carried the boxes to the kitchen and set them on the table. In the other room, he heard Kimmy’s bright voice.

“You should take days off more often, Bronte. You look great—so refreshed.”

“Really?” came Bronte’s startled reply.

“Yes. You seem different. More relaxed. I haven’t seen you this way since before Angelica.”

A low groan burned in his chest. Did Bronte’s new relaxed appearance have anything to do with him eating her pussy last night—or fucking her against the shower wall?

He was too focused on those thoughts to catch Bronte’s reply. Turning his attention back to the packages, he set the one he received aside.

The other looked ordinary enough. It was too light to contain shoes or cat food, though.

Exercising complete caution, he checked the tape sealing it. Nothing appeared to be slit or tampered with. There was only a return address but no name, something corporations did sometimes in shipping.

“Why is he still here?” Kimmy’s not-so-quiet whisper filtered to him. “I thought he’d be on his way back to Montana.”

Bronte’s voice was distracted when she answered. “He’s doing some other odd jobs for me.”

“Like being your fiancé?”

A beat of silence followed. He had an itch to walk out just to see Bronte’s face, but he stood rooted to the kitchen floor.

“Where did you hear that?” Bronte’s tone was slightly choked despite her effort to sound normal.

“Anthony dropped by yesterday to pay us for services. He claims he took you and Jace out to a celebration dinner!”

*Asshole.* Jace paid for the meal. Anthony was just trying to make himself look good.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you knew Jace before he arrived? I can’t believe you hid something so important from me.” Hurt echoed in Kimmy’s voice.

“I’m...sorry, Kimmy. Things are just moving fast, and there hasn’t been time. Between the Angelica thing, keeping the investors from finding out about the security breach and the upcoming show, there hasn’t been time. This news isn’t... something you send by email.”

Jace took out his pocketknife and flicked it open. Since Bronte was going along with the ruse of him being her fiancé, he figured he had all the rights to open her mail. Not that he’d let anything stop him—he’d check the mail no matter what. It was his job.

He slit the tape and pried open the cardboard flaps. White fabric lay in the bottom. A harmless piece of clothing.



He still had to check. When he pulled it out, the garment unfolded to reveal dark red splotches on the front, and they weren't put there in a factory. They were added later.

Blood.

Instead of dropping the item back into the box, he held it up to examine the streaky pattern of blood across the Artemis logo.

A shrill scream from behind him made the hair on his neck stand on end. With the shirt still in hand, he whirled.

Bronte stood there, Kimmy right behind her. Both women's faces were pale with shock.

"What is that?" Bronte rasped out.

He swung the shirt to his side, balled in his hand.

She leaped forward so fast on those high heels he thought she might fall on her face. He reached out to catch her.

She snagged the shirt out of his hand and held it up. Another cry burst from her lips. "It's covered in blood! Whose blood is this?"

"Bronte, hand me the shirt. Sit down. You too, Kimmy."

The assistant stumbled to the kitchen chair and collapsed heavily into it.

Bronte swayed on her feet.

He banded an arm around her middle, hauling her against his chest, and took the shirt from her hand in the same move.

"Who sent that to me?" Dark shadows of fear swam in her eyes.

"There's no name, only an address, and probably a bogus one."

She scraped her fingers through the cherry-red lock of hair hanging over one eye. "Only two people have this shirt—Angelica and me. It's the first logo we came up with for Artemis. We were so excited that we couldn't wait to get shirts made."

He nodded. “And you were wearing yours last night.” The garment might still be tossed on her bedroom floor after he ripped it off her.

“Oh my god. Does that mean Angelica is...?”

Kimmy issued a small cry at Bronte’s words.

Bronte shivered against him.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.” He gently brushed his lips over her forehead.

As he comforted Bronte, his gaze met Kimmy’s and it hit him that he didn’t have to *pretend* to be her fiancé. Comforting this woman came as naturally as breathing.

“I’m scared, Jace,” she whispered.

He tightened his hold on her, but he didn’t tell her that he was too.

He knew all too well what happened when a person ignored a request from The Broker.

\* \* \* \* \*

The high-pitched whistle of Bronte’s teakettle filled the kitchen. Jace pushed off the counter he was leaning against and switched off the burner. Muscles flexed and the brand-new, clean black T-shirt he’d donned pulled across his spine as he fixed two mugs of tea—one for her and one for Kimmy.

Her assistant’s eyes were wide as she took everything in. Emotions washed across Kimmy’s face, from awe at the bodyguard fixing them tea to despair at what they were facing.

What had Bronte dragged her into.

She was kicking herself for ever telling Kimmy she could come to her place with the files. Now she’d traumatized her employee with the most horrific unboxing of that bloody shirt.

Jace set the tea mugs before both of them. The smell of fragrant herbs drifted on the steam. He’d added spoons to the mugs and went back for the sugar bowl. When he set it in the middle of the table, Kimmy reached for it.

Bronte bowed her head and breathed in the aroma meant to calm her. “I owe you a huge apology, Kimmy.”

The woman looked up, her blue eyes wide. “For what?”

“For dragging you into this mess. It’s not fair to you. You’re just doing the amazing job you always do.”

Kimmy reached across the table and squeezed Bronte’s hand. “I’m as invested in Artemis as you are—not financially, of course, but emotionally and professionally. And I’m your friend, Bronte. Don’t forget that.”

Jace took this all in, saying nothing. He hadn’t spoken in at least twenty minutes and had been texting furiously on his phone. She had a feeling that when he slipped into the guest bedroom to change clothes, he’d also called his team.

Bronte brought her tea to her lips and let the herbs and warm liquid work into her system. Kimmy did the same. Falling into deep thought, Bronte didn’t notice that Jace had said her name until Kimmy touched the back of Bronte’s hand.

She flicked her gaze up to his. God, he really was so ruggedly handsome. She loved how protective he was with her, how tender and caring. Even getting her tea to calm her nerves went above and beyond the call of duty, in her opinion.

But *was* it duty? They’d shared a bed. He’d blown her mind not once but several times with the most soul-altering orgasms of her entire life.

When he held her or brushed his lips over her forehead a little bit ago, it hadn’t felt like something a paid employee would do.

“Two guys from my team are on their way up here,” he announced.

She straightened in her seat and Kimmy set down her mug.

“All right. Good. That sounds like a good step toward figuring this all out.” Bronte pushed away from the table.

Jace gestured for her to stay seated. “I’ll let them in and then we’ll discuss everything. Kimmy, are you going to be

okay with all this?"

"Yes." She fidgeted with her teabag, dunking it over and over again.

Jace gave them a nod and walked out of the kitchen.

Kimmy leaned in to whisper, "Do you think the guys on his team are as hot as he is?"

Leave it to her assistant to find the sunshine in a stormy day. A smile tipped Bronte's lips upward. "Let's hope not. I think we've had enough excitement for one day."

Low, masculine voices projected from the front of the condo. After a minute, Jace entered the kitchen with two big men right behind him.

All of a sudden, the kitchen felt tiny and cramped. Bronte got to her feet and Kimmy took the cue to do the same.

*Wow.* Both guys owned that same don't-screw-with-me presence Jace possessed. One had the same dark good looks, though she thought her bodyguard was bigger, tougher-looking and more handsome. The other man was taller, roped with lean muscle like an athlete. Both looked as if they could do some major bodily harm, even to somebody calling themselves The Broker.

Jace waved a hand at the ladies. "Bronte Burns and her assistant, Kimmy..."

"It's Jones." Kimmy looked between the two new bodyguards as if she were looking at hot film stars or gods. She was so fixated on the men, Bronte was shocked she even recalled her last name.

Jace tilted his head toward the newcomers. "This is McCoy."

The man with the ropey muscles gave her a tip of his white Stetson.

"And Jaren."

The other man shifted his bulky shoulders by way of greeting, an action Bronte recognized as one Jace often did,

raising even more questions about them being related.

“They’ll be staying in the building,” Jace announced.

Bronte sat up straighter. “In one of the condos?”

“Yes.”

“But how? There are rarely openings in the building and there is a waiting list for months—sometimes years—to get a unit.”

Jace’s lips quirked at one corner. “We have connections. It’s important that the guys stick close by.”

“I see.” Bronte wrapped her fingers around the mug as a way to warm away the chill. Having the ability to bypass all building protocol and set up in one of the condos was a huge reference to WEST’s power. It was enough to remind her—again—who she’d hired.

Jace walked to the fridge and poured himself a glass of water from fridge door, while the other two leaned casually against the wall as if about to discuss the weather rather than a possible murder.

Bronte tossed Jace a look. How was he going to deal with this?

He sipped the water and ran his tongue across his lips.

God, those lips. He kissed like she was the only woman in the world and he’d never see her again.

Hooking a hand around his nape, he tore his stare from hers and centered it on his teammates. “We need a plan of action. Starting with getting this bloody shirt into the hands of the authorities.”

McCoy nodded shortly. “We bypassed the local police and we’re going straight to the FBI with this.”

“This is going to the FBI?” Panic swept Bronte.

They all looked at her.

“It can’t escalate outside of your team! If all this is happening because of my former partner and what she did,

then we definitely can't let the information leak. It will tank my entire company, and in just a couple days, I plan to search for another company to partner with me on my new project. This software is something that must be rolled out as soon as possible. It will mean better medical treatments for adults and children both. I cannot let Artemis fail!"

Kimmy bobbed her head in agreement, compassion on her face for the cause.

Jace's lips compressed. "You didn't tell me all this before—about the benefit of the software and the importance of attending the trade show. Why?"

Her heart gave a flip in her chest. "I didn't think it was important to the case."

He pushed air through his nostrils. "Everything is important. Didn't you trust me?"

Bronte opened her mouth, but anything she might say was cut off by Kimmy shoving her chair back and leaping to her feet.

"Excuse me," Kimmy said before hurrying from the room.

McCoy and Jaren turned and vanished through the doorway in a wall of broad backs and denim.

Leaving Jace and Bronte alone.

He narrowed his eyes on her. "How can I do my job if you don't trust me, Bronte?"

"I-I do trust you. I just didn't realize that you needed to understand what the software does. I hired you to look into the security leak! That's it!"

He took two steps and planted his hands on the table she sat at, leaning over her, eyes crackling. "You signed a contract stating that you would disclose everything to assist us in giving you our best."

"How am I supposed to know what's crucial information and what isn't? Do you need to know what I ate for breakfast yesterday? The color of my underwear?"

“I already know both of those things,” he grumbled.

The front door closed with a little more effort than was necessary, as if the WEST guys wanted them to know they were making an exit.

Some of her anger at his accusation that she didn't trust him or had purposely kept him out of the loop fizzled out, leaving only frustration.

She spread her hands on the table. “I thought you understood how much I trust you, Jace. I invited you into my bed.” She pitched her voice low in case somebody remained in the condo to overhear. “Into my body.”

His jaw tightened. He circled the table to her side. She launched out of her seat to meet him, whether it was a challenge or more.

When he snagged her around the waist and hauled her against his body, she pressed her hands against his chest. Feeling the hard, fast thump of his heart, she studied his face.

“I have to get to that trade show, Jace. And we have to keep this out of the hands of the FBI. If my investors get wind of what Angelica did, then they'll sell the stocks and my company's worth will tank. A lot is riding on this new software, Jace. I have to do everything I promised.”

Something swirled in the depths of his eyes. Respect? Maybe something more, and it made her belly dip.

“There are far too many questions surrounding this case.”

“And now Angelica might be dead! What if she is?”

His lips twisted. “Then you'll know your software is safe.”

“Not funny, Jace. Not at all.”

“I'm sorry. It isn't funny. I'm just trying to make you feel better.”

She wanted to ask if he was acting as her bodyguard...or her lover.

A sound from the front of the condo had them breaking apart. His hand snapped around his spine, within reach of his weapon. Her insides clutched with the realization that Jace and the WEST team weren't messing around, and didn't care if she was trying to protect Artemis. They'd choose her life over her company every time.

That meant she only had herself to fall back on. Somehow, she had to find a way to keep everything operating smoothly, keep her employees safe, *and* ensure that she got a chance to attend this show and present her software to the right people who could spread it worldwide.

All while evading The Broker.

And falling for her bodyguard.



## Chapter Ten

---

“Kimmy is safely situated in the other condo with McCoy guarding her.” Jaren’s announcement brought Jace’s focus away from his laptop screen and to his brother. The condo was otherwise silent with Bronte still in bed.

He rubbed his jaw with a forefinger. “That’s step one.”

“I went to her place and collected the belongings she told me to grab. That woman’s a little...” Jaren swirled a finger over his temple, indicating Kimmy might have a screw loose.

Jace snorted. “Just because she’s not your type doesn’t mean she’s crazy. Maybe a little eccentric.”

“Like Bronte?”

Jace nodded. “Yeah.”

“Not your type either. So,” he drawled, “what about the woman broke through my big brother’s stony exterior?”

Jace dropped his gaze to his screen again, avoiding the question. “What makes you think she got to me?”

“C’mon, bro. We all heard you say you knew the color of her underwear.”

Dammit. He didn’t want to get into this right now, and definitely not with his kid brother. Growing up smack in the middle of five brothers made Jaren into something of a tattletale. His mother often joked that if a wildfire broke out, Jaren would beat the flames there to report it.

“Let’s stick to the plan, okay?” he muttered.

Jaren sat back on Bronte's pink sofa, arm stretched along the back and his legs kicked out in front of him, looking as out of place as a biker at a horse auction. Not that he'd ever make it to one to find out at this pace.

"Right," Jaren drawled. "The plan. Step two: find out whose blood is on that shirt."

Jace nodded, finished typing off a message to Corrine, and set aside his laptop. "If it is the partner's, we've got more loose threads in this case."

"The partner who stole information," he reminded him.

"Most likely she stole the software that will change the face of the healthcare industry," Jace said in disgust.

Jaren tapped a hand on the faux leather vinyl. The tattoos on each finger that spelled WILD looked even more out of place against the pink color but matched the four knuckles of his other hand that said FREE. He also wore a couple big knuckle rings they all referred to as "tooth bashers" because of the damage they could do to a man in a fight. His brother had immersed himself more in the darker side of riding motorcycles than the rest of them, but his heart was in the right place.

With a sigh, Jace sat back in his chair. "I'm sure that's what piqued The Broker's interest as well. He doesn't seem to go after small companies or people who don't have influence."

"Like the congressman."

They both fell silent for a moment, deep in thought about their shortcomings and how the congressman's daughter died on their watch. Though Judd took more responsibility for it than the rest of them, Jace still felt the weight and would until they finally caught the man behind it. All signs pointed to The Broker, but they'd been wrong before.

Jace roused. "Tomorrow we head for the trade show in Napa."

"At least we'll get away from the noise of the city."

“But we have to worry about transporting the ward without incident. I still can’t believe I agreed to let her attend.”

“It’s our chance to draw out The Broker. You know he’ll be there.”

Jace’s gut churned at the thought of again putting Bronte within that man’s reach. But when Jaren and McCoy suggested this route, Jace had to go with his gut feeling. And his gut was telling him the only way to end it was to drag the beast from his lair.

He shook his head. “I still don’t like it, man.”

“None of us want a repeat of what happened with the congressman’s daughter...but are you sure there’s not more to it than that, Jace?”

“Like what?”

“Like you falling for your ward.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jaren’s eyes creased at the corners with amusement. “Surre, bro,” he drawled. “Keep tellin’ yourself that you aren’t into Bronte. Who wouldn’t be? She’s got a bangin’ body.”

He leveled a glare at his brother. “How ’bout I smash out your front teeth and send them home to Mom so she can play tooth fairy?”

Jaren chuckled. Dropping his arm from the back of the sofa, he stood. “You’re all talk. Every one of us Abels knows it too. You’re the softy of the family.”

Jace gained his feet. Maybe he was more soft-hearted than some of his brothers, but no one was going to fuck with him—or his ward.

Jaren turned to him as if remembering something. “Kimmy told us you’re her fiancé.”

A groan burned in Jace’s chest. “I’m sure she did.”

“She’s pretty invested in her boss’s happiness. Can’t blame her. Friends like that are hard to come by. So what

gives?”

He cut a hand over his face. “It isn’t top secret or anything. It was just a good excuse to stick close to Bronte without letting her clients or employees know what’s really going on inside the company.”

“Gotcha. So you didn’t propose?”

“No.”

Jaren shrugged. “Momma will be sorry to hear that. She was excited to get a new daughter-in-law.”

He leaped out of the way as Jace attempted to land a right hook on his face.

“You better not have brought this up to Mom!”

Jaren danced away like the little pansy he was. He made it to the door but luckily Jace’s three-lock system slowed him down and he was able to ram his shoulder into Jaren, knocking him off-balance.

They were in the middle of a scuffle, and he had Jaren in a headlock, when a sound of a very feminine throat being cleared came from a few feet away.

They stopped. Jace cracked an eye around his brother’s body and saw Bronte standing there in that sexy green robe, arms folded and bare toes tapping on the floor.

Jace shoved his brother away from him, and Jaren managed to turn the third lock and escape.

As Jace secured the condo again, he tried to compose himself, but after seeing that tantalizing flash of thigh, his cock was starting to swell.

“What exactly was going on here?” Bronte’s throaty voice brought his cock to full mast.

He swung to face her, already knowing he was a goner before he locked eyes with her. “Just a brotherly moment.”

“Uh-huh. Looked like you were trying to pop his head off with your biceps.”

“That too.” He sent her a sheepish grin that she returned.

The lust pounding through his body wasn't letting up. He needed to put some distance between them, and the wall of the guest room wasn't going to do the trick.

Last time a closed bathroom door hadn't even kept her out of his arms. *Fuck.*

The way she eyed him up left no question in his mind what sort of thoughts were floating through hers. A hungry look crossed her face, and her breaths came faster, which only made her breasts push against her folded arms.

*Hell.* He wasn't going to stop this, was he?

He lunged forward just as she hurled herself at him.

Clamping his hands on her full ass, he lifted her so she wrapped her thighs around his waist. Their mouths collided in a burning kiss.

He angled his head to plunge his tongue between her lips. She parted them on a cry and came back at him by swiping her sweet tongue across his. A primal growl rumbled from him.

As he navigated toward her bedroom, something got tangled around his feet and he almost pitched them both to the floor.

“Damn cat,” he muttered.

She giggled. “Hemingway, scat!”

The cat turned up his smashed nose and slinked off.

“You insulted him.” Jace caught her lower lip and sucked.

A soft moan was her only response. In seconds, he had the cat firmly shut out of her room and Bronte tossed onto the mattress. The green robe rode up her thighs, and his gaze arrowed between them.

In a sexy move, she let her knees part. “Is this what you're looking for, Jace?”

“Strip.”

A shudder rolled through her at his one-word command.

Watching her every move, he stood at the end of the bed and removed his boots, socks and shirt. He took off his belt and left his sidearm safely on the nightstand within reach. But with his team keeping a close eye on the building and her condo, he had confidence that they wouldn't be disturbed.

Her eyes hazed as she watched him. Slipping her arms out of the robe sleeves, she revealed a nightgown underneath, equally as silky as the robe, with a Japanese floral print on it.

He said the name of the flowers in Japanese.

Her lips fell apart. "What is that?"

"Cherry blossoms. The flowers on your nightgown," he rasped, setting a knee on the bed and climbing toward the sweet treat he ached for so bad. "Now take it off before I shred it."

"Oh god!" She had to dig her heels into the bed to lift her ass up enough to remove the garments. In a blink, she was totally naked.

Jace's mouth dried out. "You're not wearing..."

"Underwear." She nodded. "I didn't want you to know the color this time."

He made a noise and might have said a bad word or two that would get his mouth washed out with soap if his momma ever heard them. But his mind blanked as he threw himself between Bronte's curvy thighs and lowered his mouth to her pussy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte gripped the covers. Her entire body thrummed. Her nerve endings were on fire.

As Jace swirled his tongue over and over her hard, straining clit, she shot higher and higher toward her peak. She was seconds away—heartbeats away.

Suddenly she tipped over the edge with a sharp cry. Her muscles gripped, her pussy clenched and she twisted Jace's hair in her fingers as her orgasm ripped through her. A sharp

cry tore from her lungs, and her hips bucked off the bed in time to the release pounding her core.

“Jace!”

He vibrated with a moan that sounded as though he got as much pleasure as she was. But he didn't know what she had in store for him. This amazing man was about to get his thick cock sucked until he didn't know his own name.

In some remote part of her brain, Bronte registered just how unlike her this all was. She might be more free-spirited than many CEOs she'd met, but she wasn't *this* free.

Only with Jace.

A final pulsation rippled through her. Collapsing to the mattress, she panted for air. Warmth spread over her, leaving her feeling as sated as if she just swam her best time and climbed out of the pool, muscles heated with exertion, to stretch out in the sun.

Jace lifted his head and gave her a smoldering look that had her toes curling into the bed all over again.

“My turn,” she purred. “Come up here.”

He crawled overtop her like a predator cat, all strength and sleek muscles working. She hooked her arms around him and rolled, forcing him onto his back. A chuckle left him but quickly cut off as she covered the bulge of his cock with her palm.

Looking into his eyes, she slowly popped the button of his jeans and inched down the zipper. When she reached into his tight black cotton briefs and pulled his cock free, his breathing hitched.

“Sweetness, you don't have—ahhh!”

She took him into her mouth, filling it with his hard velvet. Salt and musk danced on her taste buds as she brought him into the back of her throat.

He jammed his fingers into her hair, tugging the strands and shoving the length aside so he could watch her suck him.

Chest swelling with the heady power of being able to bring her strong bodyguard to his metaphorical knees, she moved down his body. She stretched out between his legs and gripped his jeans to wiggle them down his hips for better access.

When his full balls appeared, she stroked them gently while taking his cock to the root.

He made a choked noise and then a strangled one. Running her tongue up the veined length to the tip, she watched his face contort in ecstasy. Encouraged by the pleasure she was giving him, she slipped her tongue from the mushroomed head to the base and lapped her tongue over his sac.

He tensed, cock surging. Next thing she knew, he'd ripped her off him and thrown her down on the bed. She didn't have time to make a noise before he was kissing her while twisting and turning to shimmy out of his clothes.

One hand cupped her breast, his callused thumb swishing over the crest. Her mind blanked to everything in the world except her lover. In his arms, she didn't need to worry about her safety or the show or ex-partners. She only needed to drink in his kisses and the feel of his stiff cock as he stretched her to the max.

Her insides flexed, and his name burst past her lips. Hooking her thighs around him, she angled her pussy upward to take him all the way.

He fell still, eyes pinched shut and his kiss stalling.

Running her hand down his spine in a wide swath, she tried to push all her emotion in this moment into him. To show him just how good he made her feel. How safe and...alive.

He dragged his cock through her slick walls all the way to the tip before ramming home again. She locked him against her and moved in the primitive dance. Passion welled inside her. Jace's steely cock glided in and out until her insides rippled with another release.



Stiffening, he pumped fast and hard, taking her to the next level as his hot cum soaked her walls.

His loud groan filled the room, making her glad his team was a few condos over and wouldn't come running at the noise. Gripping his shoulders, she rode him to the very last.

He braced his weight over her. Eyes closed, he found her lips and kissed her with a lingering passion that sent her heart racing again.

When she curled up next to him, eyes closed, she took a moment to lock in to her emotions. She hadn't known Jace more than a few days but the fact was, he was different. Her mind knew it, her body knew it...and her heart knew it too.

His breathing slowed to a more normal rhythm and he stroked a slow path up and down her spine.

"If you stuck around, I could fall in love with you," she whispered.

His hand stopped moving, and he seemed to quit breathing as well.

Oh crap, why did she say that? She never blurted out words without thinking long and hard about them first. Sometimes agonizing over how to word things as not to offend a client or someone on her staff. Then with a man who was forbidden from her, the words just spouted from her mouth?

She had to break the tense moment.

Rolling away from him, she started to climb off the bed, but he yanked her back down and pinned her with his body. His huge biceps flexed and his dark gaze burned into his.

"Why did you say that?" His tone frayed her nerves even more. If she already didn't believe her slip was a mistake, his voice said as much.

She avoided his gaze and focused on his jaw. To her horror, he pressed a knuckle beneath her chin to force her to meet his eyes.

"Tell me why, Bronte."

She cast around for anything but the truth. She always sucked at coming up with lies on the fly.

*Guess I have to settle for the truth.*

“I thought you didn’t want me withholding anything from you.”

He stared at her for so long that her stomach started to jitter.

Just when she thought he might push her away, he lowered his lips to hers. She melted into that caress and clutched at his shoulder like she was gripping a rock in a churning sea.

Getting involved with her bodyguard was the biggest risk she’d ever taken. Starting a company seemed less worrisome than being tangled up with Jace.

## Chapter Eleven

---

Bronte's stomach was still rocking with nerves even when she woke. She could barely focus on her routine of showering and dressing for the day—the gorgeous man sharing her condo these past few days wasn't making it any easier.

She could hear him in the living room, voice low as he spoke to one of the WEST team that he'd let into the condo. She wasn't entirely in the loop, and didn't want to be, if she were honest. Knowing what was supposed to happen would only drive her crazy if it didn't happen on time—or at all.

For a woman who lived her life by a calendar and clock, the stress of a loose plan like theirs was driving her a little mad.

She tossed some clothes into a bag to take to Napa Valley. Only a few short hours ago, attending Trade Con seemed like a priority. Now she wasn't so sure.

While she had confidence that Jace and the guys would keep her safe, at times the best-laid plans went off the rails like a rogue trolley careening down the streets of San Francisco.

She added her small pouch of toiletries to the weekend bag and glanced at the closed door. Jace was still speaking to his teammate. She tried to gauge his mood by the sound of his voice.

Oh, what did it matter what his mood was when she was going to ruin it anyway?

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she braced herself. As soon as she opened the door, the voices stopped.

When she walked into the living room in her favorite pair of platform heels and saw Jace and Jaren seated together, in the same pose with elbows on their knees and heads cocked in the same manner, she blurted, “You’re brothers, aren’t you?”

Jace got to his feet, a smile toying with the corners of his mouth. “I didn’t make that clear before?”

She shook her head. “You only introduced him as Jaren. But I see the resemblance, especially with you both wearing hats.”

Jaren pushed off her sofa, which he looked very out of place on, and crossed the room to the front door. “I think we covered everything, *brother*,” he said pointedly.

Bronte couldn’t help but smile.

The man left, and she and Jace were alone. Since her blurted confession about falling for him the night before, they hadn’t spoken much. She eyed him. Would he act strange with her now?

He didn’t seem bothered by the brief admission. In fact, he looked rugged and hot and ready to conquer the day.

Or in this case, take down The Broker.

“You’re packed. Let me take your bag.” He moved forward.

“I can carry it. It’s not heavy. Besides, I’m used to doing everything myself.”

He nodded and picked up the small nylon duffel he must have ordered to carry his new clothes. “Then we’re off.”

“I just have to say goodbye to Hemingway.”

At his name, her cat padded out from behind the sofa. She moved forward to scoop him up and nuzzle his flat nose with hers and stroke his ears. “I’ll miss you, but I’ll be home in a couple of days. Your food and water dispensers are stocked and your litter boxes are clean. I also left you a hair tie to find in my bedroom if you get bored with your toys.”

Jace grunted.

She kissed him on the head and then held the cat out to Jace.

He cocked a brow. “You don’t expect me to kiss that thing, do you?”

“Why not? You seem to be fond of pussy.”

Her bold words had the effect she hoped for. Jace’s jaw dropped.

She lowered Hemingway to the floor and breezed past Jace to the door.

A scoffed laugh escaped him.

All the way down the elevator and outside, her nerves kicked in again. She really needed to talk to him about a change of plan. He wasn’t going to like it, but there was no getting around the fact that she needed some papers from the office.

In the electric car with him, she spoke up before he started the engine. “Uh...Jace? I need to make a pitstop at the office before we get on the road to Napa.”

He twisted in his seat to face her, too large for the compact car. “What for?”

“I forgot about some papers I need for the show.”

“No.” He twisted to the windshield again.

She let out an annoyed sigh. “I knew you’d be this way. It’s just a stop by the office. It’s not like The Broker’s going to be there waiting to cap me.”

“To cap you?”

“Yes. I read the phrase in a thriller novel.” She huffed. “Let’s not argue. Please. Let’s just get the papers and we’ll be on the road. Jaren will understand the change of plans.”

McCoy was slated to remain in the condo with Kimmy. The woman must be upset not to be attending Trade Con with Bronte, but it was for the best. The fewer people the WEST team had to protect, the better.

When Jace actually listened to her request and drove to Artemis, she hid her pleased smile. Getting the papers from the office was quick, but on the way out, the elevator stopped and someone boarded.

Her heart sank as she saw who it was. Anthony.

She wet her dry lips. “Hello.” Did her voice sound natural?

A smile spread over her client’s face. “Look who’s here! I didn’t expect to run into you today.”

She felt Jace’s body tense, and he plastered himself closer against her in order to keep up that dumb charade of being her fiancé. Later she’d have to enlighten him that being engaged didn’t mean he had to wrap himself around her like a boa constrictor.

Anthony beamed. “So nice to see you, Miss Burns. And... Abel. Do I have that right?” He held out a hand for Jace to shake. Reluctantly, he did but as soon as he dropped Anthony’s hand, he wrapped his arm around Bronte and hauled her more tightly against his side.

“I’m just heading up to meet with the software designer at Artemis,” Anthony informed them.

She nodded. “Great. Clarissa is looking forward to it.”

Jace remained silent and tense. She stole a glance at his face, only to find his jaw locked in a way that said he didn’t like Anthony. Just what she needed. She hoped her client didn’t pick up on it.

Since the elevator was headed down when Anthony entered, he had to ride to the ground floor with them and then back up to the Artemis office. When she and Jace stepped off, they said their goodbyes.

As soon as the door shut on Anthony’s smiling face, Jace lifted a hand to touch his ear. He spoke low into his comms device connecting him to his teammates. “Jaren, you have eyes on that guy? Look into him.”

Bronte walked faster, hoping to get out of the building before she lambasted her bodyguard. They stepped outside and she tore free of his stronghold. “You’re looking into my client now? What has he done but be nice to you and believe your tall tales about being my fiancé?”

His eyes flicked over her angry face but he didn’t speak until they were locked in the car alone. Twisting in his seat, he pinned her with his stare. “It’s my job to look into everybody who comes in contact with you. Besides”—he faced forward and gripped the wheel—“Anthony was already in the building before going to Artemis.”

Her brows shot up into her hair that still needed a trim. “So? There are other offices in the building and he’s allowed to do business with them.”

“I don’t trust anybody.” His flat tone shouldn’t turn her on like that. “I didn’t say he committed any crime, Bronte-without-the-sideways-colon-over-the-*E*. I only told Jaren to check him out.”

She blinked at Jace. “Sideways colon? Is that the best you can come up with now as a way to insult me?”

His chest deflated, and he dropped his angled jaw to his chest. “I’m not insulting you, sweetness. I’m trying to distract you.”

She opened her mouth and closed it. What was there to say to that bit of bodyguard logic, even if it was an idea born from the caveman days when they believed a woman couldn’t handle stress?

Then again, he had orders and was trained to keep a ward calm. Only she was even more frazzled by his attempt to take her mind off him digging up dirt on her client, who was more than likely just using the services of a business on another floor of her building.

He started the car and pulled out onto the street. While he navigated out of the city and hit the highway, neither one of them spoke. She had too much on her mind to hold a conversation, and he was probably trying to come up with

another way to refer to the dots that weren't over the *E* in her name.

The highway leading to Napa Valley was always a busy one, and Jace buzzed in and out of traffic like he dealt with heavy city traffic every day. But she knew that Stone Pass, where the WEST Protection office was located, was a small town nestled in the mountains. Nothing like the Bay area.

A few fat raindrops splattered the windshield.

Jace peered at the splotches. "What's this?"

"It's something called rain, Jace. It's a phenomenon all over the world."

"The forecast didn't call for rain today. I checked."

"Weathermen are often wrong," she returned.

His expression darkened into a scowl as more rain hit the windshield, until it was a full-blown downpour.

She poked the beast. "Let me guess—you don't like surprises either."

"There are enough surprises in my job. Something needs to go by the book."

"Well, if you're counting on the weather being the stable factor, you'll never be happy."

Suddenly, she realized they were slowing down. At that moment, Jace did too.

He stared down at the controls on the dashboard. "Something's wrong with the engine." He signaled and pulled off the highway. Cars zoomed past them.

"What do you think is wrong with it?" Bronte's stomach churned. What if someone had tampered with the vehicle? Someone *was* after her.

Jace rocked forward in the seat to stare at the blinking light in the corner. "Fuck! It's out of charge."

She sucked in a gasp. "You forgot to charge it?"

"Hell. Where's the nearest station?"



“You passed it two miles ago.”

He whipped his head to look at her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’re the driver and in charge!”

“Hell,” he repeated like an ornery beast.

“There are roadside services for this sort of thing.”

“And risk another driver trying to kill you?” He shook his head and snapped his phone to his ear. He barked words into it. “Jaren. The EV is out of charge. We’re stranded on the side of the road.”

His brother must have asked what an EV was because Jace pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. “Electric vehicle. Yeah. Come pick us up. I’ll drop you a pin.”

An overwhelming urge to giggle stole over Bronte. She crushed her lips with the back of her hand and twisted to stare out the side window.

“I know you’re trying not to laugh at me.” His sour tone really made her lose it, and she shook with laughter.

“You should...see...your...face!” She rocked in her seat.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

She wheezed through another heavy tremor of laughter. When she glanced at him, she saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

“You have to admit it’s a dumb thing to do.”

He snorted. “Don’t rub it in. You could have warned me the charge was low.”

“I’m not used to checking those things either. I have a driver, remember? Or at least I did. After this is all over, I’ll probably be walking to work.”

“No, you won’t.”

She met his stare across the small distance. His eyes burned with some emotion she couldn’t make sense of. “What’s wrong with walking?”

“It makes you a target. And you work long hours. A woman walking alone at night isn’t a good idea.”

She started to say that she could take care of herself when he looked in the rearview mirror. “Here’s Jaren. Be careful getting out on the side of the road in those high shoes. I’ll get the bags.”

Within seconds they transferred cars and abandoned theirs on the side of the road. She settled in the back seat, thinking Jace would take shotgun next to his brother, but when the back door opened, she started.

Jace slid in next to her.

She gave him the eyeball. She saw Jaren glance in the mirror and eyeball them both.

Sitting back in her seat, she clasped her fingers in her lap and attempted not to show how disconcerted she was by Jace’s strange, clingy behavior.

Then he reached over and covered her hands with his big, rough one. Her heart gave a little pattering thump.

She may not know what was happening, but she was pretty sure her heart was mixed up in it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jace waited for Bronte to close the bathroom door. Then waited for the sound of the shower running before he spoke to Jaren.

“What else could go wrong on this case? It’s been one tangled-up mess since I landed in California.”

His brother prowled across the thin hotel carpet to the minifridge. He took out a bottled water and glanced around. “At least the convention center’s got all the amenities.”

“Yeah, too bad we can’t drink on the job.” He doffed his cowboy hat and scraped his fingers through his hair. He tossed the hat aside on the nearby table. “Guess I’d better take that off. I can’t have anybody recognizing me as Bronte’s bodyguard.”

Jaren had secured the room key for them while Jace took Bronte through a side entrance so she wasn't seen, but he should have thought about leaving the hat back in the car.

Ugh. The damn electric car with its puny battery life could have put them in danger. He was kicking himself for not being more aware of all these details. Even if taking a car to a charging station wasn't the norm for him, it was no excuse. He had to adapt to any situation.

Jaren crossed the room again and dropped into a seat. He sipped his water, his eyes never leaving Jace.

"What the hell are you starin' at? Never seen an alpha before?" he said sardonically.

Jaren chuckled. "She's really getting to you, isn't she?"

Jace sliced his gaze to the bathroom door before realizing the action gave him away even more. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"When I was driving you two love bugs around and you were holding hands in the back seat like you were going to your first dance, you didn't stop to think that it's not the usual bodyguard/ward relationship?"

He pushed air through his nostrils. "I don't need any crap from you right now, Jaren. Just leave it be."

His brother held up his hands, still gripping the water. "Fine."

"And don't say a word to our brothers. Or our mother." Jace stabbed a finger in his direction.

"You're preachin' to the choir, bro. The last thing I'd do is air your dirty laundry when I don't want you doing the same to me."

Jace narrowed his eyes at him. "What dirty laundry do you have to air?"

"None-ya business." He polished off the water and screwed the cap back on. "I looked over the schedule for the show. Looks boring as fuck."

“Probably lots of great information to gather here.”

“Only if you’re a tech geek like you.”

“Well I won’t be gathering information or making connections with anyone here. My sole focus is Bronte.”

“In more ways than one.”

“Shut up, Jaren.”

His brother shoved to his feet and tossed the bottle at the small wastebasket across the room, making a dunk. The asshole always was better at sports than the rest of them, but he never wanted to play. Too busy rebuilding bikes and stirring up trouble.

“I’ll be in the room beside yours.” He crossed to the door and paused to swing back and look sideways at Jace. “Don’t make me call the front desk with a noise complaint.”

Jace gave him the finger, and Jaren walked out, his chuckle trailing behind him.

He wasn’t joking when he said he wished they could drink on the job. Right now, he could use a little alcohol to take the edge off. He was keyed up, more than usual too.

Of course, it was all Bronte’s fault. The woman had worked her sweet, funny, charming way into his system and now he couldn’t even think about failing her. There was a ton of pressure on him, and much of it was out of his hands. He needed his team to get more information about the bloody shirt, the driver and The Broker. Too many loose ends. Too many things could go wrong.

He must be fucking nuts for allowing Bronte to be here. Out of habit, he took out his weapon and checked it over. All was in operating order so he slid it back into the waist of his jeans and went over their itinerary in his head.

Several events were taking place during the show that Bronte would not be attending, but tonight kicked things off. A small group of CEOs were taking a bus to a local wine-tasting event. Bronte insisted that she needed to speak to one in particular who might be a good fit for her collaboration, and

Jace agreed in hopes that things would be settled quickly and they could leave.

He could take her back to her condo, carry her to bed...

As his thoughts took a dirty turn, he stroked his jaw and stared at the bathroom door.

Was she naked right now? Stepping out of the shower? His gut clenched at the fantasy of sucking on her peaked nipples and making her pussy wet and ready for him.

His phone buzzed, jerking him from the daydream. He nudged his cock into a better position and answered the call.

“It’s Ross. We’re in the building and scoping it out now.”

He almost choked on his tongue. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Last-minute decision. Things are too hairy for two of you to handle alone. I brought two of the guys with me, so you’ve got all the backup you need. Right now, Lauralee is tapping all the cameras.”

“Anything in particular you’re searching for?”

“Just The Broker.” Ross’s statement sent adrenaline through Jace’s veins. “We know he’ll be here, and this time he’s not getting away from us.”

This was it. The chance to put an end to The Broker’s reign of terror.

And to find out the truth about the event that wiped out Abel Security.

He just prayed he could keep Bronte safe while it all went down.

## Chapter Twelve

---

Bronte's parents dragged her to a lot of special events in her life. At a young age, she learned that even if she wasn't in her element, she could hold her own in company. Except that usually included sculptors and poet laureates, not brilliant minds behind the biggest tech companies in the country, if not the world.

She snagged a glass of wine from a passing server and brought it to her lips, not even bothering with analyzing the bouquet before she tossed it back.

A warm hand cupped her elbow, and she lowered the glass to see amused creases around Jace's eyes. "Don't let them get to you, sweetness."

That he understood exactly what was going on in her mind made her want to stamp her foot in irritation and simultaneously kiss him for knowing her so well.

"Do you have to be so good at reading me?" she whispered.

The lights played in his eyes, stealing her thoughts and ushering them onto a darker plane—where he was pinning her to the stone wall of the winery and plunging his hand inside her panties.

As another server passed, he set her glass on it and grabbed two new ones. The fragile goblets held a lighter wine than the one she'd guzzled a moment ago.

"Here. Try this." He offered her the goblet.

Why did he appear to fit right in with these guys? He'd changed from the jeans and T-shirt he traveled to Napa in to a

slim pair of gray trousers that hugged his ass and emphasized the bulge behind his fly. And the charcoal-gray polo shirt made his tanned skin stand out.

Holding her gaze, he brought the glass to his lips. She watched the peachy liquid brush his lips and then his throat move on the swallow.

She tried a sip too. “Is this supposed to dry out your throat like the Sahara?” she whispered with a small cough.

He made a face. “It’s not great quality. I expected better.” He raised a hand to get the server’s attention and set the glasses on it. The guy gave Jace a nod and revolved through the group, gathering other people’s glasses.

A man in a suit with the top buttons of his white shirt unbuttoned like he’d just left a bachelor party sauntered up to them. “You two look thirsty.” He flicked a hand and a server rushed over.

“Try this. It’s my favorite in the cellar.” He smiled widely at Bronte as she accepted a glass.

“I can see how people get tipsy at these tastings.” She brought it to her lips but paused to follow Jace’s lead.

He buried his nose in the glass and inhaled. “Cabernet Sauvignon?”

The man’s smile spread. He nodded.

Jace swirled the contents of the glass, and Bronte did the same, trying not to slosh the liquid over the sides and all over her dress. The events her parents dragged her to as a kid, she was served ginger ale, not wine or champagne. And the occasional glass with dinner didn’t make her someone who appreciated it the way these other CEOs seemed to.

Jace lifted his nose from the glass. “Raspberry. And do I detect green peppercorn?”

The man nodded with enthusiasm.

Bronte blinked. First Jace could speak Japanese, and now he spoke wine too?

“Nutty too. Aged in oak.”

The man reached out and clapped Jace on the shoulder. “I’m glad someone here has the nose to appreciate it. Enjoy, my friend.” He walked off to the next group.

“I take it he works for the winery,” she said quietly before taking a sip. The richness swirled in her head. Now this one she could get tipsy on.

“Sounds that way.” Jace sipped but she noticed he only allowed a tiny amount in his mouth before lowering the glass. He wouldn’t risk being impaired when on duty. His eyes roved around the room as he scoped out any danger.

Then his eyes landed on her.

His stare traveled over her lips on the rim of the glass and down to her hand.

“Damn! I forgot. Come with me.” He set down his glass, took her elbow and led her to a private corner.

“Why do I always feel like you’re pushing me like a vacuum cleaner, Jace?”

He made a noise in his throat and dug into his pants pocket, coming out with some small object pinched between his fingers.

“Hold out your hand.”

“What?”

“Just do it.”

She bristled with annoyance. “Mr. Bossy. Fine.” She held out her right hand.

“The left one.”

Her brows pinched together, but she transferred her glass to the other hand and extended it toward Jace.

His warm fingers clasped around hers. When he slipped something onto her ring finger, she snatched her hand back. Or tried to—he held it tight.



Their stares locked in a battle of wills. “What are you *doing?*” she asked in a furious whisper.

“Making us look legit.” He shoved the object to the base of her finger.

She jerked her hand up in front of her face and gaped at the diamond ring he’d placed there. “Oh my god! You did not just put a ring on me!”

“Keep your voice down.” He slanted a look toward the rest of the group at the tasting. “And yes, I did. We need to look authentic.”

She stared at the multifaceted center stone with several tiny ones stretching across the band to either side. “Is this... real?”

“It’s moissanite. Lab-grown, but tests as real. No impurities in that.”

Heat climbed into her cheeks. Just feeling the band around her finger had her heart tripping in ways she never expected, and definitely not thanks to a fake fiancé.

She dropped her hand and gave a nonchalant shrug. “I’m glad you did your homework, I guess. But why do these people need to think we’re together?”

“Fewer people will fuck with you.”

“You mean you’ll scare them off.”

The hard set of his jaw told her she was right, even though she already knew it.

She looked around his broad shoulders and spotted the person she’d come here to see. “Oh! It’s Miles Morgan. I have to speak to him.”

Jace brushed his fingers over her arm. Leaning in, he rumbled, “Stay close to me.”

A small thrill hit her system, a wave that lifted and fell, leaving her feeling jittery and as though someone had cranked up the heat in the winery.

She nodded and they drifted over to the group of men and women surrounding Miles Morgan. He was the perfect match for her new software. The one person she would choose to help her distribute it to hospitals and research labs. He was her reason for wanting to attend the trade show in the first place.

Her original idea was to take the microphone, present her software and wait for Morgan to come to her. But since Jace shot down that plan, a closed group at a wine tasting was the next best thing.

Bronte wasn't raised to worry about social strata, but she had to admit her nerves jangled at approaching the billionaire mogul. If he decided to partner with her, Artemis stocks would skyrocket. *Everything* was on the line.

Suddenly, the wine in her stomach churned, leaving her feeling sick. She stopped on the edge of the group and listened to their conversation. The topic was on solar technology. She hadn't heard of Miles Morgan dabbling in solar, but the man seemed to have a finger in every pie in the industry.

To her pleasure—and horror—the man spotted her on the edge of the group and focused on her. “Miss Burns from Artemis. I'm glad to see you joined us.”

Nerves skittered through her body to settle in her stomach. She smiled and moved forward to shake his hand.

“So nice to finally meet you, Mr. Morgan.”

“Call me Miles.”

She smiled and nodded. “And you must call me Bronte.”

“Such an interesting name. One you don't ever hear.”

“Thank you. I have very literary parents.”

At her side, Jace quietly cleared his throat. It took her a beat to realize he expected an introduction.

How was she going to do that?

He'd given her the answer—hadn't he?—when he put that ring on her finger.

She swallowed. “Miles, this is Abel. My...fiancé.”

“Congratulations! I hadn’t heard the news. Word hasn’t spread about your engagement yet.”

The men shook hands. She saw Jace’s knuckles whiten briefly as he squeezed the CEO’s hand.

“It’s relatively new,” she hurried to break them apart.

“And a lovely ring too, I see.”

She quickly shifted to take the focus off the ring that left her feeling so conflicted.

Why, though? Because of how highhanded her bodyguard was?

Or because she secretly wanted to sit and stare at that ring, letting out tiny sighs every so often while she dreamed of her father walking her down the aisle?

She had to dump these thoughts and present her software to Miles Morgan before he moved on to someone far more interesting than her.

“Mr. Morgan—Miles.” She offered him a polite smile. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a minute of your time to discuss a proposal I have for you.”

He shifted his gaze around the group. They were all drinking and laughing, not talking about business at this point — when the wine they’d consumed was beginning to hit their system.

With a nod, he waved a hand toward the exit. “Let’s step outside and enjoy the beautiful scenery while we talk.”

Jace barreled through the door ahead of her. She saw his hand twitch toward his spine in readiness of any danger and let out a small shiver that her man was so dangerous and capable.

*My man.*

Oh, god. The ring on her finger and the fake fiancé thing were starting to go to her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jace's words lodged in his throat as Bronte stepped out of the bedroom wearing a gown the color of an emerald.

She glided toward him, her high heels silent on the carpet of the suite. A nervous smile crossed over her face as she caught him staring.

The neckline was wide and low, offering a perfect hint of creamy cleavage, and the dress swished behind her.

He felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He was finding it difficult to get enough air.

She drew close, and he stepped forward to take her hands. "You look like one of those old Hollywood-era starlets."

Her lips parted on a puff of air. "You don't think it will be too much? Kimmy assured me when I picked it out that it was perfect for the dinner tonight."

"You're perfect in everything, but this dress looks like it was made for you." He stared deep into her expressive brown eyes, aware of the deeper flecks and how they glittered at his compliment.

Bronte stepped back to give him the eye too. "You don't look so shabby yourself. I don't know what I like better on you, the jeans and hat or a suit."

His cock urged him to unzip that dress and let it fall to the floor just to find out what she wore underneath it. But he needed to find some control. Tonight was a pivotal point in Bronte's case. If his team's plan succeeded, The Broker would finally be in custody. Hopefully they'd have the criminal behind it *all* this time and the man responsible for the death of the congressman's daughter would be dealt the justice he deserved.

When he stroked his thumb across her fingers, he brushed over the metal band of the engagement ring she wore. His chest tightened even further. When he placed that ring on her finger, his brain insisted it was all for show. But the part of him that always knew someday he'd ask a woman to marry him felt the act to the base of his soul.

For a fleeting moment when he'd slid the ring in place and gazed into Bronte's eyes, it hadn't been fake.

He tightened his lips, steeling himself for what else he had to do tonight. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her more than she already was. She was looking so radiantly beautiful ever since she secured that deal back at the winery with Miles Morgan. Between her inner glow of happiness and the stunning dress, everyone would be looking at her tonight.

Which would work to WEST's advantage when Jace wired her so they could keep tabs on everything.

"You're missing something." His voice sounded gritty with the nerves he tried not to show.

As he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a tiny box, her hand fluttered to her throat.

"Don't get excited. It's not what you think." His stomach shouldn't feel so sick as he opened the case and showed her the tiny gold pin in the shape of a heart.

Her lashes fluttered downward and then flicked up when she met his gaze again. "What does it do?"

"It's a camera, but if you press down on it, it will bring every man on the WEST team running to your aid. There's a built-in tracker." He plucked it from the case and moved in. "Where would you like it pinned?"

She glanced down at herself, and he was already fixated on her lush cleavage just begging for long, lazy strokes of his tongue. A flush crept over the tops of her breasts and up her throat. She pointed out a spot in the center of the neckline. "I guess right here."

"I told Ari to send something that would match a formal dress."

"Ari?"

He carefully stabbed the slender pin through the cloth. "Yes. She develops technology and recently designed a bunch of devices for our use."

"Another woman in the tech industry? That's awesome."

He pressed the back in place but didn't step away from Bronte. The warm notes of cherry and vanilla held him prisoner. All he wanted to do was smudge her lipstick, muss up her hair and make her scream his name.

She tipped her face up to his. Their lips hovered inches away.

He took a step back. "Be careful you don't hit that button."

Her breasts heaved against her bodice with a sharp intake of breath. "Better not get too close then."

Unable to help himself, he traced a fingertip over her collarbone.

Her breaths came faster. "What do you expect the camera to pick up?"

"Not what, but who. As the camera scans the guests at the dinner, my team will be running facial recognition for matches and hopefully we'll weed out The Broker."

"Why aren't you wearing one?"

"No one wants to talk to *me*."

"Am I bait?" Her pouty lips curved upward.

He gave her a ghost of a smile. "Maybe chum."

Her eyes glimmered. "I can't even fire you for that joke. I need you to protect me."

Stomach dropping, he knew the time had come. He had to tell her the news.

"Bronte, there's something you need to know." He cut his fingers through his hair, missing the hat he never expected to become such a part of him.

She searched his eyes. The red blush turned to two hectic splotches of color in her cheeks. "What is it? Did something happen?"

Fuck, did he have to give her this news? Now?

Yes, he did. It was the only way to make her see how dangerous this game was and how she had to exercise the utmost caution. Plus, it wasn't fair to withhold what he'd known since that morning.

"We got a match on the blood on that T-shirt."

She pressed a palm against her chest, dangerously close to the pin he'd cautioned her not to trigger. "And?" she barely breathed.

"It's your former partner's blood."

She turned bone white. Tilting forward at the waist, she gasped for air. Concern ripped through him, and he held her by the arms, prepared to catch her if she fainted. What had she said about him thinking she couldn't handle stress?

It wasn't that he didn't believe Bronte was as tough as any man on the WEST team. But she wasn't accustomed to dealing with threatening letters and blood-stained shirts.

"Oh my god," she whispered.

He curled a hand around her nape, itching to bury his fingers into her soft hair but not wanting to ruin her updo. In fact, the need to crush her against his chest and never let go was too damn telling.

He was falling for his ward. Hell, he was halfway to loving her.

*Of all the times to have an epiphany...*

"Is she...alive?" she asked.

"We don't know that. We've got the FBI searching for her."

Her eyes flared with alarm. "I told you, the FBI can't get involved!"

"Calm down. They're looking into her as a missing person, not as a woman who committed corporate espionage. Besides, you locked in that deal with Morgan. Your company is safe."

She managed a jerky nod. “I never wanted anything bad to happen to Angelica, even if I’m still really angry about what she did.”

“I understand, and I know you’d never wish ill on anyone. While we search for her, we’re hoping to lure out a rat tonight at the dinner.”

She met his eyes. “The Broker.”

He nodded. That time he couldn’t stop himself from dragging her close and pressing a kiss to the tender skin between her brows. Emotion coursed through him, and he pinched his eyes shut on the sensation of his heart being ripped out of his chest. If anything happened to her tonight...

*Over my dead body.*

After several heartbeats, he released her. She gave herself a small shake to compose herself. “I just need my purse.”

He watched her cross to the luggage rack and her open suitcase at the foot of the bed they’d be sharing later tonight—if she’d have him.

She hooked a thin gold chain strap over her shoulder and tucked the matching satin bag close to her hip. When she returned to his side and faced him, they stared at each other. The weight of the situation struck him.

He was about to walk his ward into the most dangerous situation of her life. The Broker liked to terrorize people on the sly, not out in the open. He used handwritten letters that had yet to be traced and sent similar messages through burner phones. He might not even show his face at the dinner tonight.

Bronte stiffened her spine and thrust her shoulders back. “I’m ready.”

He admired the hell out of her, for so, so, *so* many reasons.

*And...there goes my heart.*

He held out an arm to her. She curled her hand around the crook of his elbow and together they went to face the flames.



\* \* \* \* \*

The first person Bronte spotted when they entered the packed room was Miles Morgan. He gave her a chin lift of recognition, and she returned the acknowledgement with a smile and a small wave.

Jace saw the exchange as well. “Annnd now my team’s running a check on him.”

She rammed the point of her elbow into his side, earning a low grunt from him. “If I thought Miles was a terrible person, I never would have asked him to partner with me on the software.”

Her mind shot to Angelica. God, gaining that collaboration was exactly what she and her former partner had dreamed of for Artemis. And now Angelica was missing, possibly dead.

As if sensing her despair, Jace tilted his head close and whispered, “You’re safe. Nobody is getting through me or my guys in this room.”

She glanced around the perimeter but couldn’t pick out the WEST team from the other guests. Of course, they knew how to blend into a crowd.

“If you’re pretending to be my fiancé, what are your guys pretending to be?”

“Since everyone here’s married or in a committed relationship, I doubt they’d fake an engagement.”

She still didn’t understand the workings of Jace’s mind and what made him spit out the fiancé thing to her client. He could have told him any other lie.

Sliding her thumb over the ring at the base of her finger, she tried to think about going back to not wearing the ring. It was fake in all ways, including its cultured stone. So why did it make her eyes prickle with tears to think of Jace taking back the ring and leaving California?

As he guided her through the crowd, she suddenly realized what he was doing—putting as many faces as possible

into the WEST team's system and searching for The Broker.

"Do you even know what he looks like?" she said to him in a quiet tone.

He knew what she was talking about. "We thought we had him once before. It was a surprise to learn he was at his old tricks again."

"What happened to that man?"

His lips hardened. "Russian mafia wanted him more than us. They got to him first."

She sucked in a gasp. Mafia? That stuff only happened in movies, not in her life. But she never believed she'd be trying to hide Angelica's crimes from the shareholders to keep her business on the up and up, or that she'd be "chum," as Jace so lovingly called her.

She edged closer to his side. Once again, he recognized her need and slid his arm around her back. He gave her waist a squeeze. A second later, he murmured out of the blue, "Last time Judd tried to kick your ass, bro. I won't try—I'll succeed."

A shock ran through her as she realized he was wired with a communication device too. And he was speaking to his brother.

She shot him a questioning look, but he only shook his head lightly.

He pushed her faster through the crowd.

Barely keeping up on her teetering high heels, she hissed, "You're pushing me like a vacuum again!"

He let out a snort and slowed his pace. "Sorry. I'm used to handling horses."

She started. "Wait, what? Really?"

"Yeah. I help out on the ranch where our office is located. I'm still learning, but..."

He cut off, and she waited for more, but he led her to a round table and pulled out a chair for her. Out of the corner of

her eye, she caught sight of a broad-shouldered man twisting to trail someone through the crowd. Panic swept her, and she refused to sit down, even when Jace's fingers pressed into her spine more firmly.

Mouth dipping to her ear, he urged her into the seat. "It's all right. Jaren's just looking into someone."

She twisted her face to his. "That was Jaren? I didn't recognize him."

"Yeah, he shaved his beard so no one would pick us out as brothers. It's all right, sweetness. I promise you're safe."

A shiver of emotion tore through her, wrecking her composure and tearing down all she knew about what she wanted out of life.

If someone asked her a week ago, she would have told them she wasn't even willing to *date*. Now she couldn't begin to think about being parted from her protector...her friend... her lover.

Hooking her evening bag over the back of the chair, she allowed Jace to guide her seat close the table. When he took the chair next to her, she reached out a hand to him under the tablecloth.

Throwing her a look that spoke more than any look he'd ever given her before, he meshed his fingers with hers. "I got you, Bronte-without-the-polka-dots."

She bit down on her lower lip to disguise her smile.

Dammit. He knew just how to distract her.

Somehow, she got through dinner and then a small speech given by the chairperson of Trade Con. Even though the food was decent, her nerves made it difficult to eat much and she was too on edge to hear what the man said.

She kept covertly sweeping her stare across the room, searching for Jaren, but she didn't spot him—or the person he was looking into.

She was so stuck in her own head that she hardly noticed when the strains of music sounded, but looked up at a tap on

her shoulder.

Miles Morgan stood there. “How about a dance to celebrate our partnership?” His stare shifted to Jace. “If your fiancé doesn’t mind, that is.”

Her eyes locked with Jace’s. He offered a smile she recognized was forced. Whether he was worried about her being in another man’s arms or away from his side, she didn’t know. But he nodded in agreement.

She stood and allowed her new partner to lead her onto the dance floor with a lot of other couples.

When Miles Morgan politely took her hand and her waist, she threw a look back at Jace. He was standing on the side of the floor, his gaze glued on her. She let out the trickle of air she’d been holding in her lungs. He was close. She had the camera pin that doubled as an alarm. She was safe.

Miles smiled down at her. “I have to admit I haven’t been this excited about a project in a long time.”

His words kicked her business mind back into gear. “I’m thrilled that you’ve agreed to work with Artemis.”

“I admit I had my assistant research Artemis more. You had a business partner until very recently. What happened to her?”

Oh god. Those words *flattened* her. Suddenly, she found it difficult to breathe and wanted to rip free of his arms to run to Jace.

Instead, she remained where she was even if she sent him a sidelong look.

“My partner and I had irreconcilable differences,” she told him. “I wanted to take the company in one direction and she had other plans.”

*Like stealing what we both built. Now she might be dead.*

“The business world is fickle. People come and go on our teams, but I sense our collaboration on your software design is here to stay. We’re going to make a lot of money from this, Bronte.”

She bobbed her head and tried to focus on her feet not getting tangled in her gown as her new partner whirled her across the floor.

Money was good. Staying alive was better.

## Chapter Thirteen

---

Jace had never been edgier in his life. There were too damn many couples on the dance floor, and he was having a hard time keeping Bronte in his sight.

Not to mention the chatter in his ear between Jaren and Ross was distracting as hell. Jaren thought he saw something suspicious and left the room to follow a man. Meanwhile, Ross was feeding him intel on the person of interest, and none of it was relevant to the current situation.

“Unless it’s Bronte’s former partner or the guy walks up and identifies himself as The Broker, do we care?” Jace muttered to himself under his breath.

He fixed his stare on Bronte’s green dress, noting her position in the room before shifting his attention to the people around her. Nobody looked out of place. Plenty of people had brought their spouses to the show. How many of these things had he worked over the years? More than a handful, and enough to know that they were usually dull and security was simply a precaution.

Except The Broker was somewhere in this room and probably watching Bronte too.

He was looking across the room, over Bronte’s head, when he saw Jaren slip through the doorway. His brother positioned himself along the wall and struck up a conversation with the woman closest to him.

Jace glanced back to Bronte. The song ended, and she and Morgan broke apart. She craned her neck, searching for Jace, and he pushed forward to reach her.

As soon as she saw him, relief washed over her face. She made an attempt to hide it, but anybody watching her would have seen. God, he wanted to get her out of here.

They started toward the table. In his ear came Ross's deep voice. "Hold up. Bronte left her purse hanging on her chair."

Jace came to a dead stop. Bronte whipped her head around to look at him. Alarm flared in her eyes, and adrenaline spiked in his bloodstream.

With a hand on her spine, he guided her past the table, grabbing her purse on the way by.

"Meet me at the east door and I'll take the purse," Ross said.

"Copy."

"What is going on?" Bronte twisted to look around.

"It may be nothing. It may not. We're just taking precautions."

She glanced at what he was holding and went pale. "Oh god. I left it hanging on the chair. You don't think somebody tampered with it, do you?"

"That's what we're about to find out." He steered her—like a vacuum—through the crowd to the east door. At that moment, Ross strode by.

Jace passed off the purse, which Ross tucked inside his jacket. He walked out.

Heart hammering, Jace guided Bronte to the bar and grabbed a glass of champagne for her. When he held it out to her, she didn't immediately take it. He stared at her harder, and she seemed to jolt back to herself.

Wrapping her fingers around his, she let out a hasty breath. "I don't like any of this, Jace."

"Drink the champagne, Bronte." He grabbed a glass for himself and clinked it against hers in a mock toast meant to keep her in character.

Her eyes widened, but she seemed focused again and sipped the bubbly. “To...good champagne?”

He nodded and let the liquid brush his lips though he didn't swallow any. “To the most beautiful woman in the room.”

“And the hottest man.”

He opened his mouth. Ross cut across him. “Move the ward. Now!”

“Fuck!” He grabbed the glass out of a stunned Bronte's hand and practically snapped the stems setting them down on the bar. He locked her against him. With a hand on his side in position to grab his weapon and shoot whatever threat Ross had seen, he prepared to throw her over his shoulder and make a run for safety.

“What's happening?” she cried as they burst out of the room. Jaren flanked him on his right as Noah Wynton moved on his left. The pair matched his steps.

“Where to?” he asked into the comms device.

“Closest door with a lock. This way.” Noah jerked his head for them to follow.

Jace's chest burned with a battle roar. Whatever Ross saw in her purse would send him into a fury and he knew it. Was it another threat? A bug planted?

Noah's long legs ate up the floor, but Bronte wasn't moving as quickly. Jace guided her at a slower pace and Jaren hung back on their six. When Noah reached a door, he held it open, ushering them inside.

The small office was furnished with a single desk and chair. A few photos of Napa Valley hung above the desk. Noah partially closed the door but kept an eye on the hallway outside.

Jace felt Bronte tremble and he pulled her into his arms, tucking her under his chin.

“I don't understand what's going on,” she whimpered.



He squeezed her closer, aware that his brother was taking it all in and even more cognizant that Jace didn't give a damn anymore.

“We'll know in a minute, sweetness.”

Jaren's crooked grin was very out of place in the moment, but Jace only held his stare.

“Ross is coming.” Noah's statement preceded the man entering. The door shut and locked behind him.

Jace faced his boss and teammates, still absorbing the tremors racking Bronte with his own body. “What did you find?” he demanded.

Ross extracted the purse. The air seemed sucked from the room as he pulled out a slip of paper.

Bronte made a choked noise.

Jace loosened his grip on her enough to let her turn in his arms.

Ross held up the paper. “Have you ever seen this before? Was it in your bag when you carried it into the dining room?”

She shook her head.

“I didn't think so. He was right under our fucking noses and we missed our shot.” Ross's harsh words were punctuated with fury.

“Let me see it.” Jace held out a hand for the note. Ross handed it to him, and he unfolded it.

The blocky shape of the handwriting was the same as the first letter she'd received back in San Francisco.

“You have two days to accept the offer,” he read aloud. He flipped the note over and skimmed the back. It was blank.

Bronte's hand flew to her lips. She stared at him with huge eyes. “Do you...think it's about the system I just partnered with Miles Morgan on?”

Jace nodded. “I do. It's big—he even said so himself when we met in the winery. The Broker must be trying to get it

for somebody.”

“For who is the question,” Noah interjected.

Jace stared at his guys. “We have the answer. Or there’s already someone who can tell us. Bronte’s ex-partner. We need to find her.”

“And hope she’s alive.” Bronte’s voice wobbled, but she remained strong and didn’t break down, though she’d wrapped her arms around herself as if holding together the pieces.

Fuck, he wanted all this to end. He was finished with all the threads waving around loose and none of them able to catch hold or to connect them so far.

*It’s only a matter of time, he told himself. We’ll find the bastard and end this. Then Bronte can go home safe. Keep going with her vision for Artemis.*

Without him.

As long as she was safe and happy, he could go on. It was the idea of anything else that made him want to wage war.

“What is this guy going to do to me if I don’t give in to him?” Bronte’s question drove through the silence.

Jace wrapped his fingers around her arm. “We won’t let it go any further. Besides, the worst that happened to the last woman he threatened was that she fell for my brother.”

Jaren grunted.

Ross held out his hand for the note, which Jace gave him. “I’ll have this analyzed. Noah, you dig into the camera footage. I want every person who made a move toward that purse checked out or brought in for questioning. Got it?”

“Copy that.”

“Jaren, you go with Jace and Miss Burns. You’re leaving. Find a safe spot to hole up until we have more on the situation.”

Bronte placed her hand over his and squeezed it hard. The chill in her fingers bled through his skin. All he wanted to do

was tuck her up in his arms—his bed—and warm every inch of her with his own body.

Jaren moved to the door. “I’ll bring the car to the closest exit.”

Jace nodded. “We’ll meet you.”

Ross and Noah both nodded to Jace before taking their leave.

A sigh burned in his chest. They were close; he could feel it. But close to what? He could only hope it was the answer—and the end to the games.

Bronte looked up at Jace. “Remember when I said I sometimes have to go to the bathroom when I’m nervous?”

“Damn. Now?”

Biting her lip, she nodded.

“All right. Let’s find you a restroom.”

Relief passed over her face. With all his senses on high alert, he led her out of the office, making sure to check where the nearest exit was so they could get back there and meet Jaren at the car.

Once he spotted the sign, he opened the door and scanned the inside. The few stalls were empty.

“Make it quick.” He gave her a little nudge and turned to see a woman coming down the hallway toward the restroom. She wore a pair of black pants and a simple white button-down shirt, the same as the waitstaff at the dinner, but her oily, pasty complexion looked like she needed a restroom and fast.

Not wanting her to blow chunks on him, he pressed his back to the wall and allowed her to enter.

The Broker said two days. The clock was ticking, and there didn’t seem to be any place that The Broker couldn’t find Bronte. So far, he’d outwitted the Abel brothers *and* the WEST Protection team.

Jace was going to put a stop to it.

Then he was going to tell Bronte that they were *far* from finished with this affair.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Stupid bladder couldn't handle the smallest little stressor.*

Okay, to be fair, knowing that The Broker was not only hunting her through the state but also came to Trade Con was enough to make anybody pee their pants.

Bronte was just wiggling her tight shapewear over her hips when a familiar voice made her blood run cold.

“Bronte! I know it’s you. Get out here. We need to talk before that guy suspects me and rips my head off.”

Bronte’s fingers convulsed on the tight elastic material. Her heart was doing backflips, and her stomach threatened to rebel.

No. It couldn’t be. It *couldn't* be Angelica in the same restroom with her.

But who else could it be? She knew that voice. She’d spent countless late nights discussing business strategies and giggling over the missteps they made early on in Artemis.

*How did she get past Jace?*

Had he just let the woman waltz into the bathroom? Maybe her intuition about people really *was* off. She’d loved Angelica and was betrayed. Now the man who promised to protect her—let this happen.

Quickly, she yanked the underwear up and let her gown fall to her ankles. Sweat broke out on her face and throat. What exactly was she walking into? Should she act poised or scream her head off for Jace?

With her heart in her mouth, she slowly slid the metal door lock to the side and cracked the door open.

Angelica stood in front of her, wearing a server uniform. She’d bleached her hair from its usual warm brown hue to an ashy gray-blond that made her skin appear pasty.

Bronte sliced a look at the door. “I can have help in here in less than a second. Don’t try anything!”

Angelica stepped closer and pitched her voice low. “Bronte, please listen to me. I didn’t want to betray you. You have to believe me. I love Artemis just as much as you do.”

Not understanding, she shook her head. “Then why?” The pain she rarely let anyone see when it came to Angelica’s treachery echoed in her voice.

“I didn’t have a choice. My life was on the line!”

“Speaking of that—I received your bloody shirt in a box! Why aren’t you dead?”

“Look, there isn’t much time to explain.”

“No, there isn’t! You’re about to lose your freedom!” Bronte took a step toward the door.

Angelica grabbed her arm and spun her back. Bronte glared at her. They were equal in height but she was wearing heels and Angelica wasn’t, so she had a few inches to glower down at her ex-partner.

Angelica stank of fear. “I was at a bar to meet a guy I met on a dating app. We’d been chatting for a while and I thought he was worth meeting in a public spot. We had a drink and talked. Nothing more happened between us. But I only remember leaving the bar that night—everything else is wiped from my memory. I woke up in a hotel room with gauze around my arm.”

Bronte looked at her hard. “Gauze?”

“A bandage. Someone took my blood. I don’t know what they did with it!”

“I do! I just told you I received your bloody Artemis shirt. I thought you were dead.”

A thud sounded from outside the bathroom door. Panic blasted through Bronte and she whirled to leave, but a sharp sting in her own arm was the last thing she registered.

## Chapter Fourteen

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Jace's gut was telling him to break into that bathroom and drag Bronte out of this place. But a glance around the empty hallway told him that everything was just fine.

He checked his phone. What was taking her so long? Then he remembered that women sometimes had to deal with difficult undergarments when going to the restroom. He'd give her two more minutes and then he was going in there.

Jaren's voice projected into his ear. "I've got the car. Where are you?"

"Bronte had to use the restroom."

"Shit. Okay, just hurry. I don't have an easy feeling."

"Neither do I." He raked his fingers through his hair and leaned close to the door, listening for the sound of running water to indicate Bronte was finishing up.

A low thump sounded, and he pictured her struggling with her undergarments, getting her heel tangled in her dress and falling over. Flattening his hand on the door, he started to push it open.

Pain exploded through his skull. A roar escaped him, and he whirled, reaching for his weapon as a second hit rocked him sideways. He hit the floor hard, and his cheek bounced off the tile .

"Jace! Jace! What's happening? Goddammit, I'm coming!" He hadn't heard his little brother sound so frantic since the youngest of them, Jennings, jumped in the river and remembered too late that he couldn't swim.

His mind spun. Shoving against the floor, he did a pushup, only to take a boot to the gut. The air whooshed from him. A fist connected with his jaw, twisting his head to the side just in time to see Bronte's green dress trailing on the floor.

Terror electrified his veins. They were dragging her off. What did they do to her?

A bellow sounded from the opposite side, followed by the thunder of boots on the floor.

"Don't move, Jace!" Jaren called right before he fired his weapon twice.

One of Jace's attackers fell hard. The other let out a shrill scream before Jaren pumped another bullet into him and the sound cut off.

"They took her! Go! I'll follow you!"

Jaren looked up. Jace did too and spotted a man and the server who'd entered the restroom looking sick dragging a boneless Bronte between them.

Jaren took off at a dead run. It took Jace longer to get up with the ringing in his ears and the world spinning, but he gripped his gun and started after them.

Voices blew up in his head as Jaren spouted instructions to the others to cut off the trio.

Jace put on speed. Where did this hallway even lead? At one end was an exit with the car they were meant to make a getaway in. The other branched into several areas.

Who was that woman dressed as a server?

The Broker had Bronte. He had to get her back.

He loved her.

Shouts echoed. Glass shattered. He pushed faster, only a few paces behind his brother. He skidded around a corner and came face-to-face with reality.

Through an open exit door, he watched two people toss Bronte into the back of a van. Tires squealed on asphalt and

the red taillights blurred in his vision. Or maybe that was his fury painting everything red.

He shoved past Jaren and sprinted after the moving van. His chest burned with fear.

The van sped across the parking lot and onto the road.

More voices in his ear—someone spouting off the license plate number. An SUV tore across the lot and braked hard. A window rolled down, revealing Ross behind the wheel.

“Get in!” Ross shouted.

He lurched forward, gripped the door handle and threw himself into the passenger seat. The gun shook in his hand as he realized how bad he’d fucked up. He’d let down his guard...and they took her.

*Oh god, please don't let this be another incident like the congressman's daughter.*

A choked cry burst out of him.

Another door slammed. Noah’s hand came down on the back of the driver’s seat. “We’re in! Go!”

Jace rocked forward in his seat. His aching head hit his open palms and he let out a gritty groan.

“You okay, man? You bleeding?” Ross’s harsh tone broke through his haze of white-hot pain.

*Yeah. My fucking heart is shattered.*

“No,” he said miserably. “I fucked up. I lost her. Oh, god. We have to get her back!”

“We will.” Ross blew through a stop sign and took a corner at high speed while Noah bit off numbers and letters into the phone, conveying the plate information to someone at the WEST office.

“Jaren, get on the horn with the cops. Tell them the situation and get barricades on every road leading out of the valley.”



“I shot two men dead. I’ll tell them where to collect the bodies while I’ve got them.”

Shit was real. His little brother had killed people and the love of his life had been kidnapped.

Or worse.

No. They needed her alive so they could wring what they wanted out of her.

Ross’s phone buzzed, and he stabbed his thumb into the screen, putting it on speaker.

Corrine’s voice flooded into the SUV. “What the *hell* is happening out there, Ross? My screens are all lighting up!”

“Trouble,” Ross barked. The headlights cut through the darkness but didn’t illuminate the back of the van they were chasing.

The one carrying Bronte away from him.

Ross briefed Corrine in a few choppy sentences, but Jace was barely listening. He pulled up the images feeding from the pin she wore but couldn’t make out anything but darkness or blurred screens.

“Damn! That pin she’s wearing has a flaw. The tracker can’t engage until she pushes the alarm.” His dark voice broke into the chatter.

“Fuck. Something we didn’t anticipate,” Ross said.

“We need to find out who that server is.”

Everyone went silent.

“What server?” Ross demanded.

“A woman entered the restroom after Bronte. She was in uniform like the servers at the dinner.”

Ross cut a hand through the air. “One of you guys, get on the CC footage. Get a look at her face.”

“Describe her to me, Jace,” Corrine said in clipped tones.

“Bleach-blonde hair that was sort of dull or gray. Overdyed. White shirt, black pants. Caucasian. She looked

ill.”

“Yeah, because she was about to kidnap a woman,” Jaren said from the back seat.

“You’re not helping, man,” Noah cut in.

Jace’s gut rolled. What if they couldn’t find her? What if he was too late?

He gripped his head and stifled the moans of a man in torment. He hadn’t gotten a chance to tell Bronte that his feelings for her were growing beyond lust or attraction. That just hearing her talk excited him—that he was starting to live for the moments when he looked deep into her eyes.

“I got her!” Jaren broke in.

Jace twisted in his seat and snatched the phone from his brother’s hand. He stared at the screen.

Bile lifted in his throat. “That’s her.”

“Send it to me,” Corrine said. “I’ll see if I can zoom in and run a facial recognition.”

After a few taps on the screen, he sent the photo to Corrine.

They came around a sharp bend winding through rolling fields filled with the dark shadows of grapevines. Flashing lights lit up the sky.

“Police barricade,” Ross ground out.

“Oh shit,” came Corrine’s voice. “I blew up the photo and it’s got a match.”

“To whom?” Jace’s chest grew tighter.

“The former partner.”

Jace’s heart froze midbeat. He stared at the phone screen, waiting for Corrine to pop up the image. When he clapped eyes on it, he let out a low groan.

“Oh god. I didn’t recognize the woman from the photos of Angelica.”

“Her lighter hair makes her appear pasty, and her eyes are dull,” Corrine said. “She looks like she lost a good twenty pounds too. It’s no wonder you didn’t immediately make the jump, Jace.”

“But it’s my *job*. Goddammit!”

“Hold on. Something new is coming in on the partner that we didn’t see before.” Corrine spoke in slow, deliberate syllables like she did when all her focus was on her computer.

“What is it?” Ross asked sharply, slowing for the barricade.

“The former partner has more of a past than we first thought. Looks like she did some porn to pay for college.”

“Could it be used against her now? Would The Broker use that against her?” Noah asked.

“What lengths would she go to in order to keep that secret?” Corrine could be heard tapping on her keyboard.

Ross rolled to a stop, and two officers came forward to flank the SUV. Ross rolled all the windows down to speak with them and allow them to see who was inside.

Just then, Jace’s phone blasted an alarm. Jaren’s phone peeled the same alarm, followed by Ross and Noah’s. Still on speakerphone, an insistent screech projected over Corrine’s phone line.

Jace stiffened. “It’s Bronte. She tripped the charm on her gown. Trace her location!”

“Got her!” Corrine sang out and started spouting directions.

As the officers allowed them to pass through the barricade, Jace bowed his head into his hands once more, this time with prayers that they would find Bronte safe.

And that when they did, Jace would be the one to put a bullet between The Broker’s eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte's hand shook as she dropped it to the skirt of her dress. She balled the fabric in her fist and tried to regain her wits.

Why did *all* kidnapers hurl people into vans? Was there a generic training course on how to make off with people? And how did this become her life?

A month ago, she was busy building her company with her partner at her side. Then, in one day, her world crumbled. Angelica was caught on camera stealing files. But from what she told Bronte, she didn't want to do it—she was forced.

*Well, nobody forced her to drug me and throw me in a van!*

Short pants of air escaped Bronte's lungs as she waited for Jace to rescue her. As soon as she realized her situation, she remembered that charm Jace placed on the neck of her gown and pressed it. Hard.

Was she too far away for him to receive the emergency notification?

A whimper slipped out of her. Chilled fingers wrapped around her forearm, and she jerked her gaze up to find Angelica staring at her with compassion in her eyes.

Bronte twisted out of her grip. She wished Jace had armed her with more than a tiny gold heart charm. She could use a high heel to defend herself, but the thought of that kind of savagery made her shudder.

The van jostled her from side to side, causing her stomach, already queasy from whatever Angelica drugged her with, to heave. Swallowing hard, Bronte tried not to throw up. She breathed shallowly for several minutes and scooted a little farther away from her former partner.

The last thing she wanted was comfort from Angelica. This was all her fault. She didn't know how The Broker had gotten to her, or what he'd used to coerce her into doing his dirty work, but the woman was *weak*.

Bronte never would have let herself be lured into betrayal and corporate espionage. Now Angelica could add kidnapping

to her list of crimes, and Bronte would *definitely* be turning her over to the FBI.

The WEST team probably already had.

“Fuck!” came a bark of anger from the front of the van.

“What’s the matter?” Angelica asked.

Bronte turned a hateful scowl on the woman.

“Roadblock!”

Her heart flip-flopped at the statement, and then her stomach pitched again as the van careened in a U-turn and took off at high speed down another road.

When this was all over, she owed Jace the biggest kiss ever. The man had come through for her after all, first with the charm. Then again by setting up police roadblocks, proving that they hadn’t abandoned her and were getting her back.

She must have let out a groan because Angelica tried to soothe her again. “We’ll be stopping soon.”

“Where?” Fury ate through her the way giant corporations gobbled up small businesses.

Angelica still possessed enough of a moral compass to look away from her. She didn’t say more or try to comfort Bronte again.

The roads they took kept her stomach rolling and her head throbbing. It was dark enough in the van that she got away with lifting a hand to her bodice and pressing the charm again. This time she pinched it so hard that she feared she accidentally crushed whatever miniscule electronics powered it.

Who would get to her first? There wasn’t a question in her mind that Jace was searching right now. How many minutes behind her was he? It was likely that the cops who set up that roadblock were searching for her too.

While some romantic part of her hoped it was Jace who found her, that she could run into his arms and be lifted and clasped against his strong body, and tell him she was falling in

love with him, she didn't give much of a damn *who* got to her first. As long as somebody stopped these people.

She didn't want to think about what they'd do to make her do their bidding. Did Angelica steal those files for The Broker? Maybe she hadn't gotten all that she needed so they hatched a plan to get them out of Bronte.

The van took a few more rough bumps and sharp turns before careening to a stop that sent her tumbling onto her side. She stifled a cry and touched her neckline again just to make sure the charm hadn't fallen off. If she lost it, Jace would have no chance of finding her.

The driver cut the engine and next thing she knew, the doors opened. Angelica gave her a shove from behind. Bronte lashed out at her and smashed her fist into the closest point on Angelica's body.

Bronte didn't feel nearly as good about making contact as she thought she would. In fact, she might cry.

Any tears prickling her eyelids fled when harsh, unforgiving hands banded around her arms and yanked her from the van. She dug in her feet. One high heel snapped off, but the thin straps binding them to her ankles held as the kidnapper dragged her across a grass yard.

A door opened, and she smelled the rich scent of wine.

Okay, she was never a wine aficionado, and now she *really* disliked the stuff. If Jace were in her shoes—broken shoes—he would probably sniff the air and be able to determine his location based on what grapes grew in this region and which winery bottled it.

The scent overpowered her and so did the man shoving her inside against her will. She fought to break away from his hold but her efforts were futile.

When the man picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder, she screamed. She beat her fists against his back, wondering if the WEST team was surveilling the footage from the camera she wore and if it was helping them locate her any faster.

Realizing she could help them in some small way, she stopped fighting and waited for what came next.

The place was definitely a winery at some point in time, though if she had to guess, it had been abandoned. She cast her gaze around for any information about the place. A sign or a label would tell the team where she was.

Her captor's boots thumped on the worn wooden floors as he carried her through the building. All the furniture was pushed to the sides of the room, and they passed a table coated in thick dust.

So it really was an abandoned location and not some headquarters of The Broker. She didn't know why this gave her hope, but it did. Bouncing around on the muscled shoulder wasn't helping her stomach one bit. Acid rose in her throat, but she managed to hold it back.

In one corner, a few old wine bottles stood on a mostly empty shelving unit made of rustic wood. The letters on the label were far too small to see with her naked eye, but if she could somehow position the charm to pick up the label, she hoped one of the WEST team could enhance it.

She twisted on his shoulder. He clamped a hand over her buttocks and dug in with bruising fingers. When he whipped her down and basically dropped her on the floor, she let out a scream.

A pair of hands worked over her ankles, and she felt the bite of coarse rope dig into her skin. She flopped like a fish until she lay on her back and glared at Angelica.

"You're going to regret everything you do to me," Bronte bit off.

"If I live that long."

Bronte stared at her enemy. What did that mean? Was The Broker going to kill her too? If so, why?

"Get her in the chair." The man had a deceptively soft tone. If he were one of her clients, she might believe him harmless. But coming from one of the men who'd kidnapped her, he sounded more like a psycho.

The man who'd carried her in hauled her to her feet—awkward because of the rope binding them together—and tossed her into a wooden seat. She looked up at the scraping noise of wood on wood and saw Angelica dragging a table across the floor. Then the man with the voice of a killer stepped up to the table.

Bronte couldn't hold his stare. His blue eyes were pale and devoid of feeling. He set a laptop in front of her and opened it.

“You're The Broker, aren't you?” she asked as he pulled up a screen.

Wordlessly, he pushed the laptop in front of her.

“What do you want me to do with this?” How she had the nerve to be royally pissed, she didn't know, but it was better than shaking with fear, so she'd take it.

She squared her shoulders to face the screen. What she saw, WEST would see too. Could she type a message to Jace before Angelica shot her full of drugs again or The Broker ended her life?

She wouldn't risk it—yet. But if she got the chance, she would damn well take it.

“Log into the Artemis system, Miss Burns.”

She glared at the man while assessing him. He didn't look very strong, which probably explained his hiring thugs to do the physical stuff like throwing women into vans and chairs. He was average height, with brown hair and patchy stubble on his chin, as if he wasn't man enough to grow an actual beard.

Not like *her* man. Not like Jace.

“I'm not giving away more of my company's secrets.” She folded her hands.

He moved close and hovered over her. He might not look tough but he had a menacing presence that made her skin prickle with goosebumps and her blood run cold.

“If you want to live to see your boyfriend again, you'll do as I say and log into the system.”



She couldn't completely disguise the shudder rolling through her. Compressing her lips, she considered her options. Refuse and be beaten and keep all her files out of the hands of crazy people, or do as he said and pray that Jace reached her soon enough.

Two hands hit the table in front of the laptop. "Do it!" Angelica screeched.

"Rot in hell, you fucking bitch!" Bronte screamed back.

Her parents didn't cuss often, but they always told her that there was a time and place for bad language and that she should sprinkle it as a seasoning to enhance her meaning. She couldn't think of a better time to "sprinkle" Angelica with her true feelings.

"Log in so they can get all the software. Then everything will be okay, Bronte." Angelica's eyes took on that sadness Bronte had seen back in the van. Or maybe she'd been imagining it—it *had* been dark back there.

Her former partner—former friend—looked as if she'd aged a decade in the short month since they parted ways. Her ugly hair and pale, sickly complexion warred with each other, giving her an even more downtrodden appearance.

Angelica was no longer the woman Bronte built a company with, on the mission of keeping people safe and helping them. Instead, she'd taken a dark path and joined forces with the man who'd sent her threats and twisted her up by sending her that bloody shirt.

So they *didn't* have the entire program, the very one Bronte and Miles Morgan were forging new territory with.

"Do it, Bronte," she urged.

She hoped Jace was picking all of this up even as she shook her head.

*Please get here, Jace. I need you.*

"Bronte!" Angelica brought a fist down on the table, making the computer rattle.

She shook her head again. “How will everything be okay if they don’t need me anymore?”

The Broker made a quick move, smashing the back of his hand against the side of her face. A cry tore from her, and her head rocked. She tasted iron in her mouth and knew her teeth had cut the inside of her cheek.

Fury and fear sliced through her. She gripped the edge of the table, gauging how far she’d get if she could flip it over and make a break for it.

Not far with her ankles tied.

“Sign! In!” he commanded in a voice that shook her insides.

She lifted her trembling hands to the keys. He already had her login page up, and she’d guess that Angelica had tried everything to enter the system that Bronte—then Jace—had locked her out of.

Her mind blanked.

“You don’t want to push me, bitch,” The Broker bit out.

“I-I can’t remember my password. You’re frightening me.” Her mind cast around a seemingly empty brain for the series of letters and numbers that she’d chosen as a new passcode to enter the system.

She started to type and then pressed the backspace to delete it all.

The Broker let out a menacing growl.

“I’m trying my best! Back off!” she screamed at him.

All of a sudden, she plucked the code out of nowhere. She typed it out and the system unlocked to her.

Only she was hit with a firewall. *What in the world?* Her hands shook more. If she couldn’t access the system, who knew what these psychos would do to her.

She had no idea the firewall even existed.

The answer slammed into her. Jace had secured the system. *He* must have built the new firewall.

She fumbled for a way to get through it—or a way out.

The Broker opened his mouth to yell at her again, but just then the rumble of a vehicle vibrated the windows.

Bronte steeled her spine and pulled her fingers away from the keys. Lifting her jaw, she met The Broker's frigid stare. Jace had come to her rescue.

## Chapter Fifteen

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“Get into position. I’m taking out the door in three, two...” Jace raised his leg and kicked the lock with all the strength he had in him. It crashed inward, and he rushed the opening, weapon raised with his team on his six.

He could barely see straight for the terror pounding through his veins. He couldn’t fuck this up—he had one shot at getting Bronte back.

Shouts sounded from within. Glass shattered.

“They’re escaping!” Ross bellowed. “Noah, Jaren, go!”

A red haze filtered through Jace’s brain. All he could think about was finding Bronte and taking down anyone in his path. He reached another entrance and whipped right and left, searching for attackers.

A strangled scream from the rear of the building made his blood curdle. With a roar, he threw himself forward at a dead run. Using his body as a battering ram, he broke down yet another door and stumbled a few steps into a small room. The wind blew through the windows that had been broken out, but not everyone escaped.

His stare locked on Bronte. Pinned against a man with pale blue eyes holding a knife to her throat. Another woman lay bleeding on the floor, and this time they didn’t need an analyst to know that it was her blood. Red bloomed on Angelica’s white shirt, and she pressed a hand to it, even paler than before.

Jace came to a dead stop.

“Drop your weapons!” the man shouted at him and Ross.

Unable to get off a shot without the risk of striking the woman he loved, Jace let his hand drop. He didn't release the gun, though.

"Let her go." Jace's gaze fused with Bronte's. She wasn't crying—she was furious. Cheeks as red as the strip of her hair, she stared back at Jace, urging him to finish this at any cost.

Only he couldn't do that. Even if he had to lay down his life for her, her safety came first.

He filled his lungs. "Drop the knife."

"No fucking way." His voice was hollow and soulless, indicating he was more than a little unhinged and quickly spiraling downward. Jace had to get control of the situation.

All the trainings about hostage situations rolled through his mind, but damn if he could see how to talk the guy down.

*Get him talking.* He could almost hear Madeline's voice instructing him and his brothers on their first week with WEST Protection.

He tore his eyes from Bronte and fixed them on the man behind her. "You call yourself The Broker. But you're not the first one, are you?"

A sneer tilted his lips. "You thought you already had him."

"How many more are there?" Jace edged one foot forward.

"Wouldn't you like to know. Don't come closer!"

He stilled and flicked his eyes to Bronte again. *Check your hostage. Keep the connection.*

Only she wasn't any old hostage. This was his woman.

The one he wanted to take back to Stone Pass and tuck away from danger. And take home to his momma.

A whimper came from the floor.

Bronte's eyes shifted to her former partner crumpled on her side, trying to staunch her own bleeding. "Let me help

her!”

“You’re not going anywhere, bitch. You kept getting in my way and now you’re going to stay here.”

“You’re using an innocent woman to keep yourself safe. What kind of man are you?” Jace tried another tactic.

“One who intends to stay out of prison,” The Broker gritted out.

Jace had a better place to put the guy—like a coffin.

Bronte issued a squeak, and Jace realized why—he was distressing The Broker and causing him to press the knife more firmly against her throat.

Desperation rose like a wave inside him. “Let her go and we’ll let you go.”

He wagged his head back and forth. “So you can hunt me down later? Not a chance.”

“You must have some money stashed away somewhere. Take it and leave the country.” Jace hoped that his tone was encouraging and didn’t reflect the hate pulsing through him.

“Let me go help Angelica. She’s not going to make it if I don’t stop the bleeding.” Bronte’s plea cut through the tension and turned The Broker’s attention long enough for Jace to lunge forward.

He thought he’d use his shooting skills, but not this time. With a hard swipe, he knocked the blade away from Bronte’s throat and threw himself on top of the man. They flew backward and hit the floor, locked in the grip of battle.

Bronte’s scream sliced through him.

“Get her out of here!” he bellowed to Ross.

“No, you have to help him!” Bronte cried in response.

Jace had fifty pounds of muscle on the guy he was wrestling. He probably didn’t grow up with four brothers either. The Broker didn’t have a chance in hell of beating him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ross lift Angelica like a rag doll and toss her over his shoulder. Then he grabbed Bronte by the arm and dragged her out of the room, making slow progress thanks to her bound ankles.

*Oh, hell yeah.* Now Jace could pull out every dirty trick he had and Bronte wouldn't see just how terrible he could be.

He jammed an elbow into The Broker's ribs and rolled him at the same time, forcing the rib to crack beneath his weight. Unable to retain his grip on the knife, he dropped the weapon, and it clattered to the floor.

Not letting up now that he had the upper hand, he balled his fist and punched him in the face twice. Bones shattered and blood spurted.

"You're...not...hurting...her...or anyone else...ever again!" He pummeled him with a blow to the gut and two knees to the balls. The Broker gave up too easily when his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out.

Jace stared down at his limp adversary, furious that he couldn't keep battering him and deliver the justice he deserved.

Panting with the rage still coursing through him, he pushed off the floor and yanked steel cable ties out of his pocket. In seconds, he had the man tied hand and foot and locked to an old cooking stove's gas pipe running up out of the floor. That should hold him until the police got to him. But secretly, he hoped The Broker gained consciousness and flailed enough to break the line.

With any luck, he'd blow himself up and his stain would leave the Earth forever.

He broke for the exit and rushed out to find Bronte. She was on the ground with Noah working to cut her bound ankles. Jace's stare landed on hers, and a cry broke from her.

She held up an arm to him, and he hit his knees next to her, clutching her tight to his body and basking in the fact that she was alive, that he hadn't failed her.

He pressed kisses to her cheeks and forehead. “I got you. I’m so goddamn sorry, sweetness.”

She twisted his shirt in her grip. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“I do. I let that crazy bitch get at you and I didn’t even get a chance to tell you how I feel about you.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Noah tactfully take himself off, the rope binding Bronte’s feet dangling from his hand.

She pulled back enough to look into Jace’s eyes. “We need to talk about this, but right now, I think we need to save Angelica’s life.”

He flicked his eyes up to the SUV that Ross and Jaren were busy loading the woman into.

Without a beat of hesitation, he lifted Bronte in his arms and ran to the vehicle with her. “You try to stop the bleeding. I’ll drive.”

“No! You’re trained. I only know basic first aid. I’ll drive!” she protested as he set her on her feet.

“I’ll drive. Jace, you get in the back and help the woman. I’ll get her to the hospital. Noah, Jaren,” Ross said into the comms, “stay and watch over The Broker and the criminals you caught out back until the police arrive.”

“Copy,” they said at once.

Bronte leaped into the front seat, and Jace took the back. The scent of blood filled the vehicle, and he quickly assessed what he could even do to help when she’d lost so much blood already.

Ross took off, and Jace checked the site of the wound. It looked to have hit some vitals. Her liver, at least.

Bronte twisted to watch his progress. “We can’t let her die,” she choked.

“I’ll do the best I can. Bronte, tell me what they were asking you to do.”



“Uh...” She floundered. “He told me to sign in and give him my program. But I couldn’t. I hit a firewall.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “I knew my addition would come in handy.”

“How could you know this would all happen?”

“Sweetness, I always expect the worst. Only in this case, I got the best too. I got you.”

She made a noise that made him look up at her. Their eyes caught and held. In that moment, he knew he had a chance at a relationship with her.

He turned his attention to Angelica. About her...he wasn’t so confident.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte paused outside her condo door and turned to Jace. “You open the door. I’ll get ready to catch the cat.”

He snorted. “I’ve been looking forward to this sort of excitement for days.” He unlocked the door and reached for the handle. “On three.”

“One, two...”

He whipped the door open and Bronte held out her arms. Sure enough, her loving pet leaped right at her face. Actually, she was pretty sure he was going for Jace because of the angle of his leap, but she managed to catch the ball of fluff anyway.

He purred in her arms, and she buried her face in his fur. “He likes me again.”

“He never stopped, sweetness.” Jace issued a chuckle and closed the door. She waited to hear all three locks click into place and wasn’t disappointed.

When he turned his attention to the cat in her arms, Hemingway lifted his head and meowed in Jace’s face.

She laughed. “I think he’s telling you off for abandoning him.”

“He was fine for a few days alone, weren’t you, buddy? Probably slept sixteen hours a day and played with your hair tie the rest of the time.”

She giggled at the image he painted in her head. “Let’s see what kind of trouble you really got into.” With her arms full of cat, she walked into the kitchen. His food and water dishes were still full and he’d shoved most of the brown fish-shaped pellets to all four corners of the space.

“Well, all looks right in this world.” Her words rang with a heavy silence.

Jace’s hand on her shoulder made her turn. His eyes were blazing. “You’ve had a hell of a week.”

Shifting the heavy cat to one arm, she pressed her hand against Jace’s chest. His heart was thumping so hard and fast. What was putting him into overdrive?

He covered her hand with his and stared down at her. Lines of fatigue edged his eyes, but even that just made him look as though he’d spent months squinting into the sunset while he drove cattle across rolling fields.

Someday she’d like to see where he lived. Only she was too nervous to bring up the topic of an...*after*. Sure, they’d both dropped hints about continuing whatever was going on between them, but with Angelica going through major surgery, then squaring everything up with the WEST team, the police *and* the FBI, there hadn’t been much time for more.

And somehow on the ride from Napa to San Francisco, neither of them had brought it up.

He slowly raised his hand to cup her cheek. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“I think Hemingway feels loved enough for a while.” He took the cat from her arms and put his hands on her again.

A coo crossed her lips as he awakened every nerve in her body with a simple hand on her spine and one on her breast.

“I want you, Bronte with a diaeresis.”

She sucked in a gasp. He’d remembered.

“In that big bed of yours with your hands clutching the bars on the headboard while I lick and suck every inch of you.”

A shiver of need ran through her. Unable to stop herself, she rocked toward him, lips upraised for his kiss.

He slammed his mouth over hers in a fiery need that brought liquid heat between her thighs. As he swung her into his arms, she sank her hands into his thick hair and dragged him down. The pulse in her pussy raised soft moans from her, and he answered with deep growls.

When they reached her bed, true to his word, he spread her out on the mattress. Starting at her feet, he pulled off her shoes.

“You know I hate these.”

She giggled. “Too noisy for you, dear?”

He narrowed his eyes on hers. “You know me well.”

Her heart hitched. “Do I?” How well could she know any man after a mere week?

“You know how my cock feels stretching you.” He dropped both shoes to the floor and lowered his lips to one ankle. White heat spread up her calf and straight to her core. Her insides flexed with desire.

“I...might need to feel it a lot more to know it *really* well,” she rasped.

His eyes darkened. “Oh, you will, sweetness.” He slipped his hands up her inner thighs, running them over her pussy until he reached the waist of her trousers. With quick, sure movements, he removed them, and her panties too. The blue blouse she wore had a bow at the neck that put the brakes on.

“How do I get this thing off?”

“It’s called a pussy bow. They’re more of a retro detail in fashion.”

“There’s only two kinds of pussies I know. One’s meowing at the door to get in and the other, I’m about to bury

my tongue in.”

Alternately giggling and tugging at the bow so Jace could pull the top over her head, she drank in the playful, dirty talk she was beginning to crave. How could she go about her simple life, getting up every morning and running Artemis, then coming home to just her cat?

She loved Hemingway so much but life with Jace had taught her how empty hers really was.

When he pushed off the bed, she made a grab for the front of his shirt and brought him down on top of her again. As if he understood her needs before she ever had to voice them, he dropped his mouth to hers in a deep, branding kiss.

Her toes curled into the covers. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave herself up to her lover.

Passion flowed through her veins, a heady sensation she never thought she'd experience in her life.

“Jace,” she breathed against his lips.

He dropped his forehead to hers, breathing hard. “I know.”

With that, he climbed off the bed. She watched him strip off his clothes. Each ripple of muscle and flex of his tendons sent her to the next level of desire. When he stood totally naked beside the bed, she beckoned to him.

Words didn't seem necessary as he settled over her body and began to stroke and strum every inch of her just the way he promised he would. Callused fingertips rode up her leg, dug into her hip and lifted her against his hard cock. She rubbed her pussy on the steeled length, panting each time her clit brushed the velvety tip.

“Oh, god!”

“Can you come like this? Come for me, sweetness. I want you soaking wet when I slide my cock inside you.” Heated words broke over her, and her body erupted in goosebumps.

She rocked harder, faster. He pressed his cock into her needy bundle of nerves and dipped his lips to her nipple. As

soon as he drew it into his mouth, her body spiked. An orgasm she wasn't expecting tore through her, making her gasp and cry his name. She stared into his eyes and saw all the love burning like flames in his.

She never wanted this affair to end. She was still wearing the ring he'd given her. He was still with her, and judging by the look on his face, he dreaded leaving her as much as she did.

As her final shudder tore through her body, she sank into the fantasy of having Jace forever.

Only she knew it was all a dream. This would be their last night together.

## Chapter Sixteen

---

Every single inch of his cock that Jace fed into Bronte's tight body had his balls on the verge of blowing. Being with her after all that happened heightened the sensation until he thought he'd burst with it.

He was pretty sure this was how love was supposed to be. The connection, intimacy and raw passion between two people.

Sure, they hadn't known each other long. He had socks he'd worn longer—at least back in his teen years. But when Jace found something he wanted, he got it.

And he definitely wanted Bronte in his life.

He pumped his hips, driving his cock deep into her slick heat. She splayed her hands across his back, and the blunt ends of her nails scraping his skin dragged him even higher up the steep cliff.

One more tight squeeze of her walls around his rigid length and he'd explode.

"You're driving me crazy," he bit off. "I need to slow things down."

"Or speed up so we can start all over again."

He flashed her a grin that twisted into bliss when she rocked into him. He swung his hips faster, taking them both higher. With his lips crushed to hers, he pulled moan after sweet moan out of her.

She was the perfect woman in all ways, and he was damn lucky to have a few stolen moments with her. The thought of

walking away, of boarding a plane for Montana without her, tore open a hole in his chest that would never close.

“Jace!” Her body tensed, and he watched her face contort with bliss as another orgasm stole over her.

He pumped inside her two more times, then a third and he was following her. Ecstasy swallowed him up in a hot wave. spurts of cum showered her insides, and she contracted around him over and over again.

His mind blanked with pleasure and he buried his face against her throat with a strangled groan. Her name passed his lips on a whisper.

She cupped his jaw, fingers working over his beard. When he raised his head and looked at her, love was pouring from her stunning, expressive brown eyes.

“Oh, honey.”

“Don’t go, Jace. Stay here. There’s tons of work for bodyguards. Think of all the celebrities who come to the city.”

Hell. He’d wondered if it might come to this. To stay together, one of them had to make a hard decision.

Slowly, he pulled out of her body and rolled to the side. When he drew her into his side and brushed his lips over her temple, she shivered.

“You won’t stay, will you?”

“I can’t. I just got my life back on track after our security company went down.”

There was still the very large matter that not one man called himself The Broker but two. Possibly more. Which meant they hadn’t cut off the head of the snake yet. The only way to do that was to keep flipping over rocks until they found the person responsible.

Bronte fell still. After several heartbeats, she whispered, “I don’t want this to be the end. I feel like I finally found someone I want to be with and it’s not fair you’re about to be ripped away from me.” Her voice wavered.

Smoothing his hand over her spine, he struggled with his own emotion. “I don’t want to leave you either.”

Since no answers hovered in the sky, waiting for them to snag down like stars from the heavens, they remained silent.

“There are ways to stay in touch,” she said at last, though her tone lacked much conviction.

He rolled on top of her. She let out a gasp of surprise, which he cut off with a kiss. An urgency rose inside him. If he kissed her enough, made her cry out his name several more times, the universe had to keep them together.

Chest heaving, she tore from his kiss. “I need you again, Jace.”

Gripping her by the hips, he flipped her on top of him. “I never told you, but as soon as I get back to Montana, I plan on buying a horse. If you’re going to come visit me, you’re going to need some practice riding.”

A grin flitted over her face as she sank down over his stiff cock, taking him to the base. They shared a low moan, more in sync than ever before.

He only hoped it wasn’t the last moment they’d share.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronte pushed through the glass door with the Artemis name on it. A sigh was on her lips, but it turned to a squawk when Kimmy flew at her.

Her assistant let out a small scream and flung her arms around Bronte. “Oh my god! I’m soooo glad to see you!”

She issued a laugh. “I expect my cat to leap at me when I open a door, but not you.” She squeezed Kimmy. They held on to each other for a beat, just soaking in all that happened that they hadn’t yet discussed.

There was so much to share.

When they broke apart, their eyes met. A lump formed in Bronte’s throat. Ever since Jace kissed her goodbye that morning, she had done nothing but cry. But how could she



ever explain that her heart had been ripped out and he took it away with him to Montana?

She moved through the office, aware of the noise her shoes made on the tile floors, something she'd never noticed until Jace mentioned it.

"Let's talk in my office," she said to Kimmy, who was already following.

As soon as the door shut and they both took seats, they stared at each other again.

"McCoy is in a committed relationship." Kimmy's statement took a moment to sink into Bronte's brain.

"Oh?"

"Yes. He's really a great protector and so easygoing. But I didn't have any chance to fulfill my cowboy fantasy."

Caught off guard, Bronte laughed. The sound felt strangely freeing, and some of the tightness in her chest loosened. "I'm glad he was around to keep you safe."

Kimmy leaned forward in her seat. "Tell me about Angelica. I couldn't believe it when you texted to let me know she'd been injured. You were there?"

Nodding, she launched into the tale, which sounded more like it came from a made-for-TV movie than real life.

*Her life.*

Kimmy gasped at all the appropriate spots but when Bronte shared how much the thought of her former partner dying had bothered her, Kimmy's eyes filled with tears too.

"You can't work that closely—be friends with somebody—and not care, Bronte. You're too good a person for hate that lasts."

"I never hated Angelica. I was furious with her and I still am. She could have come to me and told me about..." She broke off. What Jace told her about how The Broker actually blackmailed Angelica with the porn videos she'd made as a

floundering college student wasn't something Bronte was willing to share with anyone.

She let out a sigh. "Well, I would have tried my best to help her."

Kimmy gave a sympathetic nod. "You still gave her all the chances in the world, Bronte. Now." She folded her hands. "Tell me about Jace."

This was the part where Bronte really would succumb to noisy tears.

Swallowing the lump bobbing in her throat, she met Kimmy's gaze. "His flight left this morning."

She could barely stand to think about how he'd looked at her before walking through the gate, beyond her reach. Or how she'd wanted to run to him and fly away wrapped in his arms.

Her life was here. Except...he'd given her a way to come to him.

That stupid electric car that he'd hated had once again shown up outside her condo.

*"I got it all gassed up. Or electrified—whatever you call it. I had it washed too."*

*"Why?" She looked over the vehicle.*

*"It's yours."*

*She blinked up at him. The most gorgeous man in the world, and one she wasn't ready to let go of. "Mine?"*

*He tugged on his hat brim—a gesture she noticed he did when deep in thought. "I bought it. Well, leased it. I'm giving it to you so you don't have to rely on drivers. We know how the last one turned out."*

*In shock, she shook her head. "You didn't have to lease me a car, Jace. It's too much."*

*He ran a hand over the hood, making her skin prick at the memory of how good his hands felt running over her body.*

*When he looked into her eyes again, her stomach dipped. “It’s a good car. Provided that you don’t let the charge run out, it should be good for long trips...like to Montana.”*

She shook away the memory but the echo of his meaning still pushed her to the verge of breakdown.

Kimmy was staring at her with tears in her own eyes. “You fell in love with your bodyguard, didn’t you?”

The statement ripped the rug out from under her, and she buried her face into her hands. “Yes! I did, and now he’s gone. But he gave me a car—”

“A car!”

“To drive to Montana. Where he lives.”

“Oh my god, Bronte. What in the world are you sitting here for?” Kimmy jumped up and began unplugging Bronte’s laptop and external hard drive. She whipped open a file drawer and pulled out her carrying case, then shoved both electronics inside it.

Bronte lifted her head and watched all this, stunned. “What in the world are you doing?”

“Packing your things for you. Since you’re just sitting here not going after the love of your life.”

“What are you talking about? I can’t just leave!”

“Girl, you built Artemis to run itself. And what work you do need to do, you can do remotely. Now,” she thrust the bag at Bronte, “get out of here. Go after your man. And don’t forget to take selfies on your road trip.”

She sputtered. Could she do that? Just take off and leave her company?

“Kimmy, I can’t do that. Miles Morgan will be coming this week to discuss our collaboration.”

She waved a hand. “I can handle Miles Morgan.”

Something in Kimmy's voice made Bronte sit up straighter. "What's going on, Kimmy?"

Pink roses hovered in her assistant's cheeks. "Uh...I might have...exchanged a few emails with Miles."

"Miles! You're on a first-name basis with him after a few emails?"

"Okay, phone calls too. And one dinner."

"Oh my god! Kimmy, how did you manage to keep this from me?"

She cocked her head. "How did you manage to fall in love with a cowboy bodyguard and not tell me?"

She shot to her feet. "You can hold down the fort?"

"I really can." She bobbed her head with enthusiasm. "I already managed to contract Anthony for several more projects. The man is very loyal to Artemis."

Wow. Bronte had no words, but she'd definitely be rubbing the fact that Anthony wasn't a bad guy in Jace's face.

She clutched the bag and circled the desk to throw her arms around Kimmy. They hugged tight. When they broke apart, Kimmy laughed.

Bronte rushed across the office. "Thank you, Kimmy. I promise I won't stay away long."

"Don't come back until you're hitched, ya hear?" She used her best country twang and it sounded completely foreign from her lips.

Bronte laughed and paused at the door. "You're the best friend and assistant I could ever ask for. And...you'd make one hell of a partner."

Kimmy beamed.

"But speaking of duty...I have one more for you."

"Anything!"

She threw her a grin. "Google how cats do on long rides in the car, would you?"

## Epilogue

---

Jace had lived through losing his company and moving away from the life he knew to end up in the cold mountains of Montana. Those transitions were hard—but he'd never been so miserable as he was after leaving Bronte.

His brothers wouldn't let him wallow in his bad mood in peace either. They were constantly ribbing him about breaking all those rules he so strictly adhered to and falling for his ward. They left boxes of Kleenex by his bed with notes written on the side in magic marker that read: Cry it out.

And they were really getting fucking annoying. In fact, he was thinking more and more about paying a visit to the Stone Pass bank and buying an even bigger plot of land than the one he already had for the horse. Only this would have space for a house and a huge yard.

He could move out of the rental he shared with his brothers. Now Ari had moved in too while the home she and Judd purchased was remodeled.

The place had never seemed so crowded, all at a time when he just wanted to be alone.

He stood at the tall window of the WEST Protection office that overlooked the big pasture. Cattle grazed and morning fog draped over the blue mountains in the backdrop, creating the prettiest picture a man could ever ask to see.

So why was he longing for skyscrapers and trolleys and a certain condo with a pink faux leather couch? Why did he wish he woke up with a fat cat with a smashed face on his chest?

He raised his coffee mug to his lips and sipped the strong, hot brew. When the office door opened behind him, he turned.

Corrine backed through the door. Seeing that her hands were full, he set his mug down and hurried to help her. Sure enough, she was balancing two boxes, a purse and the big metal container she brought to work filled with her preferred brew of coffee every day.

He divested her of the boxes.

“Thanks,” she breathed out. “I always have too much to carry.”

“You do.” He wasn’t going to argue with her when her purse looked like it contained a bowling ball and probably weighed as much as one. That made him think of Bronte’s purse with the cute little frog charm she’d smacked him with...and how a threatening note had shown up in her handbag at the trade show.

All the events seemed so long ago. Though only a few days had passed, he missed the woman with a deep ache in his soul.

Not for the first time, he thought about picking up and moving to California. Wouldn’t his brothers laugh at him then?

Corrine eyed him. “You good today, Jace?”

He grunted and returned to the window and his coffee.

“The auction starts at eight. We’ll leave in twenty minutes.”

He nodded. “I’ll just finish my coffee and then I’m ready to go.”

Corrine cocked her head. “Are you sure you still really want this horse? I mean, things change.”

He set the mug down on the nearby desk. “I want it. It’s what I’ve been working toward.”

She nodded. “You’ve got the plot of land to put it on.”

A piece of land he’d leased not far away from the Wynton Ranch.

“The barn’s all fixed up and ready.”

“But there’s no house on that land.” Why did her tone have a note of wheedling to it, as if she was trying to say more?

“Don’t need a house. Got the rental with my brothers.”

“I guess so. But my offer still stands to keep the horse here on the ranch. It’s no trouble for you to stop by and take care of her... If you win her at auction, that is.”

He gave her a nod. Neither said more on the topic she was trying to skirt. When it was time to head to the auction, his nerves kicked into gear.

What if he was outbid? What would he set his sights on then? Was he even doing the right thing in tethering himself to Montana?

The auction was taking place in the big agricultural building outside of town. When they entered the building and he heard the auctioneer calling and smelled hay and livestock, a flutter of excitement ripped through him.

He really did want this.

As he and Corrine found seats, a shrill whistle made him look up. When he spotted two men wearing white Stetsons a few rows away, he groaned. What were his jackass brothers doing here?

“You told them,” he accused Corrine.

“Nothing’s a secret in our office, Jace. They’re here to support you.”

They soon became engrossed in the buying and selling of prize pigs, Angus cows and finally, the horse auction began.

The auctioneer called so fast that Jace had a difficult time understanding when to raise his hand to bid. Thankfully, Corrine elbowed him every time.

“The price is going too high. It’s just about out of my range,” he told her.

“Just hold on a bit longer. See what happens. It’s not over until Miss Stone Pass stands up and sings. Stay in it, Jace!”

He raised his hand. The number shot higher. And higher. Then over his budget.

His heart tumbled.

He lost the horse.

Dammit. He dropped his hand.

When he stood up to leave, Corrine did too. Once he got outside, Judd and Jaren headed his way.

“You guys come to razz me about losing the horse?” He waved his hands for them to bring it on. “Let’s hear it.”

Judd shook his head. “We don’t need to rub it in that you don’t have a horse.”

Jaren grinned. “Yeah. You already don’t have a girl.” He looked over Jace’s shoulder and his smile widened.

“Ugh. Assholes.” Jace pushed out a noise of disgust and started to spin around to walk away when he spotted a woman. She strode his way, and while she wore a hat, boots, jeans and the tiniest tank top ever, something about her...was familiar.

It had his gut clenching and his heart leaping.

He took a step in her direction then stopped dead when she pushed her hat up to reveal a streak of red hair peeking out from under the brim.

“Bronte,” he murmured.

Her eyes fixed on his face, she let out a whoop and ran the rest of the way into his arms.

Joy exploded inside him that could never be gained from winning a horse. He caught Bronte up against him and whirled her. To hell with the horse—he *had* the girl. She’d come to him.

Her lips found his, and jeers of “Gross” and “Get a room” erupted around them as his brothers did what brothers did.



When they broke apart, Jace searched her eyes. Slowly, he lowered her to her boots.

“What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t let the car just sit there, could I?”

“But you must have started driving as soon as I left.”

“A few hours after your flight took off, yeah.” She bit down on her lower lip. “You’re happy I’m here, right?”

“Woman, it’s all I’ve been dreaming of. I don’t even care about the horse I lost out on.”

A sly look came over her face. “About that.”

His gaze sharpened on her.

“I might have put in a silent bid on the horse you wanted.”

“You...”

“I got the idea from Corrine.” She turned in his arms to see the laughing woman.

She turned back to Jace. “You got me the car. It was only fair.” She searched his eyes. “Now you’ve got the horse and the girl.”

“But for how long?” He brushed the long red streak of hair off her brow.

“I can work remotely, and Hemingway is already holed up in the guest room at the Wynton Ranch.”

Shock ripped through him. “What the hell? You were right under my nose and I had no clue?”

She reached up and plucked the hat off his head. “Guess love really is blind.”

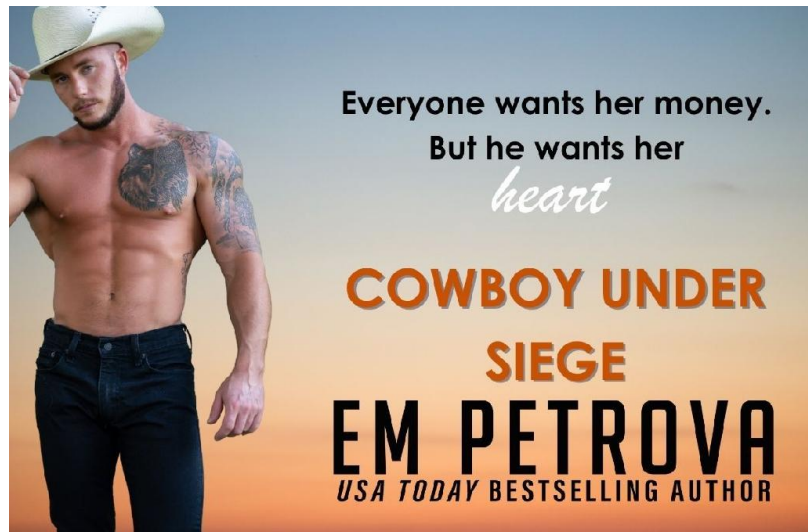
Heart fuller than it ever had been, he lowered his mouth to hers. “I do love you, Bronte even if you have no dots over the *E* of your name.”

Giggling, she went onto the toes of the boots that probably made the *perfect* noise when she walked and pressed her lips to his. “I love you, my protector cowboy. Now let’s go see this horse I bought.”

Unable to stop touching her for even a minute, he swept her up in his arms. “I hope you’ve still got that ring because I plan on asking you to marry me. For real this time.”

Her eyes blazed with love for him. “I was countin’ on it.” She booped him right on the nose.

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## Em Petrova

Em Petrova is a USA Today Bestselling Author who was raised by hippies in the wilds of Pennsylvania but told her parents at the age of four she wanted to be a gypsy when she grew up. She has a soft spot for babies, puppies and 90s Grunge music and believes in Bigfoot and aliens. She started writing at the age of twelve and prides herself on making her characters larger than life and her sex scenes hotter than hot.

She burst into the world of publishing in 2010 after having five beautiful bambinos and figuring they were old enough to get their own snacks while she pounds away at the keys. In her not-so-spare time, she is fur-mommy to a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff.

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