

A photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a white, long-sleeved, button-down shirt that is unbuttoned at the top. He is looking down and to the right. The background is black. The title 'UNTIL YOU CAN'T' is overlaid in large, red, outlined letters.

UNTIL YOU CAN'T

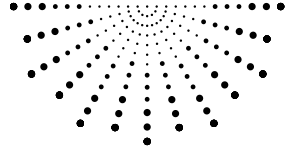
A **ROMANCE** NOVEL

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRITTNEY SAHIN

UNTIL YOU CAN'T

A ROMANCE NOVEL



BRITTNEY SAHIN

EMKO MEDIA

Until You Can't

By: Brittney Sahin

Published by: EmKo Media, LLC

Copyright © 2022 EmKo Media, LLC

This book is an original publication of Brittney Sahin.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting brittneysahin@emkocomedia.net. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products, brands, and/or restaurants referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Chief Editor: Michelle Fewer

Editor: Ashley Bauman

Proofreader: Judy Zweifel, Judy's Proofreading

Cover Design: LJ, Mayhem Cover Creations

Image License (front): JMC Enterprises

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-947717-38-1

Paperback ISBN: 9798355227586

✿ Created with Vellum

*For Michelle Fewer and Ashley Bauman
Thank you for being a part of this journey with me*

ALSO BY BRITTNEY SAHIN

Becoming Us

Someone Like You

My Every Breath

Stealth Ops Series: Bravo Team

Finding His Mark

Finding Justice

Finding the Fight

Finding Her Chance

Finding the Way Back

Stealth Ops Series: Echo Team

Chasing the Knight

Chasing Daylight

Chasing Fortune

Chasing Shadows

Chasing the Storm

Falcon Falls Security

The Hunted One

The Broken One

The Guarded One

Dublin Nights

On the Edge

On the Line

The Real Deal

The Inside Man

The Final Hour

Stand-alone (sports romance)

The Story of Us

Hidden Truths

The Safe Bet

Beyond the Chase

The Hard Truth

Surviving the Fall

The Final Goodbye

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Crossover Information](#)

[Music Playlist](#)

[Also By Brittney Sahin](#)

[Where Else Can You Find Me?](#)

PROLOGUE



RYAN

THREE YEARS AGO

“IF YOU’RE GOING TO SUMMON ME TO YOUR PLACE, YOU COULD at least have the decency to be here,” I grumbled over the line, leaving my brother a voicemail. But why was I surprised he was MIA? Anthony barely made it to the ice rink before the clock started on game nights. “Call me back. Or better yet, get your ass over here.”

I pocketed my phone and set my overnight bag by the couch in his too-rich-for-my-blood condo in Uptown Charlotte.

For a pro-athlete, my brother’s security measures were shit. Key under the doormat and his birthday to disarm his security system—*seriously, bro?*

He was lucky I’d found my way inside like a normal guy tonight and not the professional door kicker the U.S. government had trained me to be over the last seventeen years.

Spotting the wet bar on the other side of the room, I made my way over. The Advil I’d popped an hour ago hadn’t made a dent in combatting my headache. Why I thought tossing back whiskey would be a great idea—hell if I knew? But I was on edge, wondering what favor my little brother would ask of me this time.

Your head injury might be my saving grace. Just head straight to my condo when you land, had been Anthony’s last message to me while I’d still been in the air. Cryptic as always.

Glad my concussion while keeping the world safe from terrorists will help you out this weekend, had been my initial response. A text like that would get me in a hell of a lot of trouble with the Navy, so instead of hitting send, I deleted it.

As part of DEVGRU, formerly known as SEAL Team Six, we weren’t allowed to share what we did or where we went. Zipped-fucking-lips was our motto.

But damn, the knock to my head had done a number on me. I could barely remember what actually went down that day in Pech Valley, Afghanistan. My platoon had been tasked with taking down a high-value target, and shit went sideways. My reward had been a concussion and two weeks of skull-splitting headaches.

Oh, and if that wasn't bad enough ... I'd had my "operator card" revoked until who knew the hell when. Alpha Three was currently filling in for me as our team leader's number two, and that fact alone could've been the cause of my head pain. Three was a great sniper, but was he ready to be second-in-command? And if anything happened to my teammates out there because I wasn't with them ...

I cursed and reached for a bottle of Maker's Mark, ready to take the edge off my pain and attitude, but my shoulders fell at the sight of a framed photo on the narrow table behind the couch. Ignoring the liquid relief in front of me, I gave in to the pull of the memory behind the glass, grabbing the picture as if the physical connection could tether me to the past.

It'd been taken in front of Dad's shop, Rossi's Auto Body, shortly after I graduated high school and the day I left to join the Navy. It'd also been the last day I saw my father alive.

It was hard to believe Dad was only nine years older in that photo than I was now. We looked just alike, too. We both stood at six foot one. I had his dark, slightly wavy hair. Similar sharp jawline. Same lost-looking brown eyes.

Anthony, on the other hand, had the Italian-sounding name, but he looked much more like Mom than Dad.

Our parents had fallen in love when they were eighteen. Dad came from a big Italian family, and since Mom was Irish, they'd objected to their marriage. They were old school like that. But Dad chose Mom despite his parents' objections.

My hand trembled as painful memories tore through me, and I repositioned the photo back in place, worried I'd drop it.

When my phone vibrated in my pocket a moment later, I squeezed the emotions down my throat with a hard swallow

before answering my brother's call.

"You better be on your way," I barked over the line. "Also, your security measures are shit."

I grabbed my bag and headed to Anthony's bedroom in need of a shower.

"My neighbor has an emergency key. I asked her to put it under the mat when I knew you were on your way," he fired back as I dropped the bag and plopped down on the bed.

"Fine. But where are you?"

"About that, Ry." Not the best words to hear from my brother.

"Let me guess, this is a trap. You're not coming."

"I need you to sub for me tonight and play nice with Nat. Be her date to this Halloween charity event I'm supposed to attend," he dropped the news I sure as hell didn't want to hear.

"Hard pass." I attempted to stand, but my balance was off, and my ass went right back down. I needed more Advil. Or that whiskey. Maybe both.

"I'm not babysitting your girlfriend." Any other woman and I wouldn't care. But Natalia? Hell no.

"Come on, this charity event is for vets. Way more up your alley than mine. I'm just a donor. They already have my cash. Just make an appearance in the costume, smile, take a few pics, and then leave. Easy."

"Costume?" Had my brother taken a few hits to the head recently, too? A couple of hockey pucks to the face, maybe? Because in what world did he think I'd play dress-up and escort Natalia to a party?

"Do this for me, and I won't tell Mom about your head injury. You know how she overreacts."

The fact that I fessed up to my brother I even had a concussion was proof of the damn concussion. In all my years, not once had I informed my family of the injuries I'd sustained while serving. Not personally, at least.

In my twenties, I'd found myself on the operating table twice, and my superiors had notified my family while I was in surgery.

I'd been fresh out of BUD/S the first time and thought I was Superman. I went up against a guy wearing a vest packed with explosives and no will to live, and I hadn't had enough sense to recognize it.

And the second? My first deployment as a new recruit for DEVGRU. That mission had ended with a Navy Cross and back surgery.

"You're playing dirty, bro. Even for you," I griped.

"Nat will hate me forever if she misses this party. You know her, she loves Halloween. And she's a big fan of this Maddox guy throwing the charity event. Maybe you've heard of him? He's a former Marine with a ton of money, and he's paying it forward by helping veterans get back on their feet."

"Yeah, I know of him. Good guy. Great cause. But let Natalia hate you for missing the party because I'm not taking her. And in case you forgot, the woman can't stand me."

I pulled the phone away from my ear as Anthony hissed out a long, frustrated breath. My ears were already ringing, I didn't need to worsen my headache. "Not true. She just thinks *you* hate *her*. And in her defense, you treat her like shit whenever you visit."

I grunted. "I rarely visit."

"You leave a lasting impression, what can I say?" He only gave me one second of silence before tossing out, "You've been an ass to her since we began dating in college. You weren't a dick to her before that."

"She was a kid before that," I reminded him. "A teenager. And then I came home on leave, and ..." *She grew up.*

I remembered that family dinner eight years ago, two days before Christmas, when Natalia Romano and Anthony announced they were a couple. Natalia had been twenty-one, and although Anthony was only one year older than her,

they'd never been that close when we'd been younger. Not that I remembered. So, the dating news had taken me by surprise.

“And what?” Anthony prodded. “You didn't think she was good enough for me?”

“Of course not. I just didn't think you were right for each other.” I scoffed. “And I was right. You two lasted all of five minutes back then,” I added, unsure why that was relevant but the words slipped free anyway.

“It wasn't our time. I was playing hockey for Michigan, and she was a Tar Heel. But ... fate brought us back together again this year.”

“Her mom,” I reminded him. “*She* brought you together.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyways, Nat is a sweet girl. Probably too good for me. So, do me a solid. Don't be a dick, and take her to this party.”

She is too good for you. I kept that thought to myself and tried to stand again. Successful this time, I went to the floor-to-ceiling window and set a palm to the glass, taking in the amazing view of the city.

“The costume is hanging up in my closet. You can't miss it. My fans on Twitter voted for what I'm wearing tonight. We're the same size, it'll fit.”

“Your fans voted?” I laughed and faced the room. “We really are living at opposite ends of the spectrum in life, aren't we?”

“Come on. I had a game yesterday, and then this PR thing I had to do today ran late. And now my publicist needs me to stick around this weekend for some more shit.”

He was laying it on thick. Almost too thick. “Is your publicist hot?”

“What's that have to do with anything?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and bowed my head. “Just answer the question.” I hated that I didn't trust my brother, but he was a pro-hockey player with women throwing themselves at him in every city he went to, so ...

“What she looks like is irrelevant. I’m here for work. Just help me out.”

Work? Then why did I hear a siren-like sound in the background, as if someone just won big on the slots?

My little brother was at a casino. Of course. Gambling was Anthony’s second love after hockey. Dad taught us to play poker around the same time we learned how to tie our shoes. Betting with pennies and nickels back in the day was one thing, but now Anthony dropped stacks of cash on the tables, and he was horrible at knowing when to walk away.

“Does she know you’re not coming back this weekend?” I could feel myself relenting.

“I thought you could let her down easy for me. And why don’t you use this time to bond? Learn to like each other. I’m planning to propose soon.”

And then my dipshit brother ended the call.

Didn’t pick up when I called him back either.

“Anthony,” I hissed, then tossed my phone onto the bed before heading to his bathroom.

The en suite was as fancy as the rest of his luxury condo. I stepped around the partial glass wall to get to the shower, which had two more shower heads than necessary.

I turned each knob, and the blast of water washed the fog from my brain, and I replayed the last words Anthony had said on the call. “Wait, did he say propose?”

The water spraying my face alerted me that I was getting wet and still dressed.

Damn this concussion.

I lowered my focus to my boots, then exited the shower. One thing a SEAL hated was wet boots. Thankfully, I hadn’t been under the three shower heads long enough to penetrate the suede.

After removing my boots, I stripped off the rest of my damp clothes as quickly as possible and winced when I caught

sight of my reflection.

Two weeks without operating meant my brownish-black hair was a bit more unruly than normal, and the hair on my face was well on its way to becoming a beard. But it was my eyes that told the real story. Tired. Haunted. *Old*.

Benched for a reason, I guess. I'd blacked out twice in the two weeks since that op, which I hadn't told the doctors about, and waking up from those collapse-to-the-ground moments feeling hungover *hadn't* been from whiskey. As much as I wanted to be downrange again, I'd never risk my teammates. But the second my head was back on straight, I'd spin up. Well, as soon as the doctor cleared me.

I massaged my temples, wishing the headache would go away. I'd turned down the stronger drugs the doctor had offered. I'd seen what heavy-duty prescription meds had done to a few buddies of mine.

With a sigh, I went back into the shower without clothes this time. I had to admit the three shower heads felt good, like a massage, especially when the water tap-tap-tapped against the nape of my neck. Extravagance had its benefits.

I wasn't sure how long I'd simply stood there letting the water beat down on me, but I finally snatched one of the bottles and lathered myself in the soap. When the lavender scent hit my nose, I realized it was Natalia's body wash.

I traded that bottle for another, one that was more minty-fresh, which I assumed was Anthony's, and did my best to scrub *her* scent from my skin. I didn't need to smell the woman on me all night.

But rewashing my body didn't stop me from thinking about the last time I saw Natalia.

Mom's Fourth of July party. When a neighbor's big-oaf of a Doberman had gone running after a squirrel in our backyard and slammed into Natalia on his way.

I'd been close by and reached for Natalia, saving her from falling into the pool. Why had I saved her? Because she was in a sundress. The last damn thing I'd needed was to see Natalia

in a wet sundress. To see it cling to her curves as if God had pasted the fabric to her stunning body.

But on that filthy hot Fourth of July day, when I'd "saved" her from the pool, I'd hauled her my way with too much force, causing her cheek to collide with my chest.

She'd lifted her green eyes, and I'd realized I was too close. Close enough to know she didn't have perfume on, just a lavender-scented body wash. Shocked at what I had done, I'd immediately released her.

Sniffed my brother's girlfriend. No concussion to blame then. Hell, not that I knew of, at least.

"Why are you thinking about her?" *Because I'll be seeing her tonight.* "And now I'm having a conversation with myself." Yeah, the doctors didn't need to know about that.

I quickly shampooed my hair next, but when I turned off the shower, I heard someone call out, "Hey, it's me."

In hindsight, I should have opened my mouth and said, *Don't come in. It's Ryan.* But instead, I went for the towel hanging outside the shower as the door opened.

Natalia stood in the doorway. Eyes wide. Lips parted.

I half-expected her to comically slap a hand over her eyes, but nope, she slowly walked her gaze up the length of my body. Taking her time, too.

I cocked a brow. "Enjoying the show?" Not waiting for her eyes to meet mine, I secured the white fluffy towel around my waist before swiping both hands through my wet locks.

Natalia remained quiet, her eyes steady on my chest, and I assumed she'd spied some of the scars there. Including a fresh one from the op two weeks ago.

I leaned my weight against the wall at my side, amused by her shocked state.

But now it was my turn to catalog what she was wearing. And that turned out to be a horrible idea. Her Converse and skinny jeans weren't a problem. It was the white T-shirt

without a bra beneath that was the issue. Clearly, God was testing me.

Not only could I make out her full, round tits, but her nipples strained against the fabric.

“Tell me you didn’t come here in that,” I rasped, uncrossing my arms.

“Wait, what?”

I felt her eyes snap to my face, so I did some sort of Jedi mind trick to convince myself to look up.

“What are you doing here?” she asked instead of answering me. “And why are you naked?”

I frowned and jerked a thumb over my shoulder, taking one step closer to her. “Spent my whole life doing the shower thing wrong, eh?” I asked, realizing the Canadian in me had taken over.

Mom may have been second-generation Irish, but she was born and raised in Toronto, and I’d spent a good chunk of my childhood living there as well. That was also where Anthony’s love for ice hockey developed.

“Right. I shower naked, too,” she murmured.

Thank you for that. My cock didn’t seem to understand she was my brother’s soon-to-be fiancée. My body only knew it’d been deprived of sex for far too long.

“Anthony’s not coming, is he?”

“Finally dawned on ya, huh?” I pointed to the room behind her. “Maybe I should get dressed. My brother and I might be nothing alike, but I’m sure he’d feel the same as me in not wanting my girl braless in front of a naked guy.”

“I doubt Anthony would give a shit, to be honest,” she responded once we were in the bedroom.

Annd there’s the girl I remember. The blush was absent from her cheeks now.

“He’s not the possessive type. I mean, maybe he’d care if it was anyone but you. But you’re ... you.” She circled her

finger in the air like it was a wand.

“I’m me. You’re right about that,” I acknowledged, the gruffness in my voice evident as I worked to restrain my dick from standing at attention. “And since you’re my brother’s girlfriend, I’d like to say on his behalf, you shouldn’t walk around without a bra in a white tee.”

Her attention skated down to her chest as if only now remembering I’d pointed that out. “Oh shit, I had a hoodie on over this,” she began while finally giving me her back, “and when I heard the shower running, I tossed it with plans to join you ... I mean, um, Anthony.”

My brother’s girl, I shoveled the reminder down my throat. What in the hell was wrong with me? *Concussion. Right.* Legitimate excuse? I hoped so.

“I can’t tell Anthony about this. He’ll want to know who is bigger. I know him. That’ll be the first thing out of his mouth,” she rambled while putting on her Carolina hoodie. She freed her long, dark hair from the inside of the sweatshirt, then folded her arms over her chest while facing me again.

“You won’t be able to lie, huh?” I winked.

“Real funny.”

“That wasn’t a joke.” I quickly erased the smirk that snuck up on me with the back of my hand. “Anthony’s first instinct should be to throat punch me, brother or not. I’d lose my shit if you were my woman and ...” *Where am I going with this?* Nowhere good.

I went for my bag, unzipped it, and searched for something to put on. “What’s the costume his fans picked out?”

“Spiderman.”

She had to be kidding, but when I looked up, she was in the doorway of his closet with the costume dangling from her hand. “Let me guess, you’re going as Mary Jane, Spiderman’s girlfriend?”

Natalia’s lips, which in my opinion, were better than my teenage crush, Angelina Jolie’s, twitched into a gorgeous

smile. “The fact you know that’s his girlfriend’s name is kind of cute.”

“I’ve never been described as cute.” I straightened, only my boxers in my hand. “But I was a nerd in high school. Not that you’d remember. You’re a lot younger than me.”

“Only by seven years.” Her breathy tone had the hairs on my arms standing. “And I remember,” she quickly added before heading back into the closet. “But if he’s standing me up tonight,” she called out when I lost sight of her, “I think it’s only fair you get to wear whatever you want. Screw it, right?”

She returned having swapped the Spiderman costume for a suit, and her attention landed on the briefs I held.

“Talia, I ...” No idea where I was going with that.

“Talia?” Her eyes flew back to my face. “You haven’t called me that in ages.”

Where had that come from? *Shit*. I tossed my free hand through my wet hair.

“I should probably let you get some clothes on.” Her pinched brows had me curious, but I kept my mouth shut.

Seeing her flustered and off-balance was somehow disarming. And I didn’t like how she was affecting me right now.

“You’re being nice to me tonight. You okay? Hit your head?” she teased, and damn, she had no idea.

“Would you prefer if I’m a dick?”

The small little swallow I clocked from her and the way her gaze dipped to my crotch when I said the word “dick” had me taking an uneasy step back.

And why did part of me want to rat out my brother right now? Tell Natalia he was in a casino gambling his fortune away. Choosing his addiction over her. Did she even know about his gambling problems?

“No, I prefer *this* you.” Another little swallow followed her words as her eyes returned to my face.

“So ...” Great, now I was gulping. “What’s the suit supposed to represent? Businessman doesn’t seem like a costume.” Well, it would be for me. Far cry from my normal attire.

She lifted one shoulder. “I was thinking Italian mafioso. Wear this suit but with a black dress shirt beneath the open jacket. Pop a few top buttons. Call it a day?”

I tossed the boxer briefs onto the bed, feeling weird holding them while in a towel, but there was also nothing normal about this entire situation. “You didn’t answer me, though. Are you going as Mary Jane or someone else?”

Natalia chewed on her lip, and whatever shred of comfort I still had in me dissolved. “Aphrodite, actually. Goddess of love.”

I gripped the back of my neck, painfully worried about her wearing a costume like that around me. But before I could conjure up an inappropriate image of her in some toga, a sharp stabbing sensation behind my eyes commanded my attention. Every part of my skull was on fire, and I blinked a few times, trying to focus.

“Hey, you okay?” Natalia let go of the suit and started my way.

“Yeah, I’m ...” I dropped to my knees as she reached for my arms, and I accidentally pulled her down with me.

“You’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

I forced my gaze to meet her eyes the best I could. “If I pass out, just let me sleep it off, okay? Don’t tell my mother,” I mumbled as a curtain of darkness slowly descended over my eyes. “Please, Tal—” I couldn’t fight whatever was happening to me any longer, so I rushed out, “Just promise you won’t take me to the hospital.”

* * *

“YOU’RE AWAKE. THANK GOD.”

But am I awake? I sure as hell hoped I was dreaming, and that wasn't my mother's voice I'd heard when my lids had parted for all of a second.

"Can you shut off the lights? Hard on his eyes." Yup, that was Mom, all right. Which meant Natalia didn't listen to me. Not a surprise.

"Honey, how are you feeling?"

A man would always be "honey" or "sweetheart" to my mother. It didn't matter that I was thirty-six and hunted terrorists for a living. I'd be her kid until I died. And based on the fact I heard her talking, my time wasn't up yet.

I didn't want to face reality, so I battled the persistent urge to reopen my eyes to find out my current situation.

But the memory of wearing only a towel before collapsing, practically in Natalia's arms, shocked my eyes open. My attention landed squarely on Natalia. At least they had already dimmed the lights. *You're here.* I let go of a shaky breath and ripped the small tube from my nose that provided oxygen I didn't need.

"I'm sorry," Natalia mouthed, and I shook my head, knowing she'd only been scared. But still, if word about this trip to the hospital got out to my commanding officer, it'd further delay my operational status.

I zeroed in on the IV in my arm and my mother's hand next to it, then dragged my attention to her face, where a pair of worried green eyes found mine. "How long was I asleep? How'd I get here?" *And was I still in a towel when 911 came?*

"It's three in the morning. You passed out at Anthony's place, and thank God Natalia happened to show up. She found you on the bedroom floor in only your boxers and a tee."

My gaze flicked toward Natalia. *So, you attempted to save some of my dignity, huh?* I discreetly nodded my thanks, but the fact she'd had to dress me ...

"Anthony can't get a flight until the morning, but he wishes he was here," Mom added, smoothing her hand over my arm, careful not to touch the IV.

“It was a bad migraine,” I insisted, not a total lie. “I don’t need to be here. Nothing to worry about.”

“Natalia called Anthony after 911, and he told her about the concussion. Then she told me, and when I got here, I informed the doctor.” Where was Mom going with this? “Given your line of work, and since you recently had a concussion, the doctor was worried about a possible brain bleed. They had to rule it out before waking you, so you also have anesthesia in your system. You’re not going anywhere yet.”

“Did they find a bleed?” I asked, hating the trepidation in my tone.

“No.” Okay, so why didn’t Mom sound relieved? “But since you signed those papers a while back that allows doctors to discuss your health with me, well, they told me what they did find on the scans.”

Great, I knew what was coming. The doctor just worried the hell out of her, and for no good reason. She had enough on her plate. She didn’t need to deal with more because of me.

“You’ve taken too many hits to the head. He said something about small tears, I think,” she nervously explained, swiping a shaky hand through her silver hair. “I don’t remember the technical term, but he’s concerned. I’m concerned.”

“And you should be,” the doctor said, entering the room. He swapped places with my mother by the bed. “I strongly recommend you quit operating before there’s so much damage you don’t wake up next time. Or maybe you wake up and don’t remember who you are.”

Shit, maybe I am dreaming? Why’d this guy look like the doc from that show my mom loved? *Grey’s Anatomy*? What was his name? Doctor McDreamy or something? To hell if he was making decisions about my life.

“Thankfully, it’s not up to you,” I blurted as he flashed a light in my eyes and then held my wrist, checking my pulse.

He ignored me and continued with his lecture, “I’m sure you’re well aware of the dangers of your job. And you must know the research shows that explosions and ...”

He kept talking.

I stopped listening.

Of course I knew the risks. And it didn’t change the fact I still wanted to operate.

Then he dropped the bomb that grabbed my full attention again, “I’m afraid if you don’t report what happened to the Navy, I’ll have to.”

I tried to sit, but Mom sidestepped the doctor and placed a hand on my chest, urging me back down.

I wasn’t sure if the doctor was bluffing or not. Wasn’t there some sort of oath a doctor took? Privacy shit? But then again, I was the property of the United States government. Many civilian rules didn’t apply to me.

“I’m surprised the Navy let you run around only two weeks after you suffered such a major concussion,” the doctor continued. “I’m betting last night wasn’t the first time you lost consciousness. You haven’t given your body and brain time to heal. You’re running yourself into the ground, and your head can’t take one more blow. If you care about your teammates and their safety, you’ll make the right choice and walk away.” He looked at my mom, then tipped his head toward the door.

I had planned to protest their private conversation, certain they’d be discussing my health and my future without me, but when my gaze shot over to Natalia, I became distracted by her worrying her lip between her teeth.

“I’m so sorry,” Natalia said once we were alone. “I don’t want to be the reason you can’t operate.”

My shoulders fell at the concern in her soft voice. “You’re not the reason.” I wanted to be mad at her for calling 911, for not listening to me, but how could I be?

But I refused to believe the doctor. My head wasn’t that bad. It couldn’t be. I’d recover. I always did. I’d find a way.

For some stupid reason, I reached for Natalia. I blamed whatever drugs they were pumping through me.

Her eyes lowered to my palm resting on her forearm. She still had on her hoodie from last night. She'd been there all night with Mom, hadn't she?

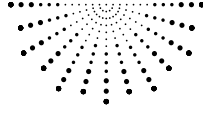
I cleared my throat and pulled my hand back. "So, uh, does Anthony know I'm bigger than him ... or did he get the same story as Mom? That you found me passed out on the floor wearing a tee and boxers?"

She was quiet for a moment as she slowly worked her gaze from her arm to my eyes. "I went with the safe answer."

I arched a brow. "Which was?"

Natalia wet her lips and whispered, "The lie."

CHAPTER ONE



RYAN

PRESENT DAY - THREE YEARS LATER

“SWEAR JAR MONEY. PAY UP.” SAMANTHA OPENED HER PALM, not missing a beat after I dropped an F-bomb in her kitchen.

“Matthew’s not even back from daycare yet.” I reached into my pocket for loose change but came up with a twenty instead.

“I’m trying to teach the men in my life to lose their sailor mouths so my son doesn’t copy them.” Samantha made a come-hither motion with her hand.

I laughed. “Fair enough. Here.” I said goodbye to the bill a girl had stuffed into my pocket as a tip an hour ago. Her name and number were scribbled on it in black ink. “Consider this an advance. I don’t have high hopes I’ll change.”

Samantha eyed the twenty, noticing the name and number on it. “Aw, keep it. You probably need to get laid.”

“Funny.” Or at least it would have been if she wasn’t right. “I’m not interested.” I waved away the money.

“Lucky for her, she gave this to you and not my husband.” She stuffed the bill in the nearly full jar, then placed it back inside her cabinet over the stove.

“Owen would never accept a tip with a woman’s number on it, so you won’t have to throw down with some flirty girl in the future. No worries.”

“True.” Samantha slid onto one of the barstools at her kitchen island.

I’d served with Samantha’s husband, Owen York, before I became a Tier One operator for DEVGRU. We’d kept in touch over the years, even when he left the Teams in 2013 to work private security and run his family’s tavern in Charleston. The man must have thought I was an idiot to believe a Teamguy like him would up and quit so early in his career.

Nah, there was more to his story, but I respected his privacy. If he didn’t want to—or couldn’t—tell me the truth,

then I wasn't one to press.

Whenever they were both in town, Samantha and Owen rotated picking up their three-year-old son. Since it was Owen's turn to handle pickup, I'd driven Samantha home from the tavern. Plus, it was my night to make dinner.

One of the few things I could cook was spaghetti and meatballs, which I was now preparing. Growing up with an Italian father meant you never actually plopped the meatball on top of the pasta. Pasta first. Meat after that. That's how it was usually done in Italy unless a restaurant catered to tourists. Well, so Dad told me.

We never had a chance as kids to visit as a family. My only time in the country was a quick trip to the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily as a sailor before making the Teams.

"I've told you this before, but you've been a lifesaver at the bar." Samantha's words redirected my attention from the stove her way. "Not to mention watching Matthew for us when we have to travel at the same time. We seriously owe you."

"You're kidding, right? I love hanging with the little dude." I was getting old, and taking care of Matthew was the closest I'd probably ever come to being a father. "I owe you two. You've let me stay in your guesthouse for months. Gave me a job while I figured my life out. We're nowhere near even." I crossed my arms and studied her.

"And have you figured your life out?" Samantha drummed her black nails on the counter.

"Fuck no." I winced. "See, this is why I gave you the twenty."

"Keep it up, and Matthew's college fund will be all set," she joked. After a quiet moment passed, she said, "In all seriousness, I know you told us that you were only planning to spend three or four months here, but don't feel rushed. You take all the time you need. I mean, you have become Charleston's favorite bartender. Who knew you had Tom Cruise's skills from *Cocktail*?"

“You’re a horrible liar.” I had a lot of skills, none of which helped behind a bar. “I appreciate your offer to stay longer, but you two close the bar in the winter, and I think it’s time I part ways.”

“Well, what about going to Charlotte? I’m sure your mother would love to see you.” She clasped her palms together.

“Heading home is definitely not the plan.” I owed her a visit, sure. But ...

“So, then ... what do you want?”

“What I want is to be on the Teams.” I let go of a deep breath, angry at myself for allowing the conversation to take the same turn it always did when we chatted about my future.

My grumpy self still hadn’t gotten over the fact I’d had to stop operating three years ago, practically to the day. As much as I hadn’t wanted to report the hospital incident to my CO, I beat that Charlotte doctor to the punch and told him about the blackouts and my headaches. I had to know for certain I was solid before I stepped outside the wire with my teammates again. I didn’t mind risking my life, but I wouldn’t risk my teammates.

Unfortunately, after the Navy ran more tests, they came to the same conclusion as the Charlotte doctor. No more operating. That had been the second darkest day of my life. My father dying had been the first.

When they pulled me from Alpha Platoon, they offered me an instructor position with Green Team—the selection course for SEALs hoping to join DEVGRU as Tier One operators.

I wasn’t a teacher. Not by a long shot. But I reluctantly accepted the job because leaving the Navy before my twentieth year was an even worse option.

I officially retired in June, canceled my lease in Virginia, and shipped my belongings home to my mom’s in Charlotte. Though, for whatever reason, I couldn’t bring myself to go home yet.

I was clueless about what to do with my life now. Thirty-nine was young to most. Ancient for a Frogman like me.

“Well,” Samantha began after giving me time to process my thoughts, “Luke has a spot for you at Scott and Scott Securities. There are plenty of positions that don’t require you to go out into the field.”

Operating, even in the private security world, was still too risky. I might not walk away from the next blow to the head.

“I’m a door kicker, not an analyst,” I reminded her, then checked on the food cooking and gave the noodles a quick stir. “But thank you.”

“I know, I know. But Teamguys always look out for each other, you know that.”

Owen letting me stay at his place was proof of that, too.

Turning back to face her, I nodded my thanks. “And, uh, how is Luke doing these days? I haven’t seen him in ages.”

Luke Scott co-owned the company with his sister, Jessica, where Owen now worked. Luke and I had been part of the same BUD/S class back in the day. I’d also briefly served with him and Owen on SEAL Team Three in my late twenties. Then Luke and I made the change to DEVGRU. But in 2013, Luke mysteriously left the Navy shortly before Owen.

“Luke’s busy with the kids and job. And it’s exhausting for him to dodge the public eye since his wife is Hollywood royalty.”

“I’m sorry I missed the wedding.” Owen and Samantha married out in Vegas a few years back, the same time Luke married his wife. I’d been in the belly of hell overseas at the time, and the only way to get out early would’ve been in a body bag.

“I think you’ve apologized plenty of times now.” She smiled and tipped her head to the fancy coffee machine in the kitchen. “And your wedding gift has lasted a long time.”

I faced the stove again and checked on the meatballs simmering in the sauce, a special recipe of Dad’s.

“We need to go get Matthew a Halloween costume after dinner. You want to come shopping with us?”

“I think you’ll need to make him a costume. Pretty sure the stores are empty by now,” I said. “Just smudge oil on his cheeks, put him in overalls, and he can be a mechanic.”

“Your dad worked on cars, right? Classics?”

My shoulders fell at Samantha’s question, and I kept my back to her, hiding the emotions I knew I was wearing at the mention of my father. “Yeah.” And yup, there was the familiar lump in my throat. “Classics were his passion. But Toyotas and the like paid the bills.”

I spent my childhood with grease under my nails. My head was either under the hood of a car or in the pages of a comic book.

Great, now I couldn’t help but think about Natalia and our conversation at my brother’s place three years ago. Spiderman and Mary Jane.

Of course, my brother and Natalia were no longer together, and according to everyone back home, I shouldered the blame for it. Even my brother, which was downright absurd.

“What about cars? Why don’t you work on them like your dad did? Restore classics.”

Before I could process Samantha’s suggestion, the clock on the wall caught my attention. It was 18:05. “In the months I’ve been here, I’ve never known Alice to be late. She walks her three Dalmatians every day at eighteen hundred hours. And Ollie goes nuts.” I turned my head, and there was only silence.

“Ollie’s not barking.” Samantha stood, preparing to go check on her Siberian Husky, but I shook my head.

“Let me check on him. You stay put.”

“I’m sure Alice is just late. First time for everything.” Samantha’s eyes thinned as if she didn’t believe her own words, though.

“You have a nine mil nearby, right?” Owen was paranoid, so I knew he probably had a safe in almost every room in the house. It’d be far from their son’s reach, of course, and one that required a code to access the firearms.

“Of course.”

“Good. Grab it and hang tight,” I requested, my heartbeat drumming with more intensity as my concern grew.

“You should—” Samantha let go of her words, and I quickly spun at the realization we weren’t alone, and I shielded her body with mine.

Men in well-tailored suits now blocked both hallways leading to the kitchen. Neither asshole stupid enough to breach Owen’s home had their faces covered. And they were also ballsy enough to have pistols trained on us.

“Hands up,” one of the men hissed, keeping his voice low.

The other guy motioned with his 9 mil, urging us to follow the command, and I kept myself in front of Samantha with her pinned to the counter behind me.

“You have less than two minutes to leave before my husband comes home. And if he sees a gun pointed at me, he’ll kill you both and ask questions later,” Samantha warned, no fear in her tone.

The men may have been armed, but there were multiple ways I could take down these pricks.

“But so help me, if you hurt my dog, I’ll kill you myself,” Samantha added, her voice sharp. I didn’t need to look back to know she was peering around my body, glaring at the intruders.

“I may be a killer, but I draw the line at harming animals,” the man closest to me casually commented while I finally lifted my arms in the air, continuing to calculate my next steps. “Your dog’s asleep, though.”

No accents from what I could tell. Or they were great actors working to disguise their origins from me. Both had dark hair and eyes. Beards. About my age or a few years older.

Nothing too distinguishable aside from some ink on the backs of their hands.

“I’m here on behalf of your brother.” The only man who’d spoken so far positioned his eyes on me. “Not here to hurt you or the girl.” I faltered at his words, and when I started to lower my arms, he motioned for me to lift them. “And we’re not looking to start shit with your husband. Our man is tailing him home from your son’s daycare, and we have about four minutes until he’s back. But we should only need two,” he went on, his tone steady and calm. Preferable to irritable and erratic, I supposed.

“If you so much as even think about touching my son, so help me ...” Samantha rasped, but fortunately, she knew better than to do something irrational and lunge for them.

I might have been a special operator, but I couldn’t charge the two guys without getting pumped full of lead.

Assuming this guy was in charge since he was the only one talking, I kept my attention focused on him. “What do you mean, on behalf of my brother?”

He holstered his pistol beneath his suit jacket, swapping it for a phone. “Anthony said you’d want proof of life before we went into details.”

I frowned, still trying to wrap my head around what was going on and how my brother had managed to get himself into trouble this time. Because two guys wouldn’t be standing there otherwise.

He set the phone on the ground and kicked it across the floor with his black suede loafer. Had Anthony told him I was dangerous? Warned him not to get close, or I’d kill him? Why would he help this asshole out if he was in danger?

“Pick it up,” he instructed, and I quickly snatched it from the floor. “As you can see, Anthony’s holding today’s *New York Times* paper.”

I briefly eyed the picture of my brother. Backward hat over his longish, curly blond hair. In a white dress shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows showing his forearms covered in ink. He

was sitting in a chair inside what appeared to be a bedroom holding the paper. His green eyes were on the camera. No bruises or visible injuries.

“Right now, he’s worth nothing to us dead. Not when he owes us so much money.”

I released a low, guttural sound, putting two and two together. “How much did you stake him for at the casino?”

“We didn’t stake him. We paid off the debts he owed to others, and now he owes us. With interest, of course. We thought with his celebrity status, he’d be good for it. Turns out, he wasn’t.” He checked his watch. Owen would be there soon.

“How much?” Had Anthony already pissed away all of his pro-hockey money? He’d only just retired, but damn, knowing my brother ...

“Nine fifty,” the guy dropped the hammer on me, and I resisted the urge to close my eyes in disgust.

“Nine hundred and fifty *thousand* dollars?” Almost a million in debt? Was my brother insane? “And he told you I can square up his debt?” What in God’s name was going on?

“You have two weeks. We’re being generous with that timeframe.” He grabbed his pistol from his suit jacket again. “Keep that phone. We’ll have Anthony call in a few days with proof of life so you remain motivated.” He tipped his head, motioning for the silent guy to start moving. “Rob a bank if you have to, but if you want to see your brother alive, you’ll pay off his debt.”

I took a step forward, and Samantha reached for my arm, reminding me not to go for the jugular at the man’s words. My body was tense, and I was prepared to fight, but I restrained myself and watched the assholes leave.

The second I heard the front door down the hall shut, I hurried that way and looked out the window to get a view of the street.

The two men hopped into the backseat of a black Escalade, and then they took off. The windows were too tinted to make

out the passengers in the front, and of course, the license plate was missing.

I cursed and went back into the kitchen only to find it empty. I turned off the stove and found Samantha in the backyard sitting alongside her Husky.

“He okay?” I took a knee opposite Ollie. His tongue hung from the side of his mouth, but he was breathing.

She’d already removed the tranq dart from his side. “Yeah, he should be okay.”

A few seconds later, I reached for her hand and helped her stand. “I’m so sorry I put you all in danger.”

“Not your fault.” Her gaze cut past me, and when I turned to see Owen pulling into the driveway, we both started for the gate.

Samantha rushed to greet her son and hoisted him in her arms.

“What happened?” Owen asked, noting the harsh looks on our faces.

“Come on, not out here,” I suggested, and we went inside.

Owen took Matthew from Samantha once we were in the kitchen and held onto him as I shared what went down, noticing the veins bulging from his neck as I spoke.

Once I was done sharing, he handed Matthew off to Samantha. His eyes fell to the floor as he processed the information.

I knew Owen. He’d be out for justice.

And in his shoes, I’d feel the same. But this was my brother’s mess, and I didn’t need to drag Owen and his family into this any more than they already were.

“What do you want to do next?” Owen asked, his tone dropping low so Matthew wouldn’t overhear him. “I’ve got your six. No matter how you want to play this.” Owen looked at Samantha as she sat Matthew at the kitchen table. “I know people with the kind of cash you need. I can get it for you.

And in the meantime, I can put some guys from Scott and Scott on the case,” he said when I remained quiet. “I can find Anthony’s location. Get eyes on your brother to confirm he’s okay.”

“I’m not letting your friends pay off my brother’s debt. And I don’t want to involve—”

“The second they pointed a gun at my wife, those assholes involved me. I’m helping you no matter what.” Owen folded his arms, steadily eyeing me, daring me to turn him down.

The man was stubborn. No way would he back down. And as much as it pained me, I needed help. “Anthony’s the reason those assholes came into your house in the first place. He told them where to find me, so it’s his fault this happened. Frankly, I don’t think he deserves your help.”

“He doesn’t,” Owen quickly shot back. “But your brother’s still alive, and mine’s not. Let’s keep it that way,” he added, his voice heavy and his stare intense, leaving no room for argument. “After we ensure he’s safe, I’ll be sure to give Anthony a piece of my mind, I promise.” He paused for a breath. “But let my team help you track down his location and see who we’re dealing with. Give me thirty-six hours, and my people will know what these motherfuckers”—he reached into his pocket and wordlessly handed a ten-dollar bill to his wife for the swear jar without missing a beat—“ate today for breakfast.”

I considered his words, knowing I couldn’t turn down his help. “Okay. But let me try and pull the cash together myself.” I could be stubborn, too. And I had two weeks. Miracles could happen.

Owen cocked his head. “How?”

My entire life savings didn’t even amount to a hundred K, but ...

“There’s one possibility, but it’s a long shot.” I shoved my hands into my pockets as I considered the idea. “My dad forfeited his inheritance when he married my mother. As

Dad's eldest son, technically, the money is still available to me."

"What's the catch?" Owen asked.

I closed my eyes and shared, "I just need to get married."

CHAPTER TWO



NATALIA

“THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-SIX DAYS.” I EYED THE STACK OF bills on my desk. “We’ve made it one year and a day.”

I leaned back in my chair, trying not to cry. Celebrating the restaurant’s birthday yesterday had been rough.

The smiling.

The dancing.

The champagne my staff sprayed.

Except for one person, no one else knew my smiles were fake.

Or that I was internally crying mid-twirl.

And they certainly didn’t know I had a minor heart attack when they wasted that expensive bottle of champagne by spraying it.

“We’ll make this work. I promise.” I looked up at that “one person” who knew the truth standing in my office.

Enzo closed the door behind him and folded his arms across his chest. Whenever customers spied Enzo outside the kitchen, they never failed to mention how much my friend looked identical to some sexy Italian actor I’d never heard of before.

Enzo had spent the first six years of his life in Sicily before moving to New York. So, unlike me, he still had a faint Italian accent whenever he became passionate about something. Apparently, that made him even more swoon-worthy.

“This is your dream, too. I don’t want to ruin everything. I don’t want to fail you.” My eyes became wet, and I did my best to fight the tears.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” Enzo strode across the room in a few quick steps. Once at my side, he spun my chair to face him and knelt before me. “And don’t you dare worry about me.”

The tears escaped and scrolled down my face—one teardrop for every bill I struggled to pay. The restaurant business was so damn hard, especially when times were tough for everyone in our economy.

“You traded your baby in last week for an older model to pay the staff and rent. I know that’s why you did it. You loved that Jeep. I won’t have you give up anything else for this place,” Enzo continued, his dark brows slanting with determination. “Let me help. You know I can come up with the cash to keep the place afloat.”

“Don’t you dare think about selling your Porsche.”

“I wouldn’t do that. But I can get the money. Just tell me how much you need.”

“I won’t have you ask your family. This is my responsibility.” I pushed back from the desk and stood, which had Enzo rising to his towering height of six-three. “Don’t even think about it, okay?” I stabbed his hard chest and tipped my chin to find his dark, brown eyes. “You’re the best Italian chef in all of Charlotte.”

“More like the best chef, period.” He winked before squeezing my shoulder. “You’ll ask me for help before you do something crazy, right? No selling a kidney or offering your firstborn to one of those men I constantly have to scare away?” He smiled. “Those assholes are one of the few reasons I leave my kitchen.”

At least he had me chuckling. “That and you love watching people enjoy your food.”

“Maybe.” He scratched his trimmed dark beard. “But these men do need to bite their tongue when they talk to you.”

“I know, Mr. Tough Guy,” I teased, but in reality, he really was a badass. “And my parents appreciate you always looking out for us.”

“Yeah, well, unfortunately, I wasn’t living here yet to stop Maria from marrying that idiot husband of hers. Thomas is horrible at keeping an eye on Maria and his daughter.”

I wasn’t a fan of my sister’s husband, but unlike Enzo, I kept my lips shut about it. I figured I lost that battle with Maria the day she told me she was pregnant with my niece, Chiara, who was now nine months old.

“Anyways.” He huffed out a deep breath. “I hate to leave you like this, but I need to get back to the kitchen.”

“I’ll be okay.” I removed his hand from my shoulder and held it between my palms.

I met Enzo when I briefly lived in Manhattan in my twenties. Our dads were best friends, and since Enzo’s family lived in New York, my father had called in a favor. Enzo had been assigned the role to “watch over me” while I was there, and we remained friends even after I moved back to Charlotte.

“You moved here for this place. For me.” I swallowed, knowing I had to renew my confidence. *Fake it until I make it, right?* “Somehow, everything will work out. It has to.”

Enzo smiled. “We’ll be okay.”

I let go of his hand when I heard the door opening. No one from my staff would barge in without knocking, which meant it was my sister, and I didn’t want her getting the wrong idea about us.

“Hey, you two.” Maria had her daughter situated at her hip when she came in, but she looked far more casual than normal.

Maria’s dark, glossy hair wasn’t hot-ironed straight like her husband preferred. Instead, it was in a messy bun at the top of her head. And she wasn’t wearing makeup.

I quickly slid the stack of bills into my top drawer before addressing my sister.

“What’s wrong?” Enzo asked, beating me to it. He took her squirming, beautiful daughter into his arms, and Maria collapsed onto the black leather chair in front of my desk.

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom told me you have a date tonight. I thought I’d fill in for you so you could have a stress-free evening without worrying about the restaurant while you’re out. I know how much you hate leaving this place while it’s open.”

“Date?” I blinked in confusion. Shit, now I remembered. The date Mom had “scheduled” for me with one of her church friends’ sons. An ER doctor who recently transferred from Uptown Charlotte to our small town of Waxhaw.

Except, our town didn’t feel so small anymore. It’d been steadily growing as more and more people began moving farther outside the city, gobbling up every square inch of land. Which was one reason I’d thought it’d be safe to open my restaurant in Waxhaw instead of closer to Uptown.

“I thought I told her to cancel.” In fact, I was sure of it.

“Mom being Mom, forgot.” Maria fidgeted with the mammoth-sized rock of a diamond on her finger. “On purpose. Obviously.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re dressed like you left Pilates if you were planning to swap places with me.” I redirected my attention to Enzo, who had Chiara giggling by tickling her belly. Apparently, the badass was also a baby whisperer.

“Thomas is out of town. I don’t get all dolled up unless he’s home, you know that.”

Enzo said something too low for either of us to hear, but I had to assume it was a jab at Maria’s husband.

“Mom and Dad will take Chiara for the night. They’ll put her to bed. I’ll stay here until closing and then head to their place after. I’ll probably just crash there since Thomas won’t be home until tomorrow night,” Maria explained. “You need to change before your date, so I figured you could drop Chiara off for me.”

I was sleeping in my old bedroom at my parents' house to save money on rent. I felt like a time traveler every time I walked in there. Posters from my high school years still clung to the bedroom walls, bringing me back to days and feelings I thought I'd left behind years ago.

Living at home was something my thirty-two-year-old self wasn't happy about, but my pride could suck it for now. The restaurant's success was everything to me.

"Well, I really do need to get back to work and make sure the kitchen isn't on fire." Enzo kissed Chiara on the cheek and set her on Maria's lap. "Go on that date. You deserve a night out," he added.

Were they all teaming up against me now? I didn't even know what the doctor looked like, and my mom was clueless about my taste in men. She kept trying to set me up with Anthony lookalikes. In truth, Anthony was the opposite of my type.

"So, what do you say? You have a spare blouse I can put on and pretend to be you tonight?" Maria briefly covered Chiara's ears and said, "So you can get laid."

I spied Enzo with his hand on the doorknob, grimacing. "Don't listen to her."

"Hey, someone needs to be getting laid. It for sure as hell hasn't been me," Maria blurted.

Enzo hung his head and patted the door twice. "My cue to leave."

Maria waved at him, and he shook his head as he shut the door.

"Where am I supposed to have drinks with the doctor, and at what time?" I pointed to the cabinet behind the desk. "I have extra shirts in there."

Maria stood and handed Chiara over, then peeled off her long-sleeved tee and tossed it onto the chair.

"And why aren't *you* getting laid?" That was news to me.

“Hey.” Maria snapped her fingers, reminding me I had her daughter in my hands. Not that Chiara understood our conversation.

Before I could prod for information, the door shot open. “I forgot to tell—” Enzo dropped his words when his gaze cut to Maria. She’d stopped breastfeeding, but her boobs had always been well above average in size. And they were on the verge of spilling free from the nude-colored bra she had on. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Hey. Baby ears,” Maria chided, pointing to her daughter, unfazed by the fact Enzo was seeing her shirtless.

“Shit, sorry.” He cursed again at his curse and then cracked a smile because at that point, why not?

“What’d you need to tell me?” I asked, attempting to draw his focus away from my married sister’s breasts.

“Right. Fuck if I remember now.” He frowned. “I’ll, uh, just leave you two to it.” He twisted the lock on the knob. “Just so no one else walks in on you,” he said before leaving.

“Whenever you finally get married, your husband will lose his mind with a man like Enzo in your life.” Maria slipped her arms into the sleeves of the white button-up blouse. “You were lucky Anthony didn’t care about other men. Ryan used to eyeball the”—she paused so I could mentally fill in the swear word for her—“out of you, and Anthony either didn’t notice or truly didn’t care.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I swiveled Chiara around to my hip so I didn’t drop her. She latched onto my blouse with her little hand and busied herself with fidgeting with the top few buttons.

“You’re crazy. Ryan hated me. *Still* hates me. The feeling is mutual, and you know that.” I shivered at the memory of that man. I hadn’t seen him in the two and a half years since Anthony and I split up.

“And also, those were death glares from Ryan, not I-want-you looks,” I reminded her since she had forgotten how much Ryan had always disliked me. Maria was four years younger,

and she hadn't spent much of her "adult years" around Ryan since he enlisted twenty years ago.

"Sureeee." Maria rolled her eyes.

Well, maybe there'd been a *few* times Ryan had checked me out, but he was a man, and I had boobs. Pretty much the same thing that caused Enzo to have that deer-in-the-headlights look just now. Men and boobs. Enough said. We both had a great set, so there was nothing else to discuss.

"Don't think I'll let you off the hook about that subtle nod to Enzo being hot, either." I needed a subject change. I'd prefer to keep Ryan's name from my mouth for the rest of the evening.

Maria finished buttoning her blouse and freed her long hair from its bun. "Forget what I said." She combed her fingers through her dark mane, trying to detangle her curls a little. "Just go on this date with the doctor and have hot sex. Ignore Mom and stay single. Trust me, you'll be happier that way. Then let me live vicariously through you."

"Wait, what's going on? Are you unhappy?" *Why am I just hearing about this?* "I get the whole lack-of-sex thing since you two have a new baby, but—"

"We're fine. I'm fine." Maria waved a dismissive hand. "Forget what I said." She pointed to the door and rattled off my "date" instructions.

"The last thing I want to do tonight is go on a date," I told my sister, wishing I had a reason to smile. *But there were too many bills. Too much to worry about.* And now I had to wonder if my little sister was okay on top of it all.

I looked down at Chiara, and she was giggling for no reason. Hoping to prolong the amazing sound of innocence, I reached over and tickled her stomach.

"Too bad." Maria kissed Chiara's dark, curly-haired head and told her goodnight, ignoring me. "Anthony has been globe-trotting with French models, and I can't even get you to have sex with a doctor. I don't know what to say."

"French models?"

Maria hung her head. “Did I say that?”

“Tell me you don’t still keep tabs on the guy on Instagram because I don’t care if he turned into some playboy.” The last I heard, he’d retired from the league because of too many injuries. But surely, the guy was set for life regarding money.

“I may have peeked at his Insta. He hasn’t posted a story in a week or so. But he was in Monaco with some model.” She bit her lip, trying to play innocent with me. “Don’t let that get you down, though.”

“I’ve been over Anthony for a long time.”

Maria opened her arms, palms to the ceiling. “Well, you might be single, which makes Mom insane, but you’re a career woman. Not everyone has to get married at our age. Or hell, at all.”

“Right, I don’t need a husband.” I forced myself to smile. Probably my hundredth fake one that week. “I just need sex.”

CHAPTER THREE



NATALIA

“NOT AGAIN. SHIT, SHIT, SHIT.” I HELD THE STEERING WHEEL tight with one hand while changing gears with the other as the dreaded Jeep death wobble kicked in.

I knew the route to my parents’ like the back of my hand, but I’d been distracted and forgot about “Aggie’s Doom”—the pothole I’d named after one of our annoying neighbors, who everyone did their best to avoid when on walks.

“Sorry, sweet girl, language, I know. But your mom isn’t here, and you don’t know what I’m saying, right, Miss Chiara?”

The steering wheel continued to shake violently, and I did my best to course correct and keep the Jeep from veering into a ditch.

I was still trying to learn how to handle the 1990 Jeep I’d bought after selling my 2015 Jeep Rubicon last week. Our relationship was a work in progress, and right now, she hated me. So much so that it seemed she wanted to toss me from the vehicle.

Chiara only giggled as if the jerky-jarring sensations were amusing.

“Almost to Nonna’s,” I said, trying not to sound alarmed that the Jeep was still cranky as hell. I’d yet to name her. I didn’t want to grow attached to a vehicle that felt like she was on her “last wheel” and heading to car heaven soon.

When a sputtering noise interrupted my thoughts and the Jeep started to slow, I realized tonight might be her last night. “Just two more minutes. Come on.” My parents’ neighborhood was practically within sight.

I could nearly hear the Jeep moan, *Sorry, I’m too old for this shit*, as the check engine light came on. I was in the process of pulling over when she died on me.

But could I resuscitate her? That was another question.

I rummaged through my bag on the passenger seat in search of my iPhone. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

I thought back to the moment I’d slid the bills into my desk drawer, remembering my phone had been beneath the stack of mail. *And now my phone’s in that drawer at the restaurant five minutes away. Just great.*

“Welllll, hell.” I twisted in my seat to check on Chiara, discovering her eyes shut and her little chest lifting and falling from small breaths.

Had the bumps put her to sleep?

“I’ll be right back. I promise,” I whispered, unsure what I planned to do. Flag someone down to help? The guy would turn out to be a serial killer with my luck tonight.

My parents lived in a relatively safe area, but could I walk the rest of the way with Chiara in my arms? Probably not.

I unbuckled and exited the Jeep, keeping the door cracked open. “Okayyy,” I said once finding the latch to pop the hood.

At least Old Girl’s engine—maybe that would be her name if she survived to earn one—wasn’t smoking. I’d take that as a win.

I loved Jeeps, and they were all I’d ever owned since I was sixteen, but I wasn’t a Jeep aficionado regarding what was under the hood.

A few seconds later, I heard the sounds of what I hoped was a Good Samaritan parking behind the Jeep. I hustled back to the sidewalk, ensuring whoever it was didn’t try to kidnap

my niece, and when the truck's headlights turned off, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Ryan Rossi? I'd been talking about him with Maria not long ago, and now there he was. Had I conjured him up somehow? Or was my mind playing tricks on me?

Nope, he was real. The man staring back at me from behind the wheel of his F-150 was definitely Ryan.

I casually shrugged and did some weird pageant-hand-wave thing, as if the last time I saw this man wasn't when he broke up my engagement to his brother.

Ryan exited his truck but remained alongside his black F-150. "What happened to your other Jeep?"

"That's the first thing you're going to say to me?" I shot back, and my hands landed defensively at my hips despite the fact my hero tonight was a real one in every sense of the word.

He was still ten feet away, but the sidewalk was illuminated by a nearby streetlamp, allowing me to see Ryan's lips twitch into a smile.

"How about hi, hello, how are you? Or better yet, are you okay?" I tossed out some suggestions.

Ryan's smile only stretched as he finally started my way, quietly working his sleeves to his elbows as if preparing to get his hands dirty. "Hi. Hello. How are you?" He angled his head. "Are you okay?" His voice dropped a few octaves with that last question.

Smartass. "I'm shitty." I sighed, hating how defeated and tired I sounded. "Thank you for asking. Old Girl broke down." *Guess you have a name now, so you can't die on me.*

"Mind if I look under the hood?" He sidestepped me without waiting for an answer while flipping his white ball cap backward. He paused for a moment by the Jeep when he spied Chiara asleep inside. "Maria's daughter?" he asked before I lost sight of him when he ducked under the hood.

"Yeah, I'm taking my niece to my parents' tonight." *Where I live now.* "My mom didn't say you were coming home. Your

mom usually gives my mom a heads-up when one of her sons is back in town.”

“Why? So you can avoid us?”

“No, I don’t care if I see either of you. My mom’s just protective,” I admitted while checking on Chiara.

“When did you buy this thing?” I was grateful for the switch in conversation.

“Last week. I got a pretty good deal.” Like practically free.

“I can tell. You didn’t have your dad or any friends check it out first?” he barked out in an accusatory tone, head still beneath the hood.

“You remember my dad, right? He knows squat about cars.” And my friends ... no. At the time, I hadn’t wanted Enzo to know about the purchase. “I didn’t ask anyone.” I swallowed. “What’s wrong with it?”

“A lot,” he said, and when I joined him, he was fidgeting with something. No clue what. “These manifold bolts should have been replaced a long time ago. If they had been, you wouldn’t be in such bad shape. But they weren’t, so you need to replace the exhaust manifold. Plus, a few other things. It’ll probably set you back about fifteen hundred if you find someone who won’t rip you off.” He closed the hood and wiped his greasy hands along the sides of his jeans.

“Fifteen hundred?” I couldn’t hide my shock. And no way could I come up with that kind of money.

“I took care of you for now. You’ll make it to your parents’ tonight, but that’s about as far as this Jeep will get you.” He folded his muscular arms, his eyes laser-focused on me.

Did he still hate me?

And do I hate you?

“Well, thank you for temporarily fixing it.” I turned, prepared to flee the scene, but then I paused and swiveled back to face him. “Are you home-home? Like for good?” I’d heard through the grapevine he’d officially retired a few months ago, but last I knew, he was living in Charleston.

“I’m here for as long as I need to be.” That rumbly tone of his had the hairs on my arms standing beneath my blouse. “Surprising my mom. She doesn’t know I’m back in town.”

“And you’re going to stay with her?” *In your old bedroom? Right above the garage? Across from my bedroom?* I gulped and felt my skin flush as memories from when Ryan would be home on leave from the Navy working shirtless on cars out in the driveway came flooding back.

I sure as hell hoped my cheeks weren’t pink right now. That he couldn’t read my thoughts. Thoughts about the first time I’d touched myself while imagining it was his hand instead.

He’d been too old for me back then and had already deployed twice at that point. But still, he’d been my crush. *Not* Anthony.

“You okay, *Talia*?” I could tell he was using that name on purpose, unlike his accidental slip of the nickname three years ago in Anthony’s condo. And why did I remember that? For some reason, I remembered every freaking interaction regarding this man.

“You named your restaurant *Talia’s Tuscan Grille*?” He stroked the stubble on his jaw, eyes still sharp on me. “You’re Sicilian, last I checked. And I didn’t think you went by *Talia*. So, why the name?”

Your mom told you about my place? “*Natalia’s Sicilian Grille* doesn’t have the same ring to it. And far too many Romanos out there already.”

He wordlessly lifted his chin, and I took that as a cue to start the engine. Check to see if his handiwork beneath the hood had been a success.

“Roger that,” I said, which was the only military jargon I knew. But it produced an unexpected smile from him.

Once behind the wheel, the engine purred, which was the best sound I’d heard all evening.

Ryan closed my door, and I rolled down the window. He propped his forearm at the top of the Jeep. “I’ll follow you

home. Going that way anyway.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Glad it was you who pulled over and not some killer.”

“Technically speaking, a killer did save you tonight.” He winked.

“Not the word I’d use to describe you, Ryan Rossi.”

This “nice thing” between us was going to end soon, I could feel it. It was like walking on eggshells and expecting none to crack. One of us would break. One of us would say something to piss off the other.

“While I have you, can I ask you something?” This conversation would do us in, for sure. “Why’d you tell your brother not to marry me?”

Ryan cleared his throat and pushed away from the Jeep.

Yup.

There it was.

A hard, cold stare from the man.

Any second I’d be saying, *Hello, broken eggshells.*

“If you believe the rumors that I blamed you for ending my career with the Teams, so I wanted some payback, then—”

“I don’t. That’s why I asked you.” Plus, it was our first time alone since the breakup.

His silence, which stretched for too many seconds, was killing me.

And when he broke it, it wasn’t to alleviate my curiosity, it was a simple order, “Move on, Natalia. Anthony’s not worth it.”

Before I could respond and explain I was way over his brother, Ryan had already walked away to return to his truck.

He waited for me to pull back onto the road, and my heart hammered with every passing second on that two-minute ride to my parents’.

Once home, I parked outside the attached garage and unstrapped Chiara from the car seat. Ryan was in his driveway with his back to the truck, eyes on me as if wanting to ensure I made it safely into the house.

I sent him a quiet nod of thanks, so I didn't wake Chiara, then retreated inside.

"Hey, I've been calling your phone. Maria finally heard it ringing in your desk drawer and answered it," was the first thing Mom said when she greeted me in the foyer, abruptly taking my sleeping niece from my arms.

"Jeep problems. Ryan was on his way to his mom's, so he, um, helped me out."

"Rossi?" Mom's brows popped up, a bit too comically, as she smoothed circles over Chiara's back to keep her asleep.

"Yeah, Ryan's surprising his mom."

"Well, Laura will be excited. How long is he staying?"

I swallowed. "I don't know." I rolled my tongue over my teeth, replaying our exchange. Why'd the man have to be so irritatingly good-looking? Rugged and rough around the edges, sure. But that only added to his appeal.

"Well, take my car to your date, then." Mom nodded a few eager times. "You still have time."

Wait, what? "The date," I muttered at the memory. "Sorry, but I've had too much excitement for one night." Ryan already had my heart beating far too fast for one evening. "Cancel for me, please?" I darted up the stairs like a teenager in trouble, not in the mood to go head-to-head with her tonight on dating the doctor.

Mom wanted me to marry.

My sister thought I should get laid.

But all I could focus on was the supposed "bane of my existence" and how he'd now be living next door.

CHAPTER FOUR



RYAN

“YOU’RE WATCHING THAT?” I SNATCHED THE REMOTE FROM Mom’s lap and turned off the TV. Anything but *SEAL Security*. Hell, I’d take that doctor show she used to watch over this.

“Aren’t you the one who told me this is the only show that realistically portrays SEALs? Why shouldn’t I watch it?” Mom sat up and grabbed her coffee mug from the end table by the recliner, watching me over the rim as she waited for a reason I didn’t know how to give her.

When we’d had *that* conversation, I didn’t mind her watching the series. It gave her a fairly decent glimpse into the life of a Teamguy. But now, it was just another reminder of what I couldn’t do.

“You know the woman who writes the script for the show, right? I can’t remember how.”

“I served with her husband, Luke Scott.”

“That’s right. How could I forget?” Mom took a sip of her coffee and frowned. “Damn. Cold already.”

I took the oversized mug from her. Some things never changed. “I’ll get you a fresh cup.” She followed me into our kitchen, and I couldn’t help but peer out the window and look at the Romanos’ home.

Had Natalia spent the night at her parents’ house? Or maybe she took their car to her place last night? *Why do I care?*

I loaded the Nespresso machine with a new pod and turned away from the window to face my mother. She had no clue why I'd come home. No way could I tell her Anthony was in trouble and owed nearly a million dollars to some loan sharks.

Once the shock wore off, she'd stress herself out to no end and stage a rescue mission herself.

Anthony was a walking red flag, and Mom pretty much slipped on a pair of shades around him, unable to notice the drama and shit that followed him. He could do no wrong in her eyes.

Mom studied me while combing her fingers through her long, silvery hair, and then revealed, "Natalia's living at home right now."

Why was she telling me this now?

And also ... *fuck*.

I reached into my pocket in search of money, prepared to offer a twenty, and then remembered I wasn't with Samantha. Damn, she had me well trained.

I must've only sworn in my head, or Mom would have called me out on it.

"Based on your wide eyes, I'm guessing Natalia didn't tell you that when you rescued her last night?"

I only mentioned my run-in with Natalia because I knew she'd find out from Natalia's mother sooner or later. Better to rip off the Band-Aid on that one now than deal with the tongue lashing I'd get later for not telling her.

"She put every dime she had into the restaurant. She's staying home to save some money. Plus, she's single." Mom shrugged.

Single because of me. I couldn't help but wonder if that thought lurked in Mom's head, too.

It was way too early for this conversation. I grabbed the new cup of coffee when it finished brewing and handed it to her.

“You and Natalia should try and be friends. It’s been twenty years since you last lived here. You won’t know as many people in town as you think. They’ve moved on or changed since high school.”

I wasn’t here to make friends. I was there to save my brother’s life. “Natalia blames me for the breakup. Hell, everyone in town does, yourself included. So no, I think friendship is off the table.”

“I know you didn’t mean to break them up. You were simply trying to offer Anthony guidance. Your dad would’ve done the same thing had he still been alive.”

Did she think I was trying to be like Dad? Nope. I wasn’t anywhere near worthy enough for that comparison. He was a far better man than I could ever hope to be. And dying at forty-five like that ...

“I’d rather not talk about the past. Or Natalia.” I needed to ease into the inheritance conversation as quickly as possible without raising too many questions. I had less than two weeks, and it felt like there was a grenade in my hand, the pin already pulled, and time was running out.

“Spill it. I know you’re here for a reason.”

Yeah, that reason’s your other son. I still hadn’t heard from my brother on the disposable phone the men had left me with, but the second he called and I confirmed he was okay, I’d most likely chew him out.

“Ryan?” Mom prompted when I’d let my thoughts run away.

I turned away from her and set my palms on the counter, my eyes trained on the window again, staring squarely at the Romanos’ two-story brick home. I spied Natalia walking to her Jeep carrying a toolbox and iPad.

What are you up to?

“Can you give me a second?” I twisted around to face Mom, and her eyes narrowed. “We’ll finish this conversation soon. Promise.” I patted her shoulder and started for the side door before she could stop me.

As the morning sunlight sliced through a small opening between the clouds, I shielded my face with my hand and stepped around the plants that served as the only “barrier” between our homes.

It was late October and unseasonably hot for this time of year, especially for this early in the morning. Natalia had the hood of her Jeep propped open, a ball cap parked on her head with her long hair in a ponytail at her back. And God help me ... she had on overalls.

I paused for a second, fighting a smile as I watched her from a few feet away. Enjoying the moment while she was still unaware of my presence.

“Please tell me you’re not searching YouTube for how to fix your Jeep,” I finally said, startling her. She fumbled the iPad, nearly dropping it onto the toolbox by her booted feet. Her dark red Doc Martens had to be a holdover from her high school days. I don’t know why that thought irked me. Just more memories of a past I could never get back.

Natalia turned slowly, then pinned the iPad to her chest with one hand while she studied me.

It took her longer than I expected to assess my sneakers, black athletic shorts, and white tee. I was considering going for a run while waiting for my uncle to call back.

I’d left a message with his assistant, and the wait was killing me. With the time difference between the U.S. and Italy, I figured he’d call me back in a couple of hours. He probably kept pretty busy running the Rossi “empire.”

“You can’t fix it yourself,” I said when she’d yet to talk. “Just so we’re clear.”

Natalia knelt and set the iPad on top of the rusty toolbox before closing the space between us. She tugged on the brim of her hat as if wanting to hide her eyes, more so from me than the sun. “Did you come over here just to make fun of me? Or do you plan on offering a hand?”

Like a dick, I reached out and opened my palm to the sky, offering her “a hand.”

She lifted her palm over mine, allowing it to hover there as she kept her eyes on my face, and I was pretty sure she planned to slap my smartass hand away. I'd deserve that. But before she had a chance to make her move, I circled her wrist, drawing her closer. I wanted a better look at her without interference from her black ball cap.

"I can't help, either. Not without *parts*," I clarified, my voice dropping lower with those pale green eyes focused on me.

When I let go of her, she asked, "Where can I get what I need?"

Right here.

And shit.

That was my sex-deprived brain hijacking my thoughts. Thank God I'd learned long ago to master the art of inner monologue and the ability to think before talking around this woman. Well, normally. Snatching her petite wrist and drawing her practically against my body should have been a choreographed thought, not an actual action on my part.

"I know a guy. He worked with my dad back in the day. I can get them wholesale for you."

Her gaze fell to the tiny sliver of space on the driveway between us. Was there something wrong?

From what I'd gathered, she had a successful business. I could understand living at home to save money since her restaurant was new, but trading in her Rubicon for an old Jeep that barely ran? No, that didn't add up.

Are you having money problems?

Natalia would never take charity, though, especially not from the likes of me. Stubborn through and through. So, I'd need to make her one hell of a perfect deal to get her to accept my help.

"I'll handle your Jeep, but I need a favor. Consider us even if you do this for me." I was losing my damn mind, and I

wasn't even sure if the plan I'd devised in my head would work with my uncle.

"What?" Natalia's gaze shot to my face, and she leaned in a touch.

I inhaled and caught a whiff of lavender, then reminded myself Natalia was Anthony's ex a half dozen times before asking her something downright crazy, "I need you to help me find a girlfriend."

"I'm sorry, what?"

Before I could offer her an explanation, my phone buzzed in my pocket. "Hold that thought. I have to take this call. Sorry."

"Um, okay," Natalia whispered, confused, and I didn't waste time starting for the sidewalk.

"Hey, this is Ryan, thanks for calling me back," I answered once confirming it was my uncle's number.

"There are only two reasons you'd call me," my uncle replied, cutting to the point. "Did someone die? Or did you change your mind about the money?"

I checked over my shoulder to ensure I was alone and spotted Natalia with her head under the hood of her Jeep. I had to make this quick before she did more damage to it by poking around.

"The money," I answered, facing forward again.

"Why now? You told my family at Dante's funeral you had no interest in the inheritance. And when I offered it to you again when my parents passed away, you were still disinterested," Maurizio quickly reminded me as if I'd ever forget. Nope, those two conversations lived in my head as if they'd happened yesterday. Especially Dad's funeral.

"Things changed." *My brother is an idiot and needs my help again.*

"You have to be married and promise to do your best to have children to carry on the Rossi name," Maurizio repeated the same bullshit he'd said to me ten years ago when my

grandfather had died, leaving him in charge. My uncle never married or had children, which meant Anthony and I had to “keep the Rossi bloodline” going.

“To an Italian woman?” That was originally part of the deal for my dad, which was why he’d lost the inheritance.

“Your grandfather was old school. Honestly, I don’t care who you marry, as long as you have kids and they have the Rossi last name.”

That was a relief. But the wife part was still problematic.

“You’re in charge of the inheritance, and how it’s handled, surely you can change the terms.” I doubted my uncle would rewrite the deal completely, but could I get him to amend it slightly?

“What are you asking?”

I picked up my pace, preparing myself to share the plan I’d concocted while driving from Charleston to Charlotte last night. “I need an advance on the inheritance. Ten percent should be fine. I’m ... starting a business, and I’d like to be able to offer my future wife and children a strong foundation to grow on. If I don’t follow through with the marriage and kids, sign the other ninety percent of my family’s share to yourself.”

I needed enough to get Anthony out of trouble, and my uncle could keep the other nine million for all I cared. Dad didn’t want it. I sure as hell didn’t, either.

My uncle’s silence meant he was at least mulling over the idea, but he was a businessman, and I knew he’d want some sort of assurance he was making a smart deal. I was worried the “nine million if I failed” wouldn’t entice him enough. He wanted the Rossi “legacy” to continue.

I knew what I had to say to seal the deal. To get the ten percent from him. “I’m dating someone, and I plan to propose soon.”

If my uncle took the bait, I would need Natalia to help me find someone ASAP. Mom was right. Almost everyone I knew

from when I lived in Charlotte twenty years ago had moved or was married.

“How can I trust you? You’re asking me to send you a million dollars on your word alone?”

“A Rossi’s word isn’t good enough for you?” I asked, and then realized my clipped tone was the wrong move with my uncle. “Sorry, Uncle Maurizio. I’m just stressed. I want to ensure I can provide for her before I propose. Plus, I just retired. I’ll only receive fifty percent of my previous salary going forward.”

More silence.

More thinking on his part.

Better than a knee-jerk no.

“Do you love this woman?” he asked.

I couldn’t hesitate on this one or he’d call my bluff. “Yes.”

“Then bring her to Tuscany so I can meet her. What better place to propose than at a vineyard in Italy?”

“What?” I gulped, the pressure now on more than before. “When?”

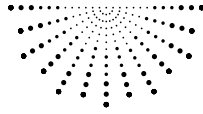
“Fly in a week from tomorrow. That should give you enough time to prepare,” he suggested. “Stay for a few days. We can get to know each other a little, and I’ll write you a check before you leave.”

My heart collided with my rib cage at his words.

Was he serious?

Twelve days from today, I had to pay off my brother’s debt. I didn’t want to press my luck and ask for more time, so I rushed out, “Yeah, okay. See you soon. Thank you.” I ended the call and nearly took a knee, wondering what in the hell I’d just agreed to do.

CHAPTER FIVE



NATALIA

RYAN STOOD ON THE OTHER SIDE OF MY DOORWAY, EYEING THE mug in my hand a few seconds too long before his gaze cut back to my face. After he'd walked away on the call, I'd spent a minute staring at the engine, quickly realizing I was in over my head. Begrudgingly admitting defeat, I'd gone inside to make coffee and drown my sorrows in a much-needed caffeine fix.

“Sorry about that.” His deep brown eyes returned to my face. “Can we finish that, uh, conversation now?”

“You mean the conversation where you asked me to be your own personal Tinder? Or whatever the newest dating app is called?”

He set a hand to the exterior frame of the door and leaned in a bit, making a dramatic show of inhaling the aroma of my coffee as his way to get me to invite him in for a cup. Apparently, he felt staring longingly at it wasn't getting his message across.

“My parents aren't home,” I blurted like some teenager worried about getting grounded for being alone with a boy. “My sister and niece slept here last night, and my parents followed them into Uptown to do some shopping,” I rambled, unsure why I was telling him all of this.

“It's early.”

“They're morning people,” I quickly replied, then took a step back. “But I suppose you can come in if you promise to behave.”

His grin caught me off guard, and when he asked, “Is there any other way I’d act around you?” my stomach did some weird fluttery thing.

Before I could catch myself, I mumbled, “Jackass comes to mind.”

It used to feel like he’d go out of his way to be a dick while I dated his brother. And I could recall three specific instances when he’d been a true horse’s ass.

“Fair enough.” His smile stretched as he lowered his muscular arm and reached out to flick the brim of my hat with his index finger. “But you have to admit, you tend to bring it out of me.”

My lips did that stupid comical thing you see on TV shows, where the girl makes a big O with her mouth, not quite wide enough to fit anything in there, especially not Ryan’s ...

Why the hell was I remembering Ryan’s naked body now?

That night three years ago in Charlotte, I’d slipped on his boxer briefs with my eyes closed while waiting for 911 to come. *But* the memory of him naked, post-shower, before he’d blacked out, had lived rent-free in my head ever since. And that’d been problematic while dating Anthony.

“And how do *I* turn you into a jackass?” I finally asked.

His gaze shot to my mouth and back to my eyes again. “I think it’s best if we remain civil, so I better not answer that.” He winked. *Damn him.* “I’ll go help myself to a cup of coffee.”

Against my better judgment, I cleared out of his way so he could come in. “Sure, help yourself,” I tossed out when he walked by, hating myself for checking him out in those black shorts. The man didn’t skip leg days, that was for sure.

I took a few seconds to compose myself, remembered I was a thirty-two-year-old woman and not some teen girl with a crush, and then joined him in my parents’ outdated kitchen.

“Looks the same as it did back in high school.” Ryan tipped his head toward the Keurig machine. “Except that.”

My parents weren't rolling in dough, so they couldn't afford to remodel their home that was still stuck in the '90s. Maria's wealthy husband, Thomas, had offered to do it as a Christmas gift one year, but my dad turned him down. Thomas didn't know my father. No handouts. Not ever.

"Soooo, about fixing my car in exchange for finding you a woman ..."

He loaded the Keurig with a pod and hit the button before facing me, and when his eyes met mine, he swiped a hand through his dark hair. He'd let it grow out a bit, causing the top and sides to have a more tousled look. *An even sexier look*, and wow, I needed to shelve that thought pronto.

"I have a hard time believing you can't find your own dates," I admitted.

"Is that your way of calling me handsome?" That broody look of his nearly penetrated my soul as he studied me. "Or is that not a word you'd use to describe me?"

I remembered our talk by the Jeep last night about a "killer" saving me. *No, definitely not a killer*. But handsome barely scratched the surface when it came to this man. I'd never surrender that thought to him, though.

Before I could work out an appropriate response, he pointed to my chest.

I looked down to see one of my overall straps undone and dangling. I had on a white top but once again no bra. I'd been home alone and not expecting anyone to join me outside, and the jean fabric had covered the tee, so no big deal. Well, until now.

"Sorry." I rolled my eyes. "I remember how you feel about a white tee and no bra." I fixed the strap, and when I carried my focus back to him, discovered his jaw strained beneath the stubble. *Interesting*. "So, tell me, why am I playing matchmaker for you?" I asked again, hoping to dodge the handsome question.

Ryan squeezed the nape of his neck, eyes still drilling holes through me.

“Nipples,” I said with a frustrated sigh, waving a hand between us. Why was he still staring at me like he was Superman and could melt steel with his eyes? “So what,” I went on, probably making things worse. But he drove me nuts, so my mouth ran away when we were together. “So you saw my nipple poke through some fabric just now. Not a big deal. You’re thirty-nine. Surely, you’ve seen plenty at this point.”

He turned at my words and retrieved his coffee. Armed with java now, Ryan took his time facing me.

The man before me had somehow morphed with that turn. He was calm. Steady. Unreadable. It was as if he’d flipped some special switch and ...

Right. He was an operator. He needed to know how to button up his emotions for the sake of a mission. Great skill to have as a SEAL, and one I was sorely lacking. Because I wore my emotions on my sleeves. All over my face. Basically, on every inch of my body.

Ryan opened his mouth, about to say something that’d most likely annoy me, but my phone buzzed on the counter next to him, and he redirected his focus to it.

Maria had brought my phone home last night and, thankfully, she hadn’t mentioned anything about the pile of bills it’d been buried under in my desk drawer.

I opened my palm in silent request for him to hand it to me.

“A text from your mom. Looks like she’s had a busy morning. Rescheduled a date for you.” I discarded my coffee mug and accepted the phone, ignoring his cocky smile. “You know, I could give you a ride.”

Let Ryan chauffeur me around? I wasn’t that desperate.

I ignored him and checked the message.

Mom: *I rescheduled your date. Coffee with the doctor today at 11 a.m. The Starbucks closest to our house. He’ll be waiting outside in a black dress shirt. You won’t be able to miss him. *winking emoji**

Me: *I have to work later. Cancel, please.*

Mom didn't even hesitate.

Mom: *You don't open until 5. And I misplaced his mother's number right after I rescheduled, so I can't cancel for you. You'll have to show up. Also, I'm about to lose service, so you probably won't be able to reach me. Ciao, ciao. xx*

Lies, Mom. All lies. I dropped my phone on the counter, knowing texting her again was a waste of time.

Ryan stared at me, back to the counter with one ankle over the other, casually sipping his coffee.

"Looks like you have a date, and I need one." One more sip of his coffee before he added, "Like I said, I'll take you on your date. Bring you to work, too, if you need a ride."

"Fix my Jeep? Drive me around? What else will you do for me if I help you find a woman?" I was kidding, but he set down his coffee and erased the distance between us.

His palm landed on the counter at my side, and he drew my chin up with his free hand to peer into his eyes. "I'll do whatever you want." His husky voice coupled with that dark look, had me shivering.

Had me wanting ... things. *Things?* Who was I kidding? Swap "things" for "sex." *That* was what I wanted. Needed.

Two and a half years without sex at my age had me worried it wouldn't be like riding a bike. What if I couldn't get back on? *Or get off, I should say.*

In my defense, running the restaurant left little to no time for sex, let alone dating.

But the way Ryan was peering into my eyes, offering to give me what felt like the world right now ... why'd I feel like he'd also be willing to ease the discomfort between my legs? And do a damn good job at it, too.

But, no. Sex with Ryan? I could never have ... "Sex."

Ryan frowned and let go of my chin. "Excuse me?"

Shit, did I just finish my thought out loud? I needed to recover. Quickly. “Are you looking to have sex with a woman, like a one-night-stand kind of thing? Or are you looking for love?”

His brows slanted. “Does that mean you’ll help me?”

“I need to know more before I can even entertain the idea of helping you.”

Ryan grumbled and grabbed his coffee.

“What’s with the mood swings? They change faster than an indecisive toddler with a TV remote,” I jabbed, and he tossed me a dirty look. “What?” I shrugged.

He rolled his eyes before sharing in a much more somber tone, “I need money. I can only access my inheritance if I can prove to my uncle I’m dating someone and in love.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I wish.”

I thought back to what Anthony had told me years ago. He’d said his grandparents were well off, and his dad turned down the inheritance when he married Laura. Dante’s decision to marry for love over money made me appreciate that man even more.

And there I was needing money over love, and from the sounds of it, Ryan needed both.

“Why? How?” I had way more questions than that, but I’d let Ryan start there.

Ryan went over to our small four-person kitchen table by the window and sat. He set a palm alongside his mug, his eyes on his ring-finger hand. “I just need the money. I don’t want to get into details. But as Dad’s eldest son, I can inherit some money from his side of the family over in Italy.” He paused as if processing some memories. “The original deal required marriage, but I renegotiated the terms. If I can prove to my uncle I’m in a committed relationship, he’ll give me ten percent of the inheritance up front.”

My head was spinning, and before my legs gave out, I moved to sit across from him. “How much is ten percent?”

He swallowed and looked up at me. “One million.”

My eyes were probably all buggy and wide right about now. I bit my tongue instead of asking that “million-dollar” question again—*why?*

“I only need nine fifty.”

“That’s a pretty specific number.” I thought I had problems. From the sounds of it, Ryan had nine hundred and fifty. *Thousand*. What on earth did he need that much money for? Was he in trouble?

He drummed his fingers on the table. “I have to fly to Italy a week from tomorrow so my uncle can meet my girlfriend.” He lifted his index finger and pointed at me. “That’s where you come in. I need you to help me find someone.”

“You want me to find you a woman to fake date to trick your uncle into giving you a million dollars? Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?” I was already back on my feet.

I didn’t realize I was pacing until strong hands grabbed me from behind, holding onto the sides of my arms to stop me.

“I’m sorry to drop this on you, and you’re about the last person I should ask for help,” he began while slowly guiding me to face him, “but I’m in a bind. And the way I see it, you are, too.” His dark brows slashed together again. “I’m asking for your help, and I’m offering you as much help as you need from me in return.” He swallowed. “What do you say? Can we put the past behind us?”

I considered his words, trying to digest them. “Let’s assume I’d be willing to help you find a woman to date. Why in the world would she agree to do this? And a free trip to Italy won’t cut it, trust me.”

He stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Like I said, I don’t need the full one million. I can pay her to date me.” His eyes quickly thinned. “Not for sex. Just so we’re clear. I might need to kiss her in front of my uncle to make things look legit, but that’s it.”

Set Ryan Rossi up with other women? Why did that thought make me physically ill?

“I’ll fix your Jeep. Drive you wherever you need to go until it’s ready. And hell, whatever else you need from me, just let me know.” The hint of desperation in his tone was unnerving.

What kind of trouble are you in? And was I seriously considering getting involved?

“What makes you think I can even find a woman for you? A woman willing to accept money to fake date you. This isn’t some reality show, by the way.”

“Since you’re a single woman, I was hoping you had some single friends. I know it’s a long shot, insane even, but I have to try.”

“Why do you have to do this?” I couldn’t trap that question behind my lips this time. I needed answers.

Hands free from his pockets now, he reached for my arm and gently squeezed. “I can’t tell you that. Just trust me.”

“How can I trust you?” I shook my head. “I’m sorry.” I eased away from his grip and jerked a thumb toward the front of the house, signaling for him to leave. “I can take care of myself. I don’t need you.”

Ryan hung his head and let go of a deep breath. “I’m not in trouble. I haven’t done anything illegal, I swear.” When he slowly worked his gaze back to my face, his eyes appeared haunted. Unsettled. “The money is for someone else. It’s important.” His Adam’s apple visibly moved when he gulped. “Please, Talia,” he added, shredding me with his use of that nickname.

Because it reminded me of a different time.

I’d been Tali to him as a kid.

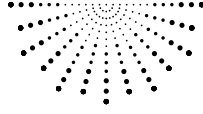
Later on, for whatever reason, he added on the *A*, calling me Talia.

But once Anthony and I began dating for the second time, he’d started calling me Natalia. I’d never understood why.

Pretty much, I never understood him in general.

“Maybe you don’t need me,” Ryan went on in a low, rough voice, once again capturing my attention, “but I sure as hell need you.”

CHAPTER SIX



RYAN

NATALIA'S BEST OFFER JUST BEFORE SENDING ME ON MY WAY two hours ago had been an, *I'll think about it*. It was better than a no, so I'd take it for now.

I'd planned to mention the inheritance to my mother, but after witnessing Natalia's reaction to my cryptic words, I knew Mom would see right through me.

I'd have to tell Mom eventually, but I bought myself some time with a lie. One that gave her hope.

I told her I was considering moving back for good. Eventually, settle down and start a family. And the tears in her eyes had been like knives to my chest. Blade after blade, a direct hit on my heart. Seeing her hopeful, knowing it was all a ruse, gutted me. I'd given her a fake smile and gentle hug before taking off for a run.

I needed to clear my head and convince myself I was doing the right thing.

Miles and miles of running did nothing to ease the guilt. If anything, the anger toward my brother for putting me in yet another shitty situation only intensified.

Anthony had dragged not just me but my friends into his mess. And now, I was potentially pulling his ex-fiancée into it as well.

I'd briefly flirted with the insane idea of offering Natalia the money to fake date me, but I'd shot that option down

pretty quickly. Completely put it out of my mind as simply desperation caused by the stress of it all.

Wrapping a towel around my hips after my post-run shower, my thoughts were interrupted by my ringing phone in the connecting bedroom. Hoping to have some good news, I hurried in there, nearly tripping over my sneakers on the way.

It was Owen. It'd been about forty hours since those two assholes had entered his Charleston home, four more hours than he'd said he'd need. I held back the joke I would normally make about the "delay" since this mission was personal.

"Hey, man." I went over to the window and opened the blinds, ensuring Natalia didn't have her head back under the hood of her Jeep. It was thirty minutes until the date her mom had scheduled for her, and she'd yet to let me know if I was giving her that awkward ride over to Starbucks.

"Sorry I'm late. I didn't want to call until I had something concrete to share," Owen said.

Based on the background noise, I assumed Owen was inside a hangar, which meant he was most likely about to spin up.

Damn, did I miss those days.

"What do you know?" I finally asked.

"You were right. The men in my house were American, but their boss is a Canadian businessman. Well, I'd use that last term loosely. He's currently renting a place in Ibiza, which is where those two guys flew out of, and as of last night, back to. Your brother is there as well," he explained in a hurry, likely getting ready to board a jet soon.

I turned away from the window, setting my eyes on the framed photos on top of the dresser. Most were of Dad and me. "And is Anthony okay?"

"Anthony's fine. I have two Teamguys from Scott and Scott Securities watching him. They put up an aerial drone an hour ago and confirmed your brother is on the property. Anthony has two security details following him everywhere

like puppy dogs. Well-armed puppy dogs.” He paused to let the news sink in. “But for a prisoner, he’s pretty free to roam, and it doesn’t look like he’s been beaten up or anything.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that information. I was relieved, sure. And yet, why did that *also* have me worried?

Before I could share my thoughts, Owen added, “My people did some digging, and it wasn’t hard to figure out the guy who bought up Anthony’s gambling debt is a hardcore hockey fan. He’s probably treating your brother with kid gloves because of it, which is Anthony’s saving grace. But that doesn’t mean he won’t pull the trigger if you don’t pay.”

“Copy that,” I remarked, my stomach dropping at the idea my brother could die if I didn’t follow through with my plan.

“You sure you don’t want us to extract your brother instead?”

I considered his words and what that option might mean. “No, if my brother owes money, then he needs to square up, or this shit will keep following him. And we can’t kill these guys just for being asshole debt collectors that threaten violence, can we?” *I mean ... can we? Could I wade in that morally gray area for a bit? Could I be that guy?*

“Samantha would prefer I don’t kill anyone unless I have to,” Owen shared, sounding a little disappointed. He was still upset the men had pointed a pistol at his wife and tranquilized his dog. He wanted some payback, and I didn’t blame him. But Owen wasn’t some cold-blooded killer. “So, I guess I’ll just have my guys sit tight and monitor the situation while you’re dealing with the money side of things.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, knowing that was probably the best option for now. “Thank you.”

“Did you talk to your uncle?”

I thought back to that conversation, surprised things had gone as smoothly as they had. I’d been prepared to offer Uncle Maurizio much more of a sales pitch than I’d needed to. Maybe my uncle had softened in his older age? “He agreed to the ten percent advance as long as I propose to my girlfriend in

front of him in Italy. I have to fly out there a week from tomorrow.”

“Shit. Who’s the lucky woman?” I knew he was doing his best not to laugh at the absurd idea of all this fake dating nonsense.

“I’m still working on the girlfriend part, but I’ll figure something out.”

I faced the window again, catching sight of Natalia’s room. Only about fifteen paces separated our homes, and with her blinds partially open, I could see her walking around her bedroom.

Feeling like some peeping Tom, I tore my gaze away.

“If you change your mind and want the money, I’ll find a way to help you, you know that,” Owen reminded me. “In the meantime, I have to spin up with Bravo for a quick op. My guy in Ibiza will be your point of contact while I’m out of town. He’s got your number and will touch base later today.”

“Bravo? An op?” I laughed. “Sounds to me like you’re still running missions for the Teams—not working private security.”

Owen cleared his throat, realizing his slip-up. “I, uh, gotta run, bro. But if anything urgent comes up, just reach out to Noah Dalton. He’s your point guy over there.”

“Whoa, hold up. Dalton? I thought he was running an architectural firm in New York now that he remarried. He’s doing side jobs for Scott and Scott?”

“Yeah, he’s a Teamguy, what can I say?” He paused. “*Never out of the fight,*” he repeated one of the common SEAL mottos.

Unless you’re forbidden to fight. My shoulders fell with disappointment. “Until you can’t ...” I whispered, not meaning for Owen to overhear me.

“Hey, just because you can’t operate doesn’t mean you’re out—”

“It does, actually,” I responded, bitter all over again. “Anyways, looks like we’re bringing the old gang back together,” I deflected.

Noah Dalton had been in my BUD/S class. It really was becoming a blast from the past, but my brother getting himself in trouble wasn’t how I wanted to have this reunion.

“Don’t worry. We’ve got your six,” Owen remarked.

After exchanging a few more words, we hung up, and I chucked the phone on the bed a little harder than necessary. I looked over at the window, needing to close the blinds before I let go of my towel. But then I spotted Natalia peeling off her top in her bedroom.

When I turned to avoid the sight, I tripped over my damn shoes and nearly slammed my head against the thirty-year-old oak dresser while falling to my knees.

For a former Tier One guy, I’d already lost my stealth-mode setting.

Wouldn’t that be my luck? Quit operating to protect my head only to have my childhood dresser take me out.

And while I’d saved my head from another blow, my shoulder wasn’t so lucky. The force knocked loose one of the frames, and I shot my arm out, catching it just before the picture connected with the hardwood floor.

I sat back on my heels and stared at the photo, feeling like I could reach out and touch the moment from when we’d lived in Toronto. Anthony was geared up for his first hockey game. Dad was standing between us, and I had a comic book under my arm. I’d been obsessed with the comic *Watchmen* back then—a group of fallen superheroes trying to navigate failures and civilian life.

Doing my best to shut down thoughts of parallels between my own life and that comic, I stood and returned the frame to its rightful place. I peered at the other photos. Only one had Mom in it. She never liked her photo taken, something she regretted after Dad passed.

The family photo had been taken the day we moved into our house in Charlotte. Well, technically, *five* of us were in the picture. Natalia was in the background. She'd been eight at the time and excited to have new neighbors.

I set a finger on the frame by Dad's face. "I'll keep Anthony safe for you. I promise." I stuffed down the emotions rising to the surface and searched for something to wear. I swapped my towel for boxer briefs and a pair of jeans, avoiding the window with the blinds still open.

While grabbing a clean shirt from my duffel bag, there was a knock at my bedroom door. "I'm decent. Come in."

When the door opened, I saw Natalia standing there instead of my mom.

How long had I been staring at the photos? Apparently, longer than I realized if Natalia had changed into a dress and made her way to my house in that time.

Standing tall now, I tossed a look over my shoulder toward the window. Did she see me? Come here to give me hell, assuming I'd spied on her?

"Your mom was on her way out. She told me I'd find you up here," she explained, drawing my focus back her way. "You didn't see me getting dressed, did you?" Her brows slanted in suspicion.

I pointed a finger at my chest with my free hand. "I should be asking you that. I was in a towel a second ago. Did you see *me*?"

Natalia folded her arms over the white and yellow sundress that went to her ankles, hiding her long legs. "Nice save." She wet her lips and teased her tongue along the seam. And damn if that small movement didn't do things to me.

"Now you're just fucking with me."

"Excuse me?"

Guess I wasn't as great as I'd believed at keeping a lid on my thoughts. I sure as hell hadn't meant to voice those words,

and I needed to switch gears and fast. “Are you here to give me your final answer?”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed, but she kept her arms locked over her chest as she continued to stare me down. “I’ll tell you if you put on a shirt.”

I dropped my attention to my chest before slowly working my gaze back to her face. “Does my lack of shirt distract you?” I teased.

She kept her eyes on my chest instead of dignifying me with a response, and I repositioned my shirt in front of my crotch, worried Natalia would notice my pitched jeans. They were old and faded and nowhere near stiff enough to conceal what I was packing right now. But with her looking at me like that, well, damn.

Brother’s ex. Brother’s ex, I did my best to down-boy the less-than-stellar throbbing situation below the belt.

“I was planning to only show up at this coffee date and cancel, but on second thought, I better stick it out with the doctor.” Her nude-colored glossy lips pursed together as she walked her gaze up the hard planes of my abdominal muscles to my chest.

“What do you mean?” I frowned, worried I did know what she was suggesting, and I didn’t like it.

“Stress,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Tension?” The word popped out like a question from that sweet, luscious mouth.

I bit down on my back teeth, doing my best not to surrender my thoughts out loud. My *actual* thoughts. But I stupidly unleashed the question anyway, “You want to get laid?” I tore my free hand through my wet hair, mussing it up. Agitated as hell was an understatement.

“I shouldn’t have said that, I’m sorry.” Her soft tone did nothing to alleviate my frustration. In *any* part of my body.

“You’re Anthony’s brother, and I’m sure you don’t want to know who your brother’s ex is going to ...”

“Going to what?” I hissed, forcing out a harsh breath. *How do you always have the power to get under my skin like this?*

“You’re half-naked, and I ... it’s been a long time since I’ve seen ... muscles so up close,” she tossed out, her tone nervous. “Don’t flatter yourself, like I said, it’s been forever.”

You’re going to kill me, woman. I put on my shirt and rolled the soft gray fabric over my abs, feeling the need to be fully clothed at her words. “I don’t recommend you deal with your stress with someone you don’t know.”

Natalia’s arms fell to her sides as she took one step closer, and I inhaled her scent again. She needed some new soap.

“Are you saying I should handle my tension with someone I do know?”

How many guy friends did she have? I knew of Enzo, the head chef at her restaurant. And I only knew about him because my mother liked to bring the man up on our calls. “You know, there are other ways to deal with stress. Like running.” She was only a foot away from me now, and I curled my fingers into my palms at my sides to keep from reaching out and offering to help ease her tension.

I couldn’t stop myself from mentally mapping out the plan I’d execute to do that. I’d lay her on my bed and bunch her dress up to her waist. Slip a finger beneath her panties to see how wet she was before pulling them down her long, shapely legs. Set my face between her thighs and flick her clit with my tongue for a taste, and then—

She arched a brow. “I saw you go for a run. Does that mean you’re tense, too?”

You have no idea. “I could take you to the range if you’d like,” I said, dodging her question. “Shooting is also a great way to deal with tension.” *Better than what I want to do with you right now.*

“Yeah, well, I’m a horrible shot.” She eased back a step as if realizing we were too close. “I’ll stick to yoga, I suppose.”

“Yoga?” I frowned, not needing that visual in my head.

“I teach a few times a week for some extra ...”

Cash? She didn’t want me to know about her money issues, but it was becoming glaringly apparent she needed help.

“I have a class after lunch today. And, well, some single women take it.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Does that mean you’re helping me? Is your answer now a yes?”

Natalia turned to the side, offering her beautiful profile but hiding her eyes from me. She tossed a hand through her long, wavy hair and shifted it to her chest. Was she nervous? Trying to hide her emotions from me?

“You’re short on time. So yes, I’ll help you.” She turned to face me again, her eyes meeting mine. “You must admit, this whole thing sounds a little crazy, though. Like the plot of a Hallmark movie. I’d go with Netflix if you were planning to have sex, but since you said you’ll be keeping it PG-rated—”

“More like G-rated.”

She circled her hand in the air just in front of me. “You may not have plans to do more than that one fake kiss, but what if she becomes interested?”

I laughed and lifted my hands from my pockets, reaching for her chin. Her breath hitched at the contact, and I blinked at the realization of what I’d done. But I didn’t let go. “Let’s see if you can even find someone to date me first.” I tipped my head to the door. “In the meantime, am I taking you to *your* date?” *Please say no.* “Driving you around is part of the deal. And anything else you need from me.” Aside from tension relief. I couldn’t do that. Not sexually, at least.

“Right, okay. I guess I should go, or Mom will kill me.” Her gaze cut to the photos on my dresser, and I let go of her chin. “But before I officially agree to help you, I need you to answer a question for me.”

Oh, shit. I knew what was coming. The same question she'd fired at me last night.

"Why'd you really convince Anthony not to marry me?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "That's pretty easy to answer. Because I *didn't* tell him not to marry you." I let go of a deep, uncomfortable breath. "The thing is ... Anthony lied."

Faint lines cut across her forehead. "Why would you let everyone believe you talked him out of marrying me, then? Why not defend yourself? Everyone has been pissed at you because of it. I don't get it."

What could I say that'd make sense to her? "He's my kid brother. It's my job to take the heavy hits for him."

"Anthony can protect himself. He's not your responsibility. When will you learn that?"

No, he can't protect himself. Look at him now. "If he didn't want to tell you the truth back then, and he needed to use me as a scapegoat, then—"

"And what was the truth?" She stepped forward, her hand going to my chest. My heart was beating borderline erratically at her line of questioning. Would she even notice? And why did I care?

I said too much. "That's not for me to say. It's not my place."

"Oh?" She fake laughed. "But it's your place to take the blame? The 'heavy hits'?" Her hand left my chest as she turned away. Unable to stop myself, I snatched her tiny wrist, gently whirling her back to face me.

She was panting a little as she looked up at me, hurt all over again by my brother. And now it was my fault. For real this time. Because I'd been honest. Gave her a partial glimmer of reality.

I should've stuck with the lie everyone believed, that I'd advised Anthony not to marry Natalia. And as his older brother, he looked up to me and canceled the wedding.

“I don’t have feelings for Anthony. You don’t get it. That’s not why I want to know,” she murmured. “I just thought maybe you didn’t want him to marry me because ...”

Because what? I angled my head, waiting for her to finish, confused by the threat of tears pricking her eyes.

Her brows tightened. “Never mind. Forget it.” She forcefully pulled free from my grasp and swiped the backs of her hands over her cheeks, wiping away any possible tears that fell there. “We’ll both just leave the past behind us. Like you said earlier, let’s move on.” She motioned for the door. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have a date waiting for me.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



RYAN

“YOU KNOW, IT’S ALMOST HALLOWEEN. SHOULDN’T YOU HAVE worn something a bit more fall-like?” I asked from behind the wheel as we neared the Starbucks.

“What’s wrong with my dress? It’s hot out. Who cares that it’s October?”

From the corner of my eye, I spied her trailing her palms along the sides of her exposed arms as if chilled. “See. You’re cold.”

“Because you’re blasting the air-conditioning since it’s *hot* out,” she responded, a bit of exasperation mixed in with that sassy tone. “What’s your deal? Most men like sundresses.”

“Exactly. And he’ll fantasize about what’s under that dress from the moment he sets his eyes on you.” I turned on my blinker with a bit too much force, aggravated I’d spoken what I’d meant to be my private thoughts.

“And are you immune to the apparent seductive allure of such a dress?”

Sitting at the red light now, I looked over to find her eyeing me with an amused expression. She was trying to get a rise out of me. “Only immune when you’re wearing one.” It was a bullshit lie, and she rolled her eyes, knowing I was full of it.

A few seconds later, I entered the Starbucks parking lot and searched for her date.

My jaw about came unhinged when I put two and two together. “You’re kidding me, right? Of all the doctors in Charlotte, *that’s* who your mom chose?” I gripped the wheel and tried to curb the emotions jetting through me at supersonic speeds.

“I had no idea it was him. I don’t even remember the name she gave me. How bad is that?” Natalia unbuckled and swiveled on the leather to face me. I could feel the frustration and hesitation radiating from her.

“With my luck, I’m not surprised it’s him.” I looked out the side window, unable to put eyes on the ER doctor who told me three years ago I should never operate again.

“I’m going to tell him I’m not interested. Do you mind waiting in the parking lot? Just give me a few minutes.” With her hand on my forearm, I looked over my shoulder to see her touching me.

“Don’t do that on my account,” I gruffly said. “It’s not his fault I had to stop operating.” I lifted my chin, drawing my eyes to hers. “Or yours.”

“Yeah, well, I took you to the hospital after you said not to.” She slowly retracted her palm.

She sure as hell didn’t need to carry the weight of that guilt on her shoulders. I’d thought we’d been through this, but clearly, she still blamed herself.

“Let’s pretend for a second you let me sleep it off at the condo. And then a few weeks later, I was sent overseas on a mission, and I blacked out again on an op, and some of my men were killed as a result.”

That very real possibility was why I’d shelved my ego three years ago and professed the truth to the Navy.

“You could’ve died too, I suppose.” Her eyes fell to her lap, and she fidgeted with a silver bangle on her wrist.

“Worrying about my own life wouldn’t have been enough to compel me to quit,” I remarked, forgetting sometimes honesty didn’t always go a long way. And could sound

borderline crazy, like in this case. I didn't have a death wish, but being in the Navy was all I'd known since Dad died.

"Just go have coffee with this doctor, okay? Enjoy yourself. We're moving on from the past, right?"

She scrunched her brow and focused back on me. "Coffee with him is kind of throwing the past in both of our faces."

Your past, too? How so? I kept the question to myself and internally answered for her. *Because you were with Anthony then?* That was my only guess.

"I have to make a few calls. I'll go park and stay out of sight. Just come find me when you're done," I suggested, despite the fact the idea of her and the doctor playing the get-to-know-you game over coffee made my stomach lurch.

"I'm not interested in him. It'll be quick." She reached for the handle. "I'm sorry it's him. Really." She left my truck, and I dropped a few expletives when the doctor stood and went in for a hug to greet her.

When Natalia shot me a look, I realized I was still hovering and needed to park. I pulled into a nearby space, not keeping my word to refrain from sight. Because what if the doctor put his hands on her and decided to see what was beneath that dress even in broad daylight?

I needed to distract myself before I left my truck and crashed the date to give the doctor the third degree, so I grabbed my phone and called my dad's old friend to order the parts for Natalia's Jeep.

We shot the shit for a few minutes, and then he promised to have everything by Monday.

I was too tense for any more small talk, so I quickly ended the call, realizing nothing would truly distract me from the fact Natalia was on a date with that doctor.

I squeezed my hand into a fist on my lap, trying to channel my frustration into something else. Into something future-focused. Just before those goons had shown up at Samantha and Owen's house, Samantha had suggested I work on cars.

The idea of reopening Rossi's Auto Body eased some tension, and I slowly unclenched my hand.

But would I be able to plant roots and live in the same town as Natalia? And what if Anthony moved back home after I cleaned up his mess? What if he tried to win Natalia back for a third time?

I blew out a deep, exhausted breath, realizing my open palm had once again converted into a fist.

My gaze cut to Natalia sipping her drink, finding her eyes on me instead of focused on her date. Was that a quiet request to bail her out?

I took her slight nod as a yes, and I turned off the truck and hopped out.

I uttered a gruff, "Excuse me," while circling their small table. "Natalia needs to leave."

The doctor shoved his sunglasses into his hair and narrowed his gaze at me. The hint of recognition in his green eyes was short-lived. Nope. He didn't remember me.

"Not sure who you are, but we just sat down." He jerked a thumb my way. "You want to go with this guy? Who is he?"

"I think that, um ..." Natalia's words were caught in her throat. She had a sweet side. One she reserved for most people, and I rarely saw because we were usually arguing. She obviously didn't want to be rude to the guy, so from the looks of it, she was struggling with how to let him down.

"Let me help you out. You were probably planning to ask some basic questions to get to know her, right?" I stood behind Natalia's chair, holding onto the back as I faced him. "Well, she takes her coffee with milk and sugar. Real sugar, not the fake shit." I paused for a second. "You probably ordered her some fancy latte before she arrived."

The doctor opened his mouth to speak, but I shook my head.

"Let's see. Her favorite color is blue. But not just any blue. She loves the color of the iridescent waters you find at

Spiaggia dei Conigli. That shade of blue. Well, *blues*, I suppose.”

I felt Natalia’s eyes on me and discovered she’d twisted in her seat to peer up at me.

“And as for her taste in men, it’s horrible. Well, her mother’s taste in men for her is garbage. The fact you’re sitting across from her is testament to that. So, you’re wasting your time sitting here, I can promise you that.” I released her chair, retrieved a ten from my wallet, and set it on the table. “For the overpriced latte.”

Still staring at me, Natalia slowly stood, appearing a bit shell-shocked for a moment before recovering enough to turn back to her date. “Thanks for the latte, but he’s right, I prefer regular coffee. And also ... I don’t want to waste your time. I should go.” And with that, she started for the truck without waiting for a response.

“Did that just happen?” the doctor asked while standing, and I did a quick mental prayer he wasn’t stupid enough to toss any rude words toward Natalia for her abrupt departure. Punching a doctor in the face might land me in jail for assault. “Well.” He grabbed the money and pocketed it when I remained quiet. “Looks like you should’ve been her date.” And then he left, heading for a red Mercedes convertible.

I shrugged off his words and went to my truck. Natalia was already inside since I’d left it unlocked when I’d hauled ass to “rescue her.”

I jumped behind the wheel and immediately started up the engine. “Where to now, ma’am?” I looked over at her with a satisfied smirk at the fact her date was, thank God, over.

She folded her arms and studied me. “What the hell was that?”

“What do you mean? I thought you wanted a save.” I opened my palms in confusion. “You did the head-nod thing.”

“I’m talking about the stuff you said. How’d you know all that about me?”

“I’ve known you for nearly twenty-five years. Or have you forgotten?”

She shook her head. “And you haven’t lived here for most of that time.” She leaned in over the console as if trying to see if I was wired and had someone feeding me intel in real time. “How in the world did you know my favorite color is because of *Spiaggia dei Conigli*? Because of Rabbit Beach?” she asked, a bewildered look on her face. “I’ve only been to Sicily that one time when I was ten, but the colors of the sea at the beach there had been nothing like I’d ever seen, and I fell in love.”

I smoothed a hand over my stubbled jawline. “When we were kids, you constantly drew pictures of Rabbit Beach after you returned from your trip there. You even gave some to my mom, and she’d put them on our fridge. From that point on, whenever you wore any shade of blue, it was no longer just blue, it was—”

“Rabbit Beach blue. I honestly forgot about that.” She smiled. “But yeah ... still my favorite.”

“See.” I shrugged. “I know you.” I focused back out the front window, unable to keep looking her in the eyes. Because my favorite color was the color of her eyes. They were far from “just green” in my mind. “By the way, my dad’s friend will have the parts I need to fix your Jeep by Monday,” I deflected.

“Oh, okay. Thank you,” she returned in a daze.

“So, where can I take you?”

“Welllll,” she began, “we have some time before I teach yoga at one. Maybe we should discuss a plan or something?”

“For how to win over one of the women in your class?” I drummed my fingertips on the wheel, uneasy with this whole situation.

“I can get you a guest pass. My gym is over in Ballantyne near that shopping complex, Waverly. We should grab a change of clothes first,” she suggested. “They have food if you want to eat and discuss a game plan before class.”

I frowned and faced her. “Are you suggesting I take your class?”

“Of course. I can’t just bring you to the front of the class and say, *Hey, this guy needs a fake girlfriend, any takers?*” She chuckled. “I mean, I’d get a few laughs until they realized I wasn’t kidding.”

“I’ve never done yoga. I’ll make an ass of myself, and that won’t get me far with any of them.” Nah, bad idea.

“Almost every woman I know that’s my age is married or in a relationship. There are plenty of twentysomethings in my class who’d say yes to you.”

“Whoa, wait a second.” I cut my hand in the air. “That’s too young for me. I’m going on forty.”

Natalia swatted my chest with the back of her hand, and I stupidly snatched her wrist. Why was that always my first reaction when around her? To reach for her. “Good thing it’s fake, then, right? Who cares if she’s in her twenties?”

“Forget yoga.” When I realized I was smoothing my thumb along her wrist where I was holding her, I quickly let go. “Find someone older. I need this to be realistic, or my uncle won’t believe it.”

She blew out a breath and pursed her lips together.

“You know someone, don’t you?” I narrowed my eyes, and she winced. “You’re holding out on me. Who?”

“Maybe.” Her shoulders fell. “Just come to my restaurant tonight. After the dinner rush. I’ll ask her to be there at the bar.” She held an index finger between us. “And no, you don’t need to take me to work today. I already asked Enzo to bring me, but you can take me home when we close. Enzo lives in Uptown, so it’d make more sense for you to drive me.”

Enzo, huh? “You’re not going to give me a name for this potential date? Tell me anything about her?”

“All you need to know is that, um ...” Natalia let go of a deep breath. “Well, I’m sure you’ll want to change your mind about the whole G-rated thing, that’s all.”

“Really?” *And why do you look so upset right now?* “Why didn’t you think of her before? Why push yoga on me?”

She rolled her tongue over her front teeth as if contemplating an appropriate response. “I mean, maybe I just wanted to see you in tights.” She was lying. But if she didn’t want to answer, I wouldn’t push her.

“You’ll never see me in tights.” I smiled. “Remember the Spiderman costume I refused to wear?”

“How could I forget?” she whispered. “Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t love to see you in it.”

“Oh really?” I teased. “Never gonna happen. Not for all the money in the world.”

“Not even for nine hundred and fifty thousand? You draw the line at tights, but you’re okay with fake dating a woman?”

Shit, you have me there. And that was a harsh reminder of my situation and why I was there.

Anthony. My brother. Her ex.

“I never understood you two,” I blurted before throwing the truck into reverse. “You and Anthony just didn’t make sense to me.”

Natalia was quiet for a moment before sharing, “That’s because what you said to the doctor was true. My mom has horrible taste in the men I should be dating.”

I shot her a quick look after leaving the Starbucks parking lot. “And who should you be dating? Someone like Enzo?” *Damn, where’d that come from?*

“We’re just friends,” she returned in a subdued tone.

“And if Enzo saw you in a white shirt without a bra? Would he still see you as just a friend?” I didn’t miss the slightly accusatory look in her eyes when I stopped at a red light.

“I assume he’d look at me the same as you did this morning, worried someone would see me like that, and he’d give me the heads-up to protect me. But that’s all.”

You thought that's how I was looking at you earlier? I couldn't help but laugh, forgetting she wasn't in on the joke in my head.

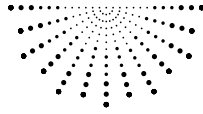
“What?” She set a hand to her slender neck, her nude-colored nails drawing my eyes. Did the color match the panties she wore? She had to be wearing something light beneath that dress so they didn't show through when the sunlight hit her. “Am I amusing?”

“Yes, you do amuse the hell out of me.”

“On the days you don't hate me, you mean? Well, I guess I should be glad I can provide you some comic relief.”

“Natalia,” I rasped, fully aware of the sound of my voice but a hundred percent unable to do anything about it, “you know damn well what I feel for you is not hate.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



NATALIA

“SINCE WHEN DO YOU GO ON INSTAGRAM?”

I flinched at my sister’s voice, and my phone tumbled to the floor. Had she developed ninja sneaking skills, or was I just that distracted by what I was looking at?

I inwardly groaned as I crouched to pick it up from behind my bar. “Please don’t be broken.” I didn’t need another unnecessary expense.

Relieved to see no damage to the screen, I shot my sister an exasperated look.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to spook you,” Maria said while pouring two glasses of Bellini Chianti.

You couldn’t go for the house red? I didn’t want her to know about my money problems, so I accepted the wine and quickly took a sip to hide the frown I felt pulling at my lips.

“Why are you here? I thought Thomas was coming home tonight.” It was close to nine on a Thursday night, and the kitchen rush was over. Our usual clients were younger families, so the place became a ghost town after eight during the week, prompting us to shut down around ten thirty or whenever the last guests chose to leave.

My bartender strode over and wiped down the counter. “Take a load off. Sit.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.” Maria rounded the counter and slid onto one of the high-back chairs.

Christian winked at her, and I elbowed him, reminding him my sister was married. He was a flirt, and I was fairly certain he was the reason for the large crowd of single women at happy hour on weekdays. The fact he also looked like a young Patrick Swayze from his *Road House* years probably had something to do with it, too.

I couldn't complain. I needed the business.

"You should keep the celebration going all week." Christian poked me back, needling me in the ribs with his index finger. "A restaurant surviving its first year is a big deal." He pointed to the wall of wine behind us. "You should have gone for the top-shelf stuff."

I lifted the glass and gave the liquid a little swirl. "Trust me, this is good." I finally rounded the counter to sit by my sister and waved him off for some privacy, knowing if Maria left her Uptown home to come down here, it was for a reason.

"Fine." Christian smiled and tipped his head toward our only other patrons at the bar. "Be over there if you need me."

"So, what's going on?" I asked once we were alone.

Maria snatched my phone from the counter and held it between us. "First, I need to see who you were spying on." She held the phone in front of my face to unlock it, then opened the Instagram app. "Well, I'm disappointed. I was hoping it was some new guy you were secretly DM'ing." She shot me a dirty look over her shoulder. "Why were you looking at Calista's page?"

About that. "I know you're not her greatest fan, but she's nice." *And thirty-one. Single. A hot model. And lives only fifteen minutes away.* Basically, perfect for Ryan.

"She's fake nice. There's a difference." She began swiping through some of her photos, most of Calista in a bikini in places I'd only ever dream of visiting.

"Calista's coming in soon to meet Ryan Rossi. I'm the one playing matchmaker this time instead of Mom," I spilled the truth. *Partial truth.* I couldn't tell her Ryan's motives for the date.

“Wait, what?” Maria let go of the phone and faced me. I flinched again as it hit the bar top. “You’re going to need to share more deets on how that happened. And I thought you and Ryan hated each other.”

Maybe we don't hate each other after all.

I thought back to Ryan’s last words to me on the ride home after he cut short my date with the doctor. *You know damn well what I feel for you is not hate.* I had no clue how to respond to that, and he didn’t seem eager to continue talking, so we endured an uncomfortable silence the rest of the way home.

I texted him to show up around nine thirty tonight, though, so he’d be there soon. A fact Enzo wasn’t happy about. When I’d shared the news Ryan was back in town with him on our ride into work, he’d pulled off the road to stare me down. Then he warned me not to trust Ryan, which was absurd since the two men had never actually met.

“Before I roll out the red carpet of information,” I began after taking a rather indulgent sip of wine, “I want you to tell me if you’re okay. Where’s Chiara? Thomas?”

“Thomas called a few hours ago and said he couldn’t make it home. He has to stay out of town longer.” She frowned. “I’m sick of being in that big house alone. Well, with Chiara, of course. So, I’m crashing at Mom and Dad’s tonight again. Chiara is already asleep there, so I thought I’d pop over here and bug you.”

“Look at us, sleeping in our old bedrooms now after we spent our childhoods anxious to become adults and move out,” I said with a small smile, unsure how to feel about this new Thomas situation. I hated how it was leading to my sister’s apparent unhappiness.

Maria downed the rest of her wine in one long swallow. “I’m worried Thomas won’t be home for that party we’re going to Sunday night, and I’ll be dateless.”

“Take Christian,” I joked. “We’re closed on Sundays and Mondays, so ...” Although, if things didn’t change soon, I

might have to reconsider the restaurant's operating hours. Maybe add an extra day.

"Don't tempt me." Maria grinned. "Enzo's your date to this Halloween party, right?"

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to the event, especially since it's a fundraiser for veterans in need." *Not that I can contribute much.* I took another large gulp of the wine to dull how much that thought had my stomach turning.

"Right. The host, Michael Maddox, was a Marine. And his wife runs an uber-popular event planning business, so they have these parties a lot, right? It'll be my first time going, but I think that's what Thomas told me when he said his company had four tickets."

I didn't want to tell her just how grateful I was for the extra tickets. I wouldn't be able to afford it otherwise. I hadn't had a chance to attend one of Maddox's events yet. I'd always wanted to meet him and his wife.

The last time I had a ticket it was because of Anthony, but then he bailed on me, and I took Ryan to the hospital that night instead.

"My first time going, too." I shrugged free the memory the best I could and faked a smile. Lots of "fakes" tonight.

"And you chose Enzo for our fourth ticket instead of a guy you might want to date?" When I didn't answer, she asked, "I heard the date with the doctor didn't go well. His mom told our mom that some muscle-y guy pretty much stole you from the table and whisked you away. Was that Ryan?"

"Does it matter? He's coming here tonight because I'm setting him up with Calista. Remember?"

She rolled her eyes at the mention of Calista. "The woman is gorgeous, I'll give you that. But I don't see the two of them as a couple. She's always off gallivanting the globe for photoshoots. I can't see Ryan being on board for that ride. Plus, it rubs me the wrong way that she and Anthony are Instagram friends, and she's always commenting with fire emojis under his pictures. Feels wrong."

“They’re friends?” I grabbed my phone and opened Instagram. I didn’t follow Anthony anymore, but since when was he friends with Calista? And why didn’t she tell me?

“You said last night you don’t care about Anthony or what he does on Insta, so why does it matter now?”

“Because if she’s got a thing for Ryan’s brother, that’d be awkward to set them up, right?”

“Oh, so Anthony’s *Ryan’s* brother now? You usually refer to Ryan as ‘the brother.’”

I ignored her while I opened Anthony’s Insta page. We both unfollowed each other after the split, and I hadn’t checked it since before we broke up. He had over three million followers now, but he only followed fifty people.

And yup, Maria was right. Calista’s name was there. I couldn’t give a damn who Anthony followed or dated, but I thought Calista was my friend. It annoyed me she kept her friendship, or whatever the two of them had, from me. And if I was being honest, it hurt a bit, too.

“Anthony shares every moment of his life on Insta. From his first sip of coffee in the morning to his last drink before bed. And it’s been nada for a week. You think he’s okay? Did Ryan say anything since you’re chummy now?”

“MIA for a week on Insta means something’s wrong?” I was rarely on Insta unless it was for work. I’d started running ads to drum up business. Posted a few food photos here and there. That was it.

“In Anthony’s world, I’m thinking yes. Maybe you should ask Ryan if he’s okay?”

The last time we talked about Anthony, it didn’t go well. I wasn’t eager to bring him up to Ryan again.

And why did my sister know so much about Anthony’s Insta habits? Before I could ask her and try to deflect the conversation away from myself, she charged right ahead with her attempt to derail my plan.

“Well, now that you know Calista has one of Anthony’s coveted fifty following spots, are you still planning on setting her up with Ryan?” Maria asked once I closed the app and set my phone facedown.

“Unless you know someone else who’s single in her thirties that would be a good fit for him?”

“I’m still trying to understand this. Ryan shows up back home, and all of a sudden, he wants to date. And you’re in charge of his love life?” She closed one eye. “Sounds suspicious to me.”

Yeah, my sister wouldn’t buy some bullshit story, so I’d have to tread lightly. “He’s fixing my Jeep. I’m helping him meet people since he’s been away from home for so long.” I tried to play it off as no big deal with a quick shrug. “A favor for a favor.” Also, not a lie.

“Hm. Okay.” She smirked. “Well, I happen to be sitting across from a single woman in her thirties.”

I dramatically scrunched every moveable part of my face and tossed in an eye roll as my answer to her suggestion.

“Right. I guess you don’t count.” She sipped her wine and then pointed toward the entrance. “She’s here. I guess we’ll find out if Ryan’s interested.”

I followed her finger to see Calista near the hostess, and I waved her over.

“Maybe give Ryan the heads-up about her friendship with Anthony first? They may have done the hanky-panky.” She winced. “Damn. I need to spend more time around adults.” She refilled her glass. “Anyways, I’m assuming if Ryan would never date you because you’re Anthony’s ex, maybe he’d feel the same way about Calista if she hooked up with Anthony?”

“First of all, Ryan and I wouldn’t date for many reasons. And secondly, we don’t know that Calista and Anthony hooked up. And I truly don’t care if they did.”

“But Ryan might care,” she said, attempting to reinforce this idea, one that didn’t sit well with me for some reason. “Why would a guy want to hook up with a woman his brother

has ... you know,” she whispered, leaning closer to me, “had his cock inside.”

I would’ve choked on my wine at her words had I been mid-sip. Instead, I nearly knocked the glass over. And that’d be a waste of a good glass of red.

“Hey, Calista,” I heard Christian greet her as she headed our way, her clickety-click heels announcing her presence.

She swept her straight blonde hair that hung like a curtain to her back. It swished from side to side as she strutted toward us. Runway walking? Catwalking? Whatever it was called, it was like an art form for Calista.

I’d make it two steps before falling if I even attempted to move in her silver stilettos and matching curve-hugging dress that showcased her assets. All of them. Breasts. Legs. And if she did a twirl to show her backside, probably her ass, too.

The woman was a goddess. And no man seemed to be immune to her. Except for Enzo, of course. He never gave her a second look.

“Hey, babe,” Calista said once I stood to greet her.

Babe. I hated when she called me that. Was my sister right? Was Calista only fake nice?

She reached for my arms and pulled me in, kissing both my cheeks.

“Oh. Hi, Maria.” Calista had dialed down her tone to “drab” when she addressed her. She must’ve known Maria wasn’t a fan.

“I’m going to leave you two to chat. I’ll walk around and check on the remaining customers.” Maria squeezed my arm, a good luck embedded in her touch, then left.

“My usual,” she ordered from Christian, offering a megawatt smile.

“Espresso martini coming right up.” He tapped the bar top twice and nodded.

“So, now that I’m here. Tell me, tell me. Who is this mystery man you think I need to meet?” Calista set her clunky, silver clutch on the counter and slid onto Maria’s former seat.

I dropped back down on my chair while my sister’s words rang like a death knell in my ears.

Ryan wouldn’t want a girl his brother had sex with ...

“Yeah, um. Question first.” I polished off the rest of my wine and then faced her. “Are you friends with Anthony?”

Her head shot back a little, and she arched her shoulders to gain an extra inch on me. “Just on social media. He followed me a few months ago, and I followed him back. That’s all.” She dismissively flicked her wrist. “He’s your ex, babe. You and I have known each other for years. We all used to hang out together when you two dated. Why would I go behind your back and hook up with him?” Her brows stitched together. “That’s what you’re asking, right?”

“No, um.” *Shit.* I’d offended her.

And I wouldn’t say we were friends-friends. We’d met through a mutual acquaintance when I briefly lived in New York and discovered we were both originally from North Carolina. We’d kept in touch here and there, but nothing significant enough to call it a friendship. I guess when she decided to move back to Charlotte four years ago to be near her family, we became friends. Not that she was home that much because of work, so was it really any different from New York?

Christian handed Calista her espresso martini, buying me a few more seconds to ponder what to say.

“The thing is, the guy you’re meeting tonight is Anthony’s brother. I just wanted to make sure it wouldn’t be weird for you,” I said once Christian moved away again.

She batted her lashes a few times. “You want to hook me up with Ryan Rossi?”

No, not hook up. Jeez. “Have you two met before?”

“We met in passing once when he was in town, but we’ve never hung out.” She sipped her drink. “But Anthony’s Anthony. And Ryan’s Ryan.”

“I don’t know what that means.” And also, I needed to keep drinking to survive this night. Screw the price tag of the wine. I reached for the bottle I’d left on the counter and filled my glass.

“Anthony’s famous and attractive. But Ryan?” She smirked. “Ryan’s hot as fuck. And the whole Navy SEAL thing just gets me going, you know?” She fanned her face with her free hand. “To be honest, I have my eye on someone else, but Ryan may be just what I need to make him jealous. At the very least, he’ll be a good lay.”

I frowned at, well, everything she’d said. “Wait, who are you interested in?”

“Hold that thought,” she said. “Mr. Hot as Fuck just walked through the door.”

I swiveled on my chair to see Ryan stride in, his white dress shirt, with a few buttons undone, partially tucked into his khakis in a messy but sexy way. He’d swapped his Apple watch for a fancier one, and his hair was gelled and artfully styled.

“See. Hot as—”

“I get it.” I stood and turned my back to her, effectively cutting her off.

Ryan started talking to our hostess, and she laughed at something he’d said. He was still smiling when his attention abruptly moved my way as if he could sense me, and our gazes collided.

Maybe I’d had too much wine in too short a period, but I’d swear the restaurant fell silent with his eyes on me. The Italian music playing softly over the speakers was the only noise in my ears.

I swallowed, my hand going to my abdomen over my blue blouse. I wished I was at least back in my sundress from earlier instead of wearing boring black slacks and a stiff shirt.

Standing next to Calista in her dress had me feeling all kinds of frumpy.

Ryan excused himself from the hostess and started our way, his eyes never leaving mine, even with Calista at my side.

“This place is incredible,” Ryan said when he stopped before us.

He took a moment to survey the setting of my quaint restaurant. The exposed brick walls, the wood beams overhead for the ceiling, and even the arched entryways at every hall were designed to give that distinct Tuscan feeling.

The wall behind the bar was stocked with wine from floor to ceiling, and there was a rolling ladder to retrieve the top-shelf bottles as well. The price tag for that wine wall alone would take me forever to pay off.

“You did a great job,” he added, looking back at me, and I’d swear that was pride in his eyes.

“Thank you.” Why’d I feel so warm everywhere all of a sudden?

Ryan lowered his gaze to my shirt and said, “Rabbit Beach blue.” His lips twitched into a smile, one I couldn’t help but reciprocate. “I’m a few minutes early.”

“I love a man who’s early,” Calista spoke up. “Hi, I’m Calista.”

Ryan stared at me for a few beats longer before turning his attention to Calista to offer his hand. “Ryan.”

“Um.” I swallowed. “I need a second.” I reached for his shirt and tugged, accidentally freeing it from his pants. And that had to be the wine’s doing.

He looked down to see my hand clutching the fabric and slowly worked his gaze back to my face. I didn’t miss the amused expression there. “I guess we’ll be right back,” he said to Calista, and when I let go of him, he followed me down the hall and to my office.

I quickly shut the door once we were alone and tore my hands through my hair as I began walking around the small space.

“You okay? You’re pacing.” He blocked my path and held onto my arms.

“I’ve been drinking. I’m a little off,” I admitted with his strong hands gently holding me in place.

“Good thing you’re not driving, eh?”

“Right.” I worried my lip between my teeth. “I just wanted to let you know I didn’t have a chance to tell her about your, um, needs.”

He lifted a brow and let go of me. “My needs?”

“Fake dating, I mean.”

“Ah.” He palmed his cheek, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the salt-and-pepper-colored stubble on his strong jawline felt rough on his skin, like sandpaper. “I can ask her if you think she won’t smack me when I offer her money in exchange for dating me?”

“Calista doesn’t need the money. She’s a successful model.”

Ryan frowned. “Then why would she do it?”

I backed up a few steps, finding the wall there. Good, I needed the support. My balance was off. “Because you’re you.”

His slight scowl remained as he replied, “I don’t know what that means.”

“But also, she ...”

He closed the space between us in a few quick strides, catching me by surprise when he placed a palm on the wall over my shoulder. Based on his slanted brows, he was as taken aback by his own quick steps to get to me.

He held my eyes, leaning in closer, and I resisted the urge to set my hand on the muscular wall before me, curious if his heart was beating as fast as mine at our proximity.

But when he brought his mouth to the shell of my ear, his breath there had my knees almost buckling. “I wish you’d stop using that lavender body wash.”

Okay, *that* was unexpected. “You hate lavender, huh?”

“I really fucking do,” he responded in a harsh tone.

I lifted my chin to find his eyes. Not the best idea. His pupils were fully blown. But no way could it be because I turned him on.

How could I? I was his brother’s ex. The girl next door that’d been too young for him half his life.

“Why do you hate it?” I whispered, trying to process this strange moment between us. I felt bound to him, locked in place with nowhere to go.

He quietly studied me, his eyes dipping to my parted lips, and for the life of me, I didn’t know why, my tongue skirted the seam of my mouth.

He seized a deep breath through his nose, and when his chest inflated, it touched mine. Yeah, we were *that* close.

I shifted my focus and noticed his palm on the wall had converted to a fist, and when I found his eyes again, he slowly released that deep breath.

How long would we remain silently occupying each other’s personal space?

“Ryan,” I murmured, breaking the quiet before I lost my mind. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes fell closed, and his breathing became shallower. I watched as his jaw strained when he pushed away from the wall, freeing me from my captive state. “Sorry,” he rasped, slowly, almost reluctantly, opening his eyes. His pupils still nearly eclipsed the brown.

I finally understood what a writer meant by “his eyes darkened.” And the reaction it provoked inside me ... holy hell. Were my panties wet?

“Sorry for what?” I kept my back to the wall, unsure if my legs would work to do the whole standing or walking thing without assistance.

“For snapping at you like that.” He faced my desk and gripped the back of his neck.

A vein appeared on his forearm as he squeezed, working at his tension there.

“It’s fine. Not sure what my lavender soap ever did to offend you, but no worries.”

He let go of his neck and slowly turned. His lips were a hard, angry line. Eyes still dark.

“You sure you’re okay?” I slid my hands alongside my arms, catching a chill.

He released another harsh breath before lowering his gaze to his shirt and fixing it back into his pants. For a sailor, I would have expected clean lines, and everything tucked in perfectly like a bedsheet before an inspection by a commanding officer. But I couldn’t help but appreciate the slight wrinkle of imperfection in his clothes.

“Calista’s waiting,” I reminded him. “And I brought you back here for another reason. She wants to use you to make someone jealous.”

He looked up at me. “I’m not going to fuck with some other guy’s feelings like that.”

“You’re using her. She’d be using you. Kind of another favor for a favor, though, right?”

His strong hands went to his hips as he muttered a few more choice swear words at the predicament. “Fine. Anything else I should know?”

I let go of my arms and pushed away from the wall, hoping I could reclaim my balance. “Is it a problem if she’s friends with your brother?”

I lost his eyes to the floor. Was he disappointed? “Has she slept with him?”

Maria was right, wasn't she? He wouldn't hook up with someone who'd ever shared a bed with his brother. I didn't blame him. And I shouldn't have cared.

So, why do I? Why do I care?

"They're just friends," I admitted. "But I suppose that means you took one look at her and decided you may not want to keep things G-rated after all."

CHAPTER NINE



NATALIA

“I THINK YOU SHOULD STOP. I HAVEN’T SEEN YOU THIS DRUNK since Anthony proposed in front of our entire family, and you said no, only to have Mom practically force you to change your answer to a yes that night.” Maria joined me behind the bar and nudged my ribs.

Anthony’s proposal was a memory I didn’t want to relive right now. It was just another reminder of the mistakes of my past.

“Are you okay?” Maria went on. “It’s not like you to drink like this, especially at your restaurant.”

“The customers are gone. No one can see me.” I stared at Calista and Ryan at their booth in the bar area about twenty feet away. She was laughing at something he’d said. “Well, almost everyone is gone.” I reached for the wine bottle, hiccupping. It was the second bottle my sister and I had opened since arriving.

“It’s empty, sis.” She snatched it from me without offering a new bottle. “Does your inebriation have anything to do with the fact they seem to be getting along? I, uh, thought that was what you wanted?”

It was ten thirty. Ryan and Calista had been chatting for almost an hour, while my stomach had become a vat of wine-infused acid. I was going to be so hungover in the morning.

“Yes, the two of them ... just what I wanted.” I slapped my mouth to try and trap the next hiccup from escaping.

“Nat.” Maria set aside the wine bottle before grabbing both of my arms, encouraging me to face her. I slowly turned, feeling like I was about to fall against her. “Do you have feelings for Ryan?”

My hand fell not-so gracefully between us. “No,” I fired back.

She tipped her head, assessing me. “Are you sure?”

“You can lower your signature accusatory eyebrow, missy.” *Did I just slur?* Shit, I never drank enough to get to a slur state. “I’m not into Mister Hot-as-Fuck Ryan Rossi.”

Maria let go of me, and I wobbled away from her. I planted my palms alongside me when my back hit the counter, and I used the bar top for support so I didn’t drop to my knees.

Wow, I definitely overdid it.

“That hot, huh?” Her lips teased into a smile. “I bet you won’t remember this conversation tomorrow.” She folded her arms and quickly looked over her shoulder toward the “happy couple” before eyeing me again. “So, you’re not into him. You just want to have hot, wild sex with the man?”

Trying to muster the inner strength to keep my mouth shut, I rolled my lips inward as a sign of protest.

“Fine. Be a brat.”

“Hey,” Christian called out, heading our way from the back hallway that led to my office. “I’m leaving. Need anything before I go?”

I looked around the bar, finding it tidy. “I’m good. Thank you.”

He pointed to the locked drawer under the counter where we kept the receipts. “By the way, Rossi made me add the two bottles of Chianti to his tab before I closed him out. I told him not to worry since you owned the place, but he insisted.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” Maria tried to hide a light chuckle by covering her mouth with a fist.

Christian shrugged. “See you tomorrow.” He saluted me, and winked at Maria, then left.

“Well, well, well.” Maria was gloating as if Ryan paying for our wine was somehow proof there was more to the story between us, and she’d just Sherlock Holmes’ed the situation. “Looks like he—”

“Don’t,” I begged, not wanting to reveal Ryan was throwing me a bone because he knew I was having money problems. My head under my Jeep’s hood this morning was all the evidence he needed.

“Okay,” she relented, then jerked a thumb toward the kitchen on the other side of the wall of wine. “But just so you know, I talked to Enzo while he was cleaning up. He’s waiting for everyone to clear out so he can have a private word with Mister Hot as Fuck. Of course, those weren’t the exact words he used. There were considerably more cuss words involved.”

Great. “Enzo shouldn’t have any beef with Ryan just because Anthony’s the man’s brother. He needs to stop being so overprotective.”

“He blames Ryan for breaking your heart. We all do.” She shook her head. “Which is why I’d be shocked to hear you have the hots for him.” She twisted around to peer at Ryan again. “I can understand having a sexual fantasy or two about the man, though.”

Ha. If only it were one or two fantasies. “If Anthony could be so easily persuaded to end things with me, then he never loved me in the first place,” I reminded her. “And also, it’s not Ryan’s fault.”

Maria clearly hadn’t drunk as much as me because she was much steadier on her feet. She quickly zipped her attention back to me. “What are you talking about?”

“Turns out Ryan didn’t tell Anthony not to marry me,” I confessed. “Anthony lied. And Ryan didn’t defend himself. Let everyone blame him.”

Maria crossed her arms. “That makes no sense.”

“If you ever wanted me to cover for you for anything, I would. In a heartbeat. You’re my little sister. I’d do anything for you.” I pointed my chin in Ryan’s direction. “Same for him and Anthony. He was willing to be everyone’s punching bag instead of letting Anthony take the heat.” *Take the heavy hits*, I remembered him saying in my kitchen that morning.

“I don’t know what to say.” She freed her arms from their locked position and set her back to the counter next to me. “I wonder why Anthony really ended things. And how he could be such a coward to lie to you and let his brother shoulder most of the blame.”

I hiccupped again. “Maybe Anthony had a feeling I’d cancel on him, so he wanted to beat me to the punch.” Was that the first time I’d said those words out loud?

“We’ll have to finish this rather enlightening conversation later. Looks like Enzo’s tired of waiting in the kitchen. And he’s heading straight for Ryan.”

“He better not hurt him.” I shook my head.

Maria chuckled. “In this case, I’m not sure who you’re worried about. Ryan’s a SEAL. Enzo is ... well, Enzo.”

“You want to run that by me again?” I overheard Ryan’s growly voice and turned to see him rising to face Enzo.

Maria wrapped an arm around my shoulder, knowing I’d need an assist walking, and we left the bar to try and get to the men before bones were broken.

“Stay the hell away from the Romanos.” Enzo flicked his chin with his hand. “I don’t care that they live next door to your mom. You’ve done enough damage, don’t you think?” he added, his voice dangerously low. One of his hands curled into a fist at his side as we approached, and I tried to rush my wobbly legs to get there quicker.

My gaze volleyed back and forth between the two testosterone-fueled men. “Don’t fight,” I ordered once we got closer, but my voice was weak from the wine, and either they didn’t hear me through their anger-fueled haze, or they completely ignored me.

“If you’ll excuse me.” Calista abruptly stood, acting as a barrier between the two men who’d been staring each other down. “I have an early morning flight to New York. As much as I’d love to stick around and watch a good old-fashioned brawl, if it’s not over me, I’m not interested.” She turned her back to Enzo and squeezed Ryan’s forearm. “I’ll text you the details for the Halloween party on Sunday. Try not to show up to our date with a black eye, okay?” Calista stepped away, allowing Ryan and Enzo to square off once again. Both seemed oblivious to her presence, and her departure.

“Party?” I said, processing her words.

Calista whispered in my ear, “I said yes to his proposal.” And then she smiled and left.

I barely heard the sounds of her heels tapping against the floor this time, too focused on the men and their locked jaws as they quietly studied each other, waiting to see who’d strike first.

“I’m not going to hit you,” Ryan said in a steady tone, and his hands relaxed at his sides. “I’m not my brother, by the way. I would never hurt Natalia.”

“But you did hurt her,” Enzo seethed, and he began working the sleeves of his black dress shirt to his elbows. *Oh, God.* He wasn’t seriously going to do something crazy in the name of my honor, was he? “Trust me, I’m far more pissed at Anthony than you. He’s the idiot who so willingly followed your advice and called things off. No real man in love would do that. But he’s never been stupid enough to come near me.” He paused. “Now you—”

“Enough,” I cried, my voice breaking. “Everyone needs to stop blaming Ryan for what Anthony did. Ryan never told Anthony not to marry me. Anthony lied.” I spun in the other direction, a little too quickly, unwilling to shed tears in front of either Enzo or Ryan, and Maria lost hold of me in the process.

I felt myself falling, but Ryan was there before I could even put my arms out to steady myself. His hand snaked behind my back, and he pinned me to his side. I slowly looked up at him, finding his eyes focused on me.

“That true?” Enzo asked, his voice lighter this time, and I pulled my gaze away from Ryan to see Maria nodding my answer for me. “Your brother is an asshole. You know that, right?”

“That’s something we can agree on,” Ryan roughly said.

Enzo unclenched his fists and looked at me. “Are you okay?”

“Just drank too much,” I admitted the obvious, but I had a feeling he’d been asking about my overall state of mind.

“I’ll drive you and Maria home. You can get your car tomorrow, Maria. You drank, too,” Enzo insisted, reaching into his pocket for his Porsche keys.

“You have a two-seater,” Maria reminded him.

“And I’m staying next door,” Ryan interjected, keeping his arm around my back, and I couldn’t help but lean into him for support. “I’d offer to take them both, but I need to talk to Natalia alone.” He dropped his focus down to me. “If you’re okay with that?”

“Yeah, um, sure.” I nodded and forced my attention on Enzo, letting him know I was in good hands.

“Fine.” The keys jingled in Enzo’s hand as he studied me. “Are you taking Calista to the Maddox event Sunday night?” His question was meant for Ryan, but his eyes stayed trained on my face, holding my attention as the reality of his question sunk in.

That was most likely what Calista had been talking about before leaving. Of course, she’d have tickets to the party. She was probably a donor like Anthony had been during his hockey days.

“She mentioned a Halloween party, but I didn’t get the details.” Ryan was quiet for a moment and then looked at me. “Maddox? *That* costume party?” He had to be remembering that night three years ago—the night I saw him naked. The night he woke up in a hospital bed. The night his life changed.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Enzo and I are going together. Maria and her husband, too.”

“I guess the six of us can get a limo? Or maybe get rooms at the hotel where the event is at?” Maria suggested.

“No,” Ryan and I said at the same time, and I immediately trained my attention on my sister, knowing she’d recognize the emotional chaos in my eyes. “I mean, I’d rather not waste money on a hotel room. And no offense, Enzo, I won’t share a bed with a guy friend.”

“Yeah, none taken. You’re like family. Not on my to-do list, either,” he said, a smile finally forming on his lips.

I reached for a nearby chair for support, and Ryan let go of me.

“But you’re going together?” Ryan asked. “And in a costume?”

Enzo scratched his chin with his free hand. “Yeah, I’m the only guy she trusts not to try and get in her pants.”

“Wow, and the truth shall set you free,” Maria said with a laugh, tossing a hand in the air, her tipsiness finally showing. “They’re going as Superman and Lois Lane.”

“You got him to wear tights?” That had Ryan smirking.

Wow, okay, so this was progress. Both men with smiles instead of fists.

“Hell no,” Enzo quickly responded. “Clark Kent. The alter ego. You couldn’t pay me to wear tights.”

Ryan shot me a pointed look. “See,” was all he said. Now that the air had cleared, were these two on their way to becoming friends?

“I guess you’ll be needing a costume. I’m sure Calista will be wearing something sparkly and flashy.” Maria rolled her eyes. “Anyways, let me grab our purses from the office, and we can all head out, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.” I could use the assist so I didn’t have to walk back there myself.

“So.” Enzo stuffed his free hand into his pocket, continuing to toy with his key chain in the other, while we waited for Maria to return. “I heard you retired from the Navy. What are your plans now?” Was he trying to have a civil conversation right now?

Thank you, I mouthed to him. The last thing I wanted was my closest guy friend hating my—

Well, what was Ryan? A friend now?

I let go of the thought because I was too lightheaded and out of it to process anything serious.

“I honestly don’t know. I might work on cars like my dad did. Preferably classics.” Ryan dove a hand through his hair. “We’ll see.”

I turned to face him in surprise, but I was too drunk to move that fast, and I fell right into his arms. Again.

“Easy,” he said softly as my breasts smashed against his chest, and he circled my waist to hold my back. Then he tipped my chin with his other hand to guide my eyes up to meet his.

Enzo’s deep throat clear, followed by my sister blurting, “Do you need a room?” had Ryan stepping back and lowering his hand from my face.

“Let’s go,” Ryan said as he took my purse from Maria. He crouched to sling my arm over his shoulder, and I’d stubbornly protest his help if I wasn’t drunk.

“I could use some air before we leave,” I said once in the parking lot, leaning against his truck so he could let me go. He quickly tossed my purse inside it before looking over at Enzo.

“This yours?” Ryan asked while Enzo closed the door for Maria.

“Yeah.” Enzo nodded, then circled his Porsche 911 for the driver’s side.

Ryan stroked his jaw. “This was my dad’s favorite. He always said driving a Porsche is like gliding—”

“On air,” Enzo finished for him, and some weird moment seemed to pass between them. Respect?

“Right.” Ryan half-smiled.

Enzo turned his attention to me. “You sure you’re good?”

“Yeah. We’ll be behind you soon,” I promised.

Enzo nodded, gave one hesitant look at Ryan, and then hopped into his Porsche.

Once they were gone, Ryan strode before me. I looked up over his shoulder to see the moon tipped on its side in the starlit sky. It was a lot cooler out now than it’d been earlier when I had on that sundress. “You didn’t need to pay for the wine, but thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You wanted to talk to me alone?”

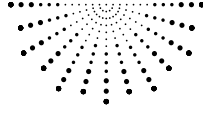
“Yeah.” Ryan shoved his hands in his pockets, and I couldn’t help but study his strong forearms.

“I’m not sure if I should fake date Calista. I think I should find someone else.”

I set a hand to my stomach—a weird, hollow-like pain there. “Why?”

He bowed his head. “Because I’m fairly certain she lied to you,” he began, then confirmed what I also suspected, “And she more than likely slept with Anthony.”

CHAPTER TEN



RYAN

“OH.” NATALIA’S LACKLUSTER RESPONSE WASN’T WHAT I’D expected from her. Wasn’t she disappointed that her friend hooked up with her ex and then lied about it?

I didn’t need my fancy government training to be able to read Calista, to see through the lies she’d peddled over drinks about her “friendship” with my brother.

“How do you know?” Natalia asked.

I did my best to keep some distance between us, worried I’d lose my mind again and get too damn close. I didn’t need a repeat of what almost happened when we were alone in her office. “Trust me, I know. Plus, she’s Anthony’s type.”

“I’m nothing like Calista, though.”

I lifted my brows, not sure what she wanted me to say to that.

“Of course, you never thought we should be together. Maybe because you knew I wasn’t his type.” She frowned. “I know you didn’t convince Anthony to break up with me, but regardless, you still believed we shouldn’t be together, right?” She dragged a hand down the column of her throat, her lip going between her teeth.

Maybe having this conversation while she was intoxicated was a bad idea? “You can’t compare yourself to Calista.” I angled my head, studying her, wishing she’d free her lip.

“Right. She’s a model.” I heard the defeat in her tone. I knew she was confident, so that had to be the alcohol talking.

And I'd just stumbled into a conversation I wasn't prepared to have.

"You can't compare yourself to Calista because it wouldn't be fair to *her*," I admitted.

Her brows slanted, and she pushed away from the truck, surprisingly keeping her balance as she closed the space between us. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean." I'd get myself into a lot more trouble if I went so far as to spell it out for her. I was already having a hard enough time being around her without my control snapping.

I kept my hands in my pockets for safekeeping, hoping she didn't need me to catch her again.

"So, just to be clear, you don't want to date Calista because you think she had sex with your brother? And you wouldn't want to be with a woman he's already been with?" There was a sad undertone to her voice that I was pretty sure she would've done her best to hide if it weren't for the Chianti. "That's why you asked me if they had a thing back in my office, right?"

"No." I huffed out a deep breath. "I don't think I should date her out of respect for *you*. Because she's supposed to be your friend, and she screwed your ex, so that pisses me off on your behalf," I explained as calmly as possible.

She quietly processed my words before asking, "Why'd you make her the offer, then?"

"That was before I caught her in a few lies during my interrogation."

She smirked. "She was laughing. I'd hardly call that an interrogation."

I lifted a brow. "The best way to pump intel from a subject is without them realizing they're providing it."

"You sound like a SEAL right now."

"I am a SEAL. Always will be, even after hanging up my uniform." My throat burned a little after I'd said that. The

discomfort from my past had my chest aching.

“Of course,” she whispered.

“Back to Calista,” I prompted, needing her to let me know what she wanted me to do. Carry on with the woman regardless of the new information, or find someone else to date?

I thought back to Natalia’s words in her office before I had drinks with Calista. I’d assumed she didn’t want me to have sex with any woman Anthony had ever touched because it’d be too harsh of a reminder of her breakup with him. Looking at her now, I wasn’t so sure that was the case.

Natalia closed her eyes, which I knew was a bad idea. Her head would most likely start to spin, she’d lose her balance, and I’d have to catch her again. I didn’t exactly hate that idea, but it wouldn’t have been productive for either of us.

“Well, I don’t care who Anthony sleeps with,” she shared. “So, don’t cancel on account of me. Don’t use me as an excuse not to hook up with a woman your brother—”

“Would you stop saying that, damnit? I just told you I only care about her past with my brother if it upsets you.”

Natalia opened her eyes and, just as I’d predicted, lost her balance. My hands shot free from my pockets to catch her, and I grabbed hold of her arms to keep her upright.

I was breathing a little too hard, but I managed to rasp, “I told you in your office after your G-rated comment I have no plans to sleep with her.” My face was dangerously close to hers as I emphasized, “Whether she hooked up with my brother or not doesn’t change that fact.”

Her shoulders fell. “I’m sorry. I think I’m just drunk.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I hissed, angry at myself, not her. I should’ve known better than to open up that can of worms with how much wine she’d had.

“Just date her, okay?” She wet her lips and looked up at me again. “You probably won’t have enough time to find someone else that’s both suitable and so willing to help.”

I eased my grip on her arms, worried I'd hurt her.

"I promise I'm fine with it." But then why were there tears in her eyes?

You're anything but fine. What in the hell was I supposed to do now? "Let's talk about this tomorrow when you're sober." Without thinking through my next moves, I scooped her into my arms, and she released a startled gasp.

She didn't resist, though, and linked her wrists behind my head, staring into my eyes as I carried her. I did my best to ignore the fact her ass was pretty much in my hands as I walked. I also may have taken my sweet time getting to the passenger side of my truck.

I held her for a few seconds longer than necessary, still maintaining my hold of her while reaching for the handle and opening the door. I slid her onto the seat and reached across her lap to buckle her, feeling the need to do it myself. When she fisted a handful of my shirt, I froze.

"What are you doing?" Still bent over her, with one hand on the dash for support, I twisted to peer at her and discovered her mouth mere inches from mine.

"I probably won't remember this tomorrow, but—"

"No." I had no clue what she was about to suggest, but the answer needed to be a no from me. "It's my responsibility not to let you do anything you wouldn't do while sober." I hated the fact my dick twitched when she arched a bit off the seat, nearly touching my crotch. I closed my eyes for a moment and drew in a deep breath, attempting to bring myself back under full control, before fixing my gaze on her face.

She drew her lips closer despite my rejection, entranced by the wine or something. Dazed and confused, sure. Or more like dazed and horny. Thank God I was the one taking her home. Enzo may have claimed only to see her as family, but the fact of the matter was—they weren't. And he was a guy. So no, I didn't trust him alone with her.

"You really don't know me all that well," she murmured. "Maybe I'd do this when sober."

I was on the verge of asking her to define “this” ... but thank God, I refrained. “I thought I established earlier, I do know you.” I removed her hand from my shirt and backed away to stand alongside the truck.

“Just because you know how I like my coffee and remembered Rabbit Beach blue, doesn’t mean you’re the authority on me.”

She was pissed. Trying to hurt me. And I knew it was the wine talking, but I didn’t trust myself not to fall into a trap and stick my foot in my mouth. Because what if I said something I might regret, and she *did* remember tomorrow?

Instead, I said, “I need to get you home.” And with that, I stepped back and shut her door.

When I was inside the truck, she had her arms folded and her head resting against the window, eyes closed.

With any luck, she’d pass out before I got her home. My chest hurt at the sight of her. It physically fucking hurt.

Because she was in pain. Stress from whatever money problems she had most likely the cause of her drunken state. And having to help me was probably like ripping at old wounds, making her relive her breakup with my brother.

I was an asshole for ever asking for her help, and I’d have to find a way to make things right somehow.

I let go of a few deep breaths and then pulled away from her restaurant.

She remained quiet the short ride to her place, and as I expected, Enzo and Maria were waiting outside.

I parked behind Enzo’s Porsche, feeling another swell of discomfort in my chest at the mere sight of my father’s favorite car, then turned off the engine to go around and open the door for Natalia.

Enzo beat me to it. “I’ll take it from here,” he said with a suspicious nod, noticing Natalia’s change in demeanor. Grumpy, for one.

“Goodnight, Ryan.” Maria gave a sympathetic wave, clearly noticing the change as well.

“Yeah, goodnight.” I’d planned to wait until Natalia was inside, but I wanted to kill Enzo for simply having his arm around her while walking her to the house, so I got back into my truck and drove the short distance to my driveway.

* * *

I WAS RELIEVED THAT MOM WAS ALREADY ASLEEP WHEN I walked in. I was wound too damn tight for any kind of conversation.

I’d only had one glass of Maker’s Mark earlier since I knew I’d be driving, and I needed to take the edge off with another drink. I went to the small bar in the dining room to see if Mom kept it stocked.

“Jackpot.” I snatched a glass and a bottle of Jameson.

Once upstairs, I kicked off my loafers and set the bottle and glass on my dresser. “Always a SEAL, right?” I mumbled, remembering my words to Natalia.

Forever a Teamguy ... until you’re not.

Because you’re broken. Discarded. Feeling like half a man.

I left the liquor on the dresser and opened my closet, unsure if walking down memory lane was the best idea.

Mom had hung up my dress whites and dress blues alongside my uniforms. I reached for one of the pixelated green, black, and brown camo uniforms from my operating days, eyeing the patches on the sleeve. Then I ran my palm over the insignia on the breast of the uniform—the SEAL trident with an eagle clutching an anchor, trident, and pistol.

My stomach turned as I tried to remember what happened on my last day operating three years ago.

Of course, the actual memories were fuzzy. I had to read the AAR, the after-action report, to fill in the details that had led to the end of my time as Alpha Two. To learn more about

the explosion that had sent me flying. And I wasn't Superman, nor did I heal like him in the sunlight. God, if only that'd been the case.

I took a knee and reached for the shoebox that held so many memories, then began rummaging through the pictures. It was too painful to look at the photos from my time with Alpha Platoon, so I searched for some older images from when I was at BUD/S. Back when we didn't have camera phones.

Once I found the aged pictures, I sat back on my heels to go through them. *God, we were kids back then.*

Luke, Noah, myself, and a few other guys were in most of the pictures. We'd become a close-knit group of seven. Not a single one of us ever rang the bell and quit. We'd graduated BUD/S and became Teamguys.

Another one of our BUD/S crew also worked at Scott & Scott Securities, but probably more regularly than Noah, even though Knox's father was now the President of the United States. Maybe Knox was the link between Luke's company and the President? Well, *if* my instincts were right, and the guys were actually running secret ops for the Commander in Chief. If true, my gut told me Noah didn't take part in those clandestine missions.

I'd talked to Noah earlier before heading to Natalia's restaurant, and he confirmed Anthony still appeared to be fine.

I'd thanked him over and over again for his help. For leaving his family in New York for my brother who didn't deserve it. It'd been way too long since we'd talked, so we tried to play catch-up over our brief ten-minute call.

Noah had a family, just like Luke. The other four guys I kicked it with back at BUD/S were married with kids, too. I was the only solo act left.

I let go of a heavy sigh, packed up my mental and physical memories, and then exited the closet, closing the literal door behind me. The metaphorical door? Yeah, that never fully shut.

Before I had a chance to grab the Irish whiskey, I noticed Natalia's bedroom light up, and then her blinds scrolled up a moment later.

I frowned, unsure of her game plan, but did the same with the blinds in my room, then dug into my pocket for my phone. I held it in front of the window, letting her know I planned to call.

She disappeared for a second as I searched my contacts for her number and returned to view while answering.

"You have my attention," I said, uncomfortable with how I could see her inside her lit-up room. She'd yet to swap her clothes for pajamas, at least.

"I never drink this much. And it's been forever since a man has touched me, so I'm horny. Then I felt rejected. I was a brat. I'm sorry," she rambled.

I set my forearm flat against the window pane and let go of a rumbly growl of frustration.

Had she forgotten about our conversation in my bedroom earlier? She'd been sober then, spelling out how long it'd been since a man had touched her and how badly she needed to get laid.

"Your honesty is going to get someone hurt," I admitted, my tone a touch too gruff.

"Oh yeah. How so?"

Because I want to cut off every hand that's ever touched you. And that was crazy. Especially since one of those hands belonged to my brother.

"I suggest you turn your ass around and go to bed, Natalia," I said, going with a slightly safer response than the truth. "And I don't want you drunk dialing anyone. Or tripping over a shoe." *Like I did earlier.*

She remained quiet. But she didn't need to talk to torture me. Because she was busy walking her fingers down the buttons of her blouse, popping them open one by one while holding the phone to her ear with her shoulder.

She freed the last button, and I was relieved to see she had a white tank top underneath. And God willing, a bra since she'd been at work.

“Go to bed, please,” I grated out, hoping she wouldn't notice my tone of voice had me sounding *Fifty Shades of Fucked*. Probably not what that movie was called, but yeah, my dick was hard. In desperate need of stroking. But I was in my mother's house, and I wasn't sixteen, so that felt all kinds of wrong.

“Like I said, I called because I'm horny.” She cursed. “Sorry. I meant I called because I'm *sorry*.”

I straightened, lowering my arm from the window. “I'm two seconds away from breaching your property to tuck your ass into bed myself. I don't need you calling some dude after we hang up. Or deciding to go streaking beneath the moonlight. I'm pretty sure I've never seen you this way, so I have no idea what to expect.”

“Breach my house, huh?” She chuckled.

“You don't think I can?”

“Oh, I'm sure you can.” She set her palm on the glass. “But do you want to risk getting caught in my bedroom? My very Italian father would lose his mind. It doesn't matter that I'm thirty-two.”

I smiled. How could I not? She was so damn adorable.

But when she began working the Rabbit Beach blue blouse free from her left arm with one hand, I was worried she was going to lose her balance and trip and fall. And then I would need to breach her property and risk a lecture by Mr. Romano if he caught me in her room.

“Well, if you don't want me becoming target practice for your old man, then do me a favor and go to bed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sir? I lowered my hand to my crotch to adjust my pants.

“But only if you tell me a bedtime story. You do that, and I'll be a good girl. No tripping. No streaking. No drunk dialing

bad boys.”

I clenched my hand at the idea of some “bad boy” going near her. Not on my watch.

“Bedtime story?” I did my best to shake the tension from my arm and open my palm before I spoke again. “I only have war stories for you, sweetheart. I’ll just give you nightmares.”

“Twenty years in the Navy,” she whispered. “We missed so much of each other’s lives while you were gone.”

I backed up a step from the window at her words and the tender, sad tone of her voice. My chest didn’t feel right.

“I know far less about you than you know about me,” she went on, catching me off guard a bit. “The man you’ve become in the twenty years since you left ...”

I set a palm to my heart and moved the heel of my hand in circles, trying to free the pain growing there.

“You take your coffee black. And your favorite color is—”

“Green,” I said, thinking about the color of her eyes.

She was quiet for a moment before saying, “I don’t even know if you’ve ever been in a serious relationship. Or if you have a hair color preference when it comes to women. Or—”

“Nothing serious, no,” I replied, a little too quickly. “And dark hair.” I set my fist to the glass and lightly tapped it twice, swallowing down the lump in my throat. “I’ll tell you a story if you please go to bed.” My voice was hoarse that time, emotion cutting through me, unexpected yet undeniable.

“As long as your story doesn’t begin with, ‘This one time at band camp,’ then I’m all ears.”

“Hey, *American Pie* is a classic.” How’d she always do that? Have me tense one moment and smiling the next. “And I never went to band camp, by the way.”

She laughed. “Okay, mister, then go for it. Tell me your story.”

“Get in bed first,” I reminded her.

“I have to get these clothes off.”

“Not in front of the window,” I pleaded, then pointed to the blinds. We simultaneously closed them, and although she was still on the line, I could finally breathe again.

I never would’ve survived living next door to her when I was younger if we’d been close in age.

“Ryan,” she whispered after her light went out, and I assumed she’d set the phone down to change.

I bit my tongue and didn’t dare ask her what she was now wearing. “Yeah?”

“I’m in bed now.”

“Good ...” *Girl*. I gulped. And my cock throbbed. Damn it all to hell. *Forget the past. How will I survive living next door to you now?* “Are you comfortable?”

“Are you?” Why’d it feel like we were about to have phone sex instead of story time? “Hold on.” I undressed down to my boxer briefs and slid beneath the covers of my bed. “Yeah, I’m in bed now.”

“Mm. Okay, I’m ready for you,” Natalia said in a sleepy, sexy voice.

I needed to remind myself I was a thirty-nine-year-old, grown-ass man in my mom’s house, so I didn’t wrap my hand around my cock and rub one out. *Because damn.*

“Well, um, give me a second to try and think of a story. One that isn’t classified.” But I was coming up empty. “Natalia, you still awake or ...”

Silence.

“Talia,” I said, testing the waters.

“Mm, yes?” she murmured, her nickname rousing her from her sleepy state.

“Um, never mind. Just go to sleep.” I closed my eyes, listening to the soft sounds of her breathing as she dozed off. “That’s my girl,” I whispered, on the edge of a dream-like state. “We can save story time for tomorrow.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



RYAN

“IT’S SO GOOD TO SEE YOU, HONEY.” MRS. ROMANO PULLED me in for a hug, and I quickly extended my arms so I didn’t spill the coffee or crush the bag of food I was carrying.

“Easy, Ma.” I looked over Mrs. Romano’s shoulder to see Maria carrying her daughter. “Let him breathe.”

“But he smells so good.” Mrs. Romano released me and smoothed a hand over my gray tee as if searching for lint.

“Hey, son.” I turned to see Mr. Romano on approach. When he offered his palm, Mrs. Romano freed the to-go coffee cup from my hand.

Hearing the word “son” felt strange coming from him. It’d once been reserved for Anthony, who should have been his son-in-law by now.

“Y’all are crowding him. Maybe step back?” Maria suggested, bouncing Chiara on her hip. Chiara just stared at me with her huge brown eyes.

“Maria told us the truth about your brother.” Mrs. Romano raised a fist and shook it. “I’d love to smack him in the back of the head for throwing you under the bus like he did.”

Wait, what? I stepped around the Romanos to get a better look at Maria, and she only shrugged. Why’d she tell them that? Now my mom would find out, and I’d have to share the disappointing news that her perfect son was far from perfect.

“We owe you an apology for how rude we’ve been since the breakup.” Mr. Romano slung an arm around my shoulder,

and I had to take a second to remember to breathe. Both Natalia's parents had Italian accents, and whenever Mr. Romano spoke to me, it was almost like I could hear my dad talking. "Seeing as you retired from the Navy this past summer, and Natalia's restaurant just had its birthday, I say we have a joint celebration."

"Oh, that'd be a great idea. We should have your mom over, too," Mrs. Romano went on, taking hold of my other arm to loop it with hers. I spied Chiara laughing from the corner of my eye as if the Romano sandwich I found myself in was hilarious. "Natalia has a thing on Sunday. But her place is closed Monday, so let's do it then."

"Ma'am, I appreciate that, but really, you don't need to go to all that trouble for—"

"You're going to turn down my cooking?" She looked up at me. "Really?"

Shit. I guess not. "Monday it is. Just let me know what I can bring." Once she released my arm, I took the coffee from her. "Is Natalia awake?" It was zero nine hundred, so I wasn't sure if she was still sleeping off her hangover.

Mr. Romano dropped his arm from my shoulder and grabbed his car keys from the table by the front door. "Still in bed, I think. But it's nine. Feel free to wake her up."

"We're taking Maria to pick up her car at the restaurant. Looks like the girls had too much wine last night, but I suppose you already know that." Mrs. Romano winked as if I was in on some scandalous secret. "Is that coffee and food for her?" She eyed the brown bag in my hand.

"Yeah, I thought she might need it." I shrugged.

"Such a sweet boy. Our hometown hero." She tipped her head to the door, motioning for Maria to go. "We're all so happy to have you back."

I didn't know what to say, and frankly, I wasn't sure if I was home for good. But I nodded my thanks anyway.

"Go on up. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you." Maria smirked.

And what was that all about? I waited for everyone to leave, surprised Natalia hadn't come down yet with all the commotion.

I looked at the stairs, covered in the same burgundy-red carpet as the rest of the downstairs, hesitant to go up.

Technically speaking, Natalia and I "slept together" last night. I'd woken up around zero five hundred, realizing the call was still connected when I heard soft, sexy little sounds coming from her over the line. Either she was in pain during a dream ... *or* mid-climax. I ended the call pretty quickly after that.

But those little moans had done a number on me, and I'd been unable to fall back asleep. In an attempt to distract myself, I'd called Noah and checked on my brother.

In my opinion, he and his buddy from Scott & Scott needed to pack up and go home. So far, the only danger had come from Anthony having one too many cocktails and falling into the pool. His bodyguards had fished him out, leaving him on a lounge chair to sober up.

Noah said he'd give it a few more days, and if nothing changed, he'd go back to his wife and children. But he insisted he'd fly out as backup once I was ready to pay off the debt.

After that call, I'd decided to take a long run to destress since I was still worked up.

With more time to kill, I'd showered and made Mom breakfast. We watched a show together while we ate, one that had nothing to do with doctors or SEALs, thank God. I still couldn't tell you what it was about. Apparently, I was fidgety enough for Mom to kick me out of the house so she could watch her shows in peace.

Unsure what to do with myself, I drove aimlessly for a bit until I wound up at a local cafe, and grabbed breakfast for Natalia, assuming she'd need food and coffee to manage a hangover.

Now I'm here and about to wake up Sleeping Beauty? Really?

I took my time climbing her stairs, feeling the same adrenaline rush I had back in the day when heading into a stairwell on an op. The same uncertainty about who or what might be waiting for me on the other side.

This woman.

God help me, this woman.

She had my head spinning every which way when we were alone. I couldn't discern my left from my right around her. I only knew I had to keep my hands off her.

"Natalia?" I called out once upstairs, and I realized I'd never actually been in her room before. Why would I have been? She was a kid when I was a teenager.

I poked my head in the first room, even though it didn't face my house so it couldn't have been her bedroom. An army of toys were scattered all over the floor. A pack and play by the bed. *Maria's*.

I bypassed the second room, assuming it was her parent's bedroom and headed for the final room—the only bedroom with a view of my mom's house.

The door was cracked open. "Natalia?" I rapped my knuckles against it and waited. "It's me."

My heart was in my throat. Forget feeling like a Tier One operator right now, she had me feeling like a nervous teen on a first date. Decades before I took my first life in battle.

"I'm coming in," I warned her since she'd yet to respond, and I was too impatient to wait.

I pushed the door open with the to-go cup of coffee and closed one eye, a little worried about what I might find.

I relaxed when I noticed the bed was empty, but tensed up again when I heard the shower running in the connecting bathroom.

Hoping to avoid a repeat of three years ago, but this time with her being the naked one, I went to the door and hit it twice with my fist to ensure she heard me.

“It’s Ryan,” I called out.

The shower water turned off a second later. “Why are you in my bedroom?”

Good question. “Your parents sent me up here. Your dad told me to wake you up. I, uh, brought you breakfast.”

“Oh. Give me a second, okay?”

Please tell me you brought a change of clothes in there. I backed away from the door and took a moment to look around her bedroom.

She’d already made her bed, which made my sailor heart happy. And she had an old stuffed blue teddy bear propped up at the center of her pillow.

I set the coffee and bagel on the dresser opposite her bed, and reached for one of the framed photos. She had her niece cradled in her arms. Chiara was probably a day old. “So beautiful.”

“What?”

Yup, it was official. In addition to my stealth mode, my sixth sense had been deactivated. She got the drop on me. My trident should’ve been revoked.

“Your niece. Beautiful,” I rushed out, doing my best to recover as I repositioned the photo back on the dresser.

Considering how quickly she’d left the bathroom, I was nervous to turn around. No way she’d gotten dressed that fast, and I couldn’t handle it if she were only in a robe or towel. “Is it safe to face you?” I flicked my finger at the brown bag, which had her bagel inside.

“Well, I’m not braless in a white tee. Does that answer your question?”

I grinned. “Hardly.”

She grabbed my shoulder, urging me around. “Don’t worry, I know how uncomfortable you get when there’s any nippleage-action going on.”

Nippleage? “You still drunk?” I teased, finally surrendering to the need to turn toward her. Was it a bad sign that it felt like a loss when she let go of me?

My breath hitched once I faced her. “Natalia.” I swiped a hand through my hair and bumped into her dresser. “I hate you.” I frowned, immediately looking toward the window where we shared what could only be described as a “moment” last night. “You love to drive me nuts.”

“I’m just giving you a hard time.”

She was right, she hadn’t lied. Her bra was full coverage. No “nippleage,” but the cut of her panties hadn’t left much to the imagination.

“Yeah, I don’t need you giving me a hard anything.” Well, that sounded absolutely fucking horrible. *Damnit.*

The vision of her standing there in only her nude-colored bra and matching panties would forever be ingrained in my memory. Not a chance in hell I’d forget that near-glimpse of her pussy, covered by the tiny piece of silk. A piece of silk that would look far better on the floor while I pumped my cock inside her.

And damn, now I was hard.

Somewhere along the way, the girl next door became the woman who drove me crazy. *Still drives me crazy.*

“I have a robe on now. You can look. But we’re still not even since I’ve had to live with the memory of you naked for the last three years.”

“You’ve been thinking about that day, hmm?” I teased, buying myself some time to lower my heart rate, and the semi I was now sporting.

“Kind of *hard* to forget,” she deadpanned, and I couldn’t be frustrated with her when she had me smiling despite my best efforts not to.

“Relax, sailor.” She fisted my gray tee, commanding my attention.

My jaw tightened on reflex. “That’s not much better,” I remarked at the sight of her in a short cream-colored silk robe. Did she know how fast I could untie the knot at her waist? Reach between her thighs and confirm if she was as wet as I was hard?

“Why are you actually here?” She let go of my shirt and ran her hands over the material, smoothing out the wrinkles, and took her sweet time on my abs.

I dropped my focus to her hand. My jaw, and my fists at my sides, would remain clenched as long as she had her palm near the top button of my jeans.

She lifted her gaze to meet mine, those gorgeous greens doing a number on my sanity. I’d always told myself I was a stand-up guy, and I’d learned how to treat women from my father.

And yet, it was taking every ounce of restraint not to lift her and toss her onto her childhood bed. I’d ask for permission and then ... I’d fuck her senseless with both my mouth and cock.

But damn did I feel like an asshole for allowing those thoughts to settle so vividly in my mind. And my father would be forever disappointed in me if I were to make a move on my brother’s ex.

“I think you de-wrinkled my shirt enough now,” I murmured, praying to God she’d back away before her robe fell to a puddle at her feet. I’d go down to my knees along with it to worship her. Peel her barely there panties to the side and stroke that beautiful cunt with my tongue and fingers while she screamed my name. *Not Anthony’s.*

And damn my brother all to hell for getting in my head right now.

“Ryan, you okay?” she asked, finally letting go of my shirt.

I followed her eyes, which were focused a little too intensely on my crotch.

I cleared my throat, willing my dick to go down and her gaze to come back up. “I brought you a bagel and coffee. Advil in my pocket. Thought you might be hungover.”

“Oh.” She smiled and didn’t waste time getting to the food and coffee. I took advantage of her turning and adjusted my jeans.

“How’d you know I love everything bagels?”

She pivoted back around, eyeing the two halves smothered in cream cheese, and moaned as she sank her teeth into one piece.

I’d prefer to make you moan in another way, but ...
“Truth? I was trained to remember everything. I can walk into any room and memorize pretty much anything inside it. It’s a skill we had to learn on the Teams. Our snipers are even better at it.”

“And *that* explains how you know I like everything bagels? Really?”

“I may have observed you eating them on more than one occasion over the years.”

“Ah, okay. And here I thought you just secretly had a soft spot for me.” She took another bite, chewed, then swallowed. “Kidding. I know you don’t hate me, but let’s not go so far as to pretend you like me. Not that much, anyway.”

“Right.” My focus went from her long legs down to her nude-colored toenail polish. Bad idea. Images of her legs hooked over my shoulders while I buried myself deep inside her played out in my brain. *I am so fucked.*

“And your strong sense of smell, is that credited to your time as a Teamguy, too?”

“Mm. Maybe. But if you think I have a great sniffer, you should meet my buddy, Owen. You can blindfold him, and he can pretty much name every smell on God’s green earth if he’s ever encountered it even once before.”

She set the bagel half on the wrapper. “Maybe I’ll meet some of your SEAL friends someday.” She twined the silk of

her belt robe around her finger. “I’m assuming you’re not here to talk about your past, though. Here to ask me for permission about Calista again?”

Calista? Damn. I’d forgotten about her.

“My answer is the same as last night. Date her. I don’t have a problem with it.”

“I actually forgot about that.” Standing there with Natalia, all I could think about was her.

I’d happily give up breathing the same air as other women if Natalia was mine. *Yup, fucked.*

“I came over because I want to get to know you. For real. Not just the memory recall shit. You said last night we don’t know each other, and if we’re going to put the past behind us, let’s try and be friends.”

Natalia’s back went to the dresser, and she folded her arms. “Friends, huh?”

I nodded, doing my best to keep a straight face. To not reach for her and do all the wicked things I wanted with her. Things that I sure as hell didn’t want to do with any of my friends.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Not yet, at least.” She continued fidgeting with the belt of her robe. “I think I have a problem that needs to be addressed before we can do the whole friends thing.”

My shoulders went back at her words. *Problem?* Was she in danger? Did she need help? “Who do I need to kill?” I roughly asked, stepping closer as my hands locked at my sides.

She let go of her belt and held her palms up. “No, no. Easy there, Captain America.” Her lips tipped into a gorgeous smile. “This kind of problem isn’t something I think you can help me with.”

I held the back of my neck, a bad feeling in my gut about where this conversation was heading. Memories from her

words in my bedroom yesterday resurfaced, and I tightened my abs for the expected gut shot.

“I’m not a therapist, but I’ve been trying to understand why I seem to be ... having such a reaction when around you. Sober or tipsy.”

“You were more than tipsy.”

“True.” She grimaced. “Thank you for not letting me make a fool of myself last night. Any more than I already did.”

I kept quiet, uncomfortable with what I knew was coming.

“I told you the other day, and well, if memory serves me correctly, last night—that I need some tension relief. *Sexual* tension relief.”

And there it is.

“Can I be honest with you?”

A humorless laugh escaped my tight lips. “That’s pretty much all you’ve been since I came home. Maybe try lying for a change?” I was only partially kidding. In truth, I wouldn’t survive much more “honesty” from this woman, especially with her talking about “sexual tension” while wearing a silk robe.

“I’ll take honesty over your way of handling things. Cryptic sentences you leave me to interpret. Unfinished lines of thought. And don’t get me started on your hate for lavender.”

My brows slanted, and I stepped closer at the realization that ... “No lavender this time?”

“I wasn’t sure if I was going to see you today, and I didn’t want to annoy you if I did. I grabbed a bottle of body wash from my sister’s bathroom.”

I stalked over to her window, setting a hand and my forehead on the glass. I needed some breathing space.

“See. This,” she began, and I knew she was probably talking with her hands. “This is what I mean. Confusing the hell out of me.” She paused to see if I’d talk. I had no plans to,

so she continued, “Should I even bother to get the truth from you about why you hate lavender?”

Silence.

That was all I could give her.

Any real answer would only sound insane.

Maybe I am insane?

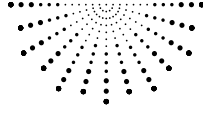
“Fine,” she replied. “Back to the problem you can’t help me with, then.” Another pause. Another chance for my heart to break at what I knew was coming. “Before we can try this friends thing, I need to get rid of my pent-up sexual frustration. The fact I haven’t even been kissed by a man in over two years is more than likely the reason why I almost kissed you last night. Drunk or sober, I wouldn’t do that if it weren’t for this issue.”

I tapped my forehead against the window, curled my hand into a fist, and closed my eyes at that sharp, impaling reminder she’d been engaged to my brother. *He’d* had her in every possible way.

“Are you trying to tell me we can’t have a fresh start and be friends until you get laid?” I asked, my voice harsher than I intended. I was going for more incredulous, but I was angry and annoyed that she would even think that. One, we’d already talked about how dangerous and stupid it was to hook up with someone for sex. Two, was she that repulsed at the thought that I might be an option? I spun around to face her, incapable of shielding my frustration and went with my first thought to hide the fact I was even thinking the second. “I told you yesterday, screwing some stranger for tension relief was a shitty idea. Or did you forget?”

“Well,” she said while innocently lifting her shoulders, “the only alternative is screwing you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



NATALIA

“I’M KIDDING,” I BLURTED.

Ryan’s face was pale, and his muscular arms hung by his sides. The only time I’d probably ever see any part of that man limp.

Of course, I shouldn’t see any part of you hard, either, should I?

“You’re kidding?” he repeated back to me with narrowed eyes, not quite buying it. *Me neither, Ryan. Me neither.*

I tossed my hands in the air with dramatic flair. “Oh, come on. Did you really think I was suggesting having sex in my parents’ house?” I faked a laugh. “Or that we sneak over to your room at your mom’s house and do it? I wasn’t serious. That was just a little payback for all the times you drove me nuts over the years.”

“Payback?” He folded his arms, setting his back to the window. His eyes quickly caressed every inch of my visible skin, and I shivered as if he’d made actual contact. “Yesterday in my room, you were kidding about wanting to have sex with a stranger? And last night, the horny bit was a charade to frustrate me?”

I frustrate you? Like ... sexually?

One eye closed as if he were behind a sniper rifle, and he’d acquired his next target. In this case, me.

“Last night, I was shit-faced and could barely stand. I take no responsibility for my actions.” I cut across my narrow

bedroom to stand closer. “But other than that, yeah, I was giving you a hard time.” I lifted my chin, looked directly into his eyes and did my best to maintain some type of steely resolve despite my hangover. “Come on,” I began when his silence made it a little hard to breathe, “do you really think I’d discuss my sex life, or lack thereof in this case, with you?”

He returned my sharp gaze with one of his own, a fierce look that came awfully close to penetrating my defenses. I wrapped my arms tightly around my body to keep my robe from falling to the floor.

Heaven help me, I *did* want this man to screw me. Right or wrong didn’t matter. The biggest lie was thinking that hooking up with someone else could shake me free from the “Ryan Rossi effect.” And I couldn’t even lie to myself about that.

Did he wear down his enemies out in battle with his looks? Disarm them with a devilish smile?

Ryan cocked his head, still not believing me. I wasn’t the best actress.

I extended my hand between us like a peace offering. “From now on, I’ll consider us even. Although, we’re nowhere near it. I’ll stop busting your balls, okay? We can try and be friends. Get to know each other. If that’s really what you want.”

His gaze dropped to my hand, and I noticed the subtle flare of his nostrils just before he took my palm, then he caught me off guard by tugging me against his hard frame.

My free hand went to his chest as he gently collected my wet hair into a fist, and he leaned in closer.

“You smell like watermelon bubble gum.” His breath fluttered over the sensitive part of my neck, right where it met my shoulder, before his mouth drew near my ear.

“I may have used Chiara’s soap instead of Maria’s.” I shrugged, and fought to stifle the nervous giggle threatening to escape. “Don’t tell me you have an aversion to watermelon, too?” We were too close. He was still holding onto me and I could feel his heart beating wildly beneath my palm. Oh, and

there was the fact his mouth was near my neck, and he was holding my hair right now ... yeah, there was *that*, too.

I shivered, my body on the verge of going into self-destruct mode, where I lost all willpower and begged him on my hands and knees to save me from this sexual tension purgatory. Because I really did need sex. I just wished like hell I didn't *only* want it to be with him.

"I happen to like watermelon." He slowly eased back, letting go of my hand and hair. "Now, get dressed. Wear something comfortable. I'm taking you out."

"What? Why?" The whiplash from this man was enough to send me to a chiropractor. Another thing I couldn't afford. But in all fairness, I'd been doing the same to him since yesterday morning.

"We made a truce, right? Agreed to be friends and get to know each other? We shook on it."

I arched a brow. "That wasn't a handshake. That was ... something else." Something borderline sinful. Nearly erotic. A touch-myself-at-night-worthy moment to remember.

He smiled and slipped his hands into his pockets. "Why do I get the feeling you're far from done busting my balls, Talia?"

* * *

"NOW I UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'RE SINGLE." I WAS PANTING. Sweaty. Desperate for water. And so tired I could've collapsed right there on the floor of the climbing gym.

On second thought, why not?

I stretched out on my back on the blue floor mat, indulging in a quiet moment to catch my breath far enough away from other climbers. The last two hours of climbing at Inner Peaks, an indoor climbing center in the nearby town of Matthews, had been grueling in just the right way.

"Oh yeah, why is that?" Ryan laid out alongside me, and his pinky finger brushed against mine.

He quickly pulled his hand away and linked his palms over his chest. Not out of breath at all.

Of course, you're not. Once a Teamguy, always a Teamguy, right? The man had endurance, that was for sure.

“Well.” I turned my cheek to look at him, finding his deep brown eyes intensely focused on me, and it took me a second to regain my composure and collect my thoughts. “If your idea of a date is making a woman work for her meal like this, I can understand why you might not make it to a second.”

“If I *were* on a date, she'd still wind up panting and breathless, I can assure you.” He shifted to his side and propped his head up with his elbow and hand. “But after I wined and dined her, of course. Food first. Then the calorie burner after.”

Ugh. I didn't need to think about this man rolling around in bed with a naked woman. “Well, I could certainly use the dining part right about now. I'm starving. But I'm a hot mess, and we'd probably be unwelcome anywhere.”

“I think I have an idea.” He grinned and switched to his knees, then offered a hand so we could both stand together. “Come on.”

I accepted his rough palm, my heart colliding with my ribs at the contact. “Thanks.”

He held my hand a few seconds longer than necessary, then cleared his throat and pulled away.

We changed and returned our gear, then headed to his truck. It was a quiet ride, both of us either caught up in our own thoughts, or too worried about what those thoughts might betray if we voiced them. Or maybe that was just me.

It was cooler today than yesterday. More “fall-like,” and I loved it. Charlotte's weather had mood swings on point with mine lately. Hot one minute. Cold the next. Not always much in between this time of year.

Twenty minutes later, we were at a park on top of a blanket he'd rolled out in the bed of his truck, eating Chick-fil-A. Of

course he knew my favorite fast food. I tried not to moan after the first bite of my sandwich.

“Maybe you do know how to win a girl over,” I teased, dipping a fry into honey mustard next.

He was sitting opposite me, our legs stretched out, backs to the interior walls while we ate. I couldn't see his eyes behind his aviator shades, but his attention was fixed my way when he said, “I have my moments.” He ate a few bites and then asked, “How's your stress? Better now after hitting the gym?”

I assumed he meant work stress. Not lack-of-orgasm stress. “You want to ask me how bad things are, don't you?” I set my sandwich down and wiped my hands on a napkin.

He quietly nodded.

I shifted my food to the side and propped up my knees, pulling them to my chest. “I'll make you a deal, a question for a question. If we're still doing this get-to-know-you thing, I'll answer yours if you promise to answer a few of mine.” I rolled my tongue around the inside of my mouth, trying to do a discreet check of my teeth to ensure they were clean.

“As long as you don't ask anything about classified missions, I suppose I can play that game.” He balled up his empty wrapper and kept it in his closed hand, squeezing it like a stress ball. Even the mention of operating had him on edge.

“Fair enough.” I let go of an uneasy breath. “To answer your question, yeah, things are bad. I'm not sure if the restaurant will make it to Christmas, to be honest,” I confessed. “I just ...” My shoulders collapsed in defeat. “I've dreamed about owning a place since I was a kid. Spent my twenties working in restaurants to learn the business. Took off to New York thinking, what better place than there to get to know the ins and outs of owning a restaurant? I thought I was ready when we opened.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and bowed my head. “But I'm failing.”

“Hey now.” At the feel of his hand on my ankle, his warm palm sliding in small circles beneath my jeans, I looked up at

him. “In the SEALs, we like to say, *‘Never out of the fight.’*” He paused to let the words sink in. “Same applies to you.”

“‘It ain’t over until it’s over’ kind of thing?”

“Precisely.” He smiled. “You keep fighting—”

“Until you can’t?” I interjected. He frowned at my words, as if they’d had a much more personal meaning than I’d intended. I winced when the realization of what those words meant to him sunk in.

He had to stop operating three years ago. But, knowing this man, he would never have quit.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, hoping he’d hear the multiple apologies embedded in my words.

He shook his head. “It’s fine. Really,” he said and cleared his throat, as if trying to discard his emotions. “But um, we SEALs, also know when to ask for help.” He kept his hand on my ankle, continuing to smooth the pad of his thumb in small, comforting circles.

What should’ve been an insignificant touch felt like one of the most intimate moments of my life.

“Well, that might be a lie.” A quick smile came and went. “We’re hardheaded and stubborn, but we’ll ask for help if it means saving others. And I’m thinking you’re like that. You have people who rely on you. So, let me help you.”

I flinched at his suggestion, not expecting the conversation to go in that direction. “You don’t need to be everyone’s hero.”

“Fine.” He shrugged. “I’ll just be yours.”

The way he’d dropped those last words hit me right in the heart. I seized a deep breath, trying to understand what was going on. The most frustrating man I’d ever met had been a thorn in my side, albeit a sexy thorn, for years. And he was quickly becoming everything I never knew I needed.

“I can’t accept a handout,” I decided. “I’m sorry.”

He studied me for a moment. Based on the tight draw of his lips, his hidden gaze was likely narrowed, and he was

ready to fight me on this. “Consider it a loan with zero percent interest and a fifty-year repayment plan, then.”

No way would I ask him to lend me the nine thousand I needed when banks didn’t even trust me to pay them back. I’d already maxed out my credit cards, though. And I couldn’t get approved for another.

“Listen, I told Enzo no when he offered to help, and I’m telling you the same.”

“You’re a hell of a lot more stubborn than I thought,” he said, still touching my ankle. “But if you’re serious about not caring whether or not I date Calista, well, she’s not taking the money. So, why shouldn’t it go to you, then? You’re helping me. Consider it a business transaction,” he pressed. The mention of Calista hit me like I’d done a belly flop into a pool, and it stung.

“Not up for discussion.” I flicked my finger, motioning I was ready to move on, and he grunted. “My turn for a question.” I needed to talk about something else. Anything but my money problem or *his* issue. I couldn’t stomach the thought of him spending alone time with Calista.

“Fine. Go ahead.” He set the balled-up wrapper alongside his jeaned leg, but he’d yet to stop touching my ankle. It was ... distracting, to say the least.

“You said you haven’t been in a serious relationship. How come?”

“You remember me sharing that last night, huh?”

“I remember everything from last night,” I admitted.

“Well.” He pulled his hand free from my leg as if he’d just realized what he’d been doing. “War is probably the reason.” He grabbed at the tanned skin of his neck. “Fear of being cheated on while deployed, too. And also the fear of *not* being cheated on and having to commit to someone I knew I could never love.”

“Well, that’s a lot to unpack.” I blinked in surprise. “Why do you feel you can’t ever love someone?”

He went quiet, appearing uncomfortable. “I don’t know.”

But you do know, don’t you? He just didn’t want to share.

“In my twenties, I was too young. Too focused on trying to be like one of those heroes I grew up reading about in comics.” He lowered his hand to his lap. “And then in my thirties, I kind of forgot there was life outside of the Navy.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say next, and he didn’t give me a chance.

“My turn. Hmmm.” He smirked before asking, “Ever jump from a plane?”

I rolled my eyes, knowing he knew the answer to that. “If that’s your way of asking me to go skydiving for our next little adventure ... that’ll be a hard pass from me. Rock climbing is extreme enough.”

He smiled. “Fair enough.”

“And that also counts as your question.” *My turn.* I needed to be on my feet for my next question. It was going to be an uncomfortable one. I left his truck bed and waited for him to do the same.

“Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to be a fan of this next one?” he asked once his shoes hit the ground.

I closed the space between us and reached for his sunglasses, needing to look him in the eyes for this. He didn’t stop me from taking them off, only looked at me with worried brown eyes.

It was now or never.

“I just want to know something. And it’s not because I still have feelings for him ...” *It’s so I won’t feel so guilty for having feelings for someone else back then.* Based on the grave look on his face, he knew what was coming. “Anthony, he cheated on me, didn’t he?”

Ryan dragged a hand through his dark hair, mussing it up as he gave me his profile, gaze moving to the playground far off in the distance. We were near an empty soccer field. Totally private. “You sure you want to know this?”

“Sounds like an answer to me,” I whispered, then nudged his arm with his sunglasses, offering them back.

He took them and faced me, his lips a hard slash on his otherwise stoic face. “Yeah, he cheated.”

I’d never cheated. Well, not unless fantasizing about Anthony’s brother here and there counted. And maybe it did. Maybe that’s why I felt such relief knowing Anthony had never truly loved me. How could he if he was sleeping around?

“Did you know he was cheating on me, but you looked away because he’s your brother? Protected him?” This would be the only painful part—finding out whether Ryan was complicit in Anthony’s asshole endeavors with other women.

Ryan’s jaw tightened as he slid his aviators back on. We studied each other for a few uncomfortable moments, only a few ragged breaths passing between us.

“I only knew of one time for certain. And only because I was visiting him one weekend while he had a game in Tampa, and a woman opened his hotel door instead of him,” he shared. “After I punched my brother in the face, I told him if he didn’t tell you about the affair, I would.” He looked away from me, and I grabbed his arm, urging him back around, my heart in my throat. “He took the cowardly way out and broke up with you instead of fessing up. And I let everyone blame me for the breakup because I didn’t want to see you hurt any more than I assumed you already were.”

I let go of his arm and wedged my thumbnail between my teeth, my thoughts all over the place. The man who’d do anything for his brother had chosen my feelings instead? Let people hate him to protect hurting me? I didn’t know what to say.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his tone almost hoarse.

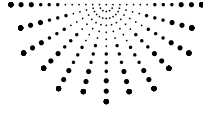
I swallowed and freed my thumbnail from my teeth to offer him a response. “Thank you for the truth.” I nodded. “And for punching him,” I added with a half-cry, half-laugh.

Ryan reached for me, holding one arm, and lightly squeezed. “You always deserved better. You know that, right?”

I felt a runaway tear on my cheek and quickly discarded it. I didn’t want to cry. Not in front of Ryan. And not over his asshole brother, Anthony. I did my best to suck it up and change the subject. “Well then. How about no more questions for today?”

“Just one.” He startled me by caressing my cheek with the back of his hand. “What do you say we go to the range and do a little target practice?” He smiled. “Not sure about you, but I sure as hell feel like shooting something.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



NATALIA

“THANK YOU FOR DITCHING WORK EARLY AND COMING WITH me tonight. I needed this.” Maria grabbed the bottle of tequila she’d ordered and poured two shots. Casamigos—a good one, at least. Much better for sipping, though.

She’d reserved a VIP booth at a trendy lounge that turned into a club on the weekends. I didn’t want to know how much it would all cost, but I knew she’d pull out Thomas’s black American Express card for the evening. And since I assumed Thomas was why she’d snatched me from the restaurant at nine tonight, pleading to join her in the city, I wasn’t going to turn down drinks on his dime.

After dropping Chiara off at our parents’ place, she’d shown up in a tight red dress with black slingback pumps, holding an armful of my sexiest dresses. Noticing her eye makeup was smudged, as if she’d been fighting tears on the drive over, I gave her a squeeze and agreed to go out.

“Maria.” I cupped her arm, drawing her focus, hoping to stop her from tossing back the shot. “Will you please tell me what’s wrong? I’m worried.”

Maria peered toward the dance floor of the nightclub. The room was dark aside from flashing lights bouncing around and the multiple crystal chandeliers shimmering overhead.

It was around eleven thirty, so it was starting to get crowded. I felt too old to be there.

Maria pulled her arm free from my grasp and took the shot, closing her eyes as she swallowed.

“What’d Thomas do?” I cut to the point, because after dancing for the last thirty minutes, she’d yet to share the urgent nature of her “need to dance now” request.

Maria opened her eyes, and when she realized I had no intention of shooting tequila, reached for my shot glass. After spending the day trying to shake off my hangover, I was far from in the mood to drink. And from the looks of it, I’d be driving her Mercedes home.

My thoughts switched to Ryan as I waited for her to answer, thinking about the day we’d spent together. Those memories had my body heating, and I was already hot from the club. I needed something to drink, but definitely not tequila.

After we’d gone shooting at the range, and he’d been one hell of an instructor, we took a walk on a nature trail before he’d returned me back home so I could get ready for work. And take my second shower of the day.

As far as non-dates went, it’d been ... amazing. Even in light of the Anthony-cheated news. I’d always had a feeling he hadn’t been faithful, but since my heart never really belonged to him, the information didn’t hurt as much as it probably should have. I knew in my gut I never would’ve walked down the aisle with him. He didn’t need to end things. *I* would have.

“You have to answer me at some point,” I said, returning my attention to my sister, who had my stomach in knots with worry.

“I think Thomas is going to leave me,” Maria confided as she refilled both shot glasses. I reached out to try and stop her, but she was stubborn.

“Did he say that?” I frowned, not sure how to feel about that. On one hand, I hated her husband. But I didn’t want to see my sister go through a divorce, either.

“No.” She hiccupped. “But he pocket dialed me while having sex with another woman, so ...”

My back slammed against the seat at her words, my heart breaking for her. “How can you be sure?”

Maria took another shot, winced less this time, which was a bad sign, then pivoted to look at me. “Hmm. Because I heard a woman saying, ‘Yes, yes. That’s the spot.’ And then he hissed, ‘Your pussy tastes so good.’”

I covered my mouth, growing ill.

“I ended the call after that.” Annd she took another shot. I didn’t blame her now. “So, yeah, if he doesn’t leave me for this woman ... well, I’ll be ending things.”

I scooted closer and tugged her to my side. She resisted at first—stubborn—but then gave in and let me wrap my arms around her.

She refused to cry. *Good*. That asshole didn’t deserve her tears.

I was glad I hadn’t told her about the Anthony-cheating news. *Of all days ...*

“I hate him,” she said against my chest, then pulled away and patted her cheeks with the backs of her hands, searching for tears that weren’t there.

Screw him. “What do you need from me?”

“Just to dance. Help me forget what happened.” She pointed to my phone buzzing on the table. “Probably Enzo again. I think he’s worried.”

“We did bolt out of the restaurant in these tiny dresses,” I commented, pointing to my skintight sleeveless black dress. “He’s overprotective, you know that.”

Maria grabbed my phone, used my face to unlock it, then began typing.

“What are you writing?” I snatched the phone from her, worried what the hell my drunk sister would say, but I was too late. She’d already hit send.

But also ...

The message had been from Ryan not Enzo, which meant she’d just texted Ryan and ...

“Maria. You just told *Ryan* I need to plan to get laid and have hot sex.”

“Sorry, I assumed it was Enzo checking on us again.” She shrugged. “Why would Ryan care, though?”

Bubbles popped up from Ryan in the text thread.

Then disappeared.

Then popped up again.

Ryan: *WHERE ARE YOU?*

“Shit, shit, shit.” I read the original message he’d sent before my sister’s rapid-fire reply. He’d been checking on me, making sure I was okay since I’d texted him not to pick me up, and that I was going out with my sister.

I thought back to the near-kiss last night in his truck. And then there was the fact I’d told him in his bedroom I needed to get laid. The teasing I’d done in my bedroom that morning, too. And how I’d tried to backpedal and said I’d been joking. “The timing ... sucks.”

Natalia: *That was Maria. I’m sorry. She’s had too much tequila, and she answered for me. I’m fine. Really.*

Ryan: *Where are you?*

At least he didn’t ask with all caps again. But why’d he need to know our location? What would he do about it?

While I was contemplating how to answer, a message popped up from Enzo.

Enzo: *WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU, NAT? I’m with Ryan. We’re coming to you now.*

“What?” I reread the message, trying to wrap my head around the text. *You’re hanging out together? Really? From near-enemies to friends, huh?*

I decided to put the guys into a group text. If they were going to gang up on me, then ...

Natalia: *Maria is having a rough night. I’m just helping her out. I’ve got this covered. You boys don’t need to worry.*

Goodnight. x

Enzo: *Don't fuck with me, Nat. Tell me where you are right damn now! Who the hell hurt Maria, and who needs to die?*

Well, that escalated quickly. Why was I surprised when it came to Enzo?

“I don't want anyone coming. I just want to dance in peace,” Maria said, making the accurate assumption her text had caused problems.

I watched more bubbles pop up on the text thread. Probably Ryan's turn to yell this time.

They were both overreacting.

At Maria's insistence, I stowed the phone in my clutch. I knew my sister. She was two shots past the point of having a civil conversation with them in public if they were to show up.

“Okay, whatever you need. Just tell me. You want to dance? Forget?” I slid off the booth, clutch under my arm, and offered her my palm.

She nodded, and we made our way to the packed dance floor to try and find a spot to move freely. The DJ was blending electronic dance music with hip hop, and the crowd was going wild. I was also fairly certain we were the oldest women on the dance floor packed with mostly college kids.

Tuning out the crowd, I finally got into the groove—finding my rhythm and losing myself to the beat. Time was irrelevant as we danced, both of us trying to forget something for as long as we could. I was slammed back to reality, stopping all momentum, when I felt the hairs on the back of my neck, slick with sweat, stand.

“What's wrong?” Maria tugged at my wrist, urging me to keep dancing.

I spun around, knowing that some-freaking-how they'd tracked us down. The raw, masculine, alpha-energy vibrating around us could only be from those two.

I tipped my head to the side, my eyes landing on Ryan and Enzo standing near the entrance of the club. I shivered at the

sight of the two powerful men stalking our way with purposeful strides. Black dress shirts. Dark pants.

“They’re here.” I gulped as shivers crisscrossed over my skin, then I abruptly turned away from the approaching storm at the feel of a hand on my ass—a hand I knew wasn’t Maria’s.

When I pivoted toward the too-young-for-me guy playing grabby hands, he forcefully pinned me to his body in one fast movement.

“Let me go,” I demanded, shoving at his chest, hoping to get him to back off before the two alphas did it for me.

“Come on, I love a good cougar. You could use some young blood in you.” The guy winked, and so help me, I’d have kned him in the balls if I could’ve gotten in a better position.

Maria noticed the problem, and snatched the man’s arm, trying to unglue him from my body. In his attempt to shove her away, he elbowed her in the face.

Maria cried out in shock, and held her jaw as I struggled to get to her.

“No means no, asshole,” I heard Ryan hiss from behind as he freed me from the man’s grasp. Before I could react, he’d sidestepped me and had the guy on his knees in one quick move. He’d done something to the man’s wrist, and he was twisting it hard from the looks of it.

Ryan bent forward, staring down at the young college-aged kid who had no clue what he’d just stepped in.

I quickly looked over to see Enzo cradling Maria in his arms, protecting her, but his gaze was intensely focused on the kid as if he craved to be the one about to rip him apart instead.

The people on the dance floor finally realized what was going on, and those nearby backed up, not wanting to be part of whatever was happening, but apparently not wanting to miss out on the action either.

“He’s a kid,” I told Ryan, and I reached for his arm at the sound of the man-child moaning from the pain. “Just let him go.” I tugged again. “Please.”

Ryan cocked his head, then finally released him and faced me. “Are you okay?”

I focused on the guy stumbling to his feet, holding his wrist and seething a few obscenities before he hauled ass to the exit. He really had come close to death. If Ryan hadn’t been the one to intervene, Enzo would’ve surely killed him.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“Can we go out to the patio?” Maria reached for my arm once Enzo let go of her, his gaze still trained in the direction the man had run.

“Don’t,” I hissed, setting my hand on Enzo’s chest. “You’re not that guy anymore,” I reminded him.

Enzo lowered his face closer to mine so I could hear him growl, “I’ll always be that guy, Nat. That will never change.” Then he snatched Maria’s arm and motioned toward the patio doors.

Ryan kept me tight to his side as we maneuvered through the crowd. People shifted out of our way as we moved, sensing the threats both Ryan and Enzo posed to anyone who dared cross them.

I’d never seen that side of Ryan before. Enzo? Sure. But Ryan ... that’d been intense.

Once we were on the patio, which had a nice view of the city, I went to the railing and sucked in a deep breath of the fresh air. I set my clutch down on a small empty table next to me, my hand cramping from holding it while dancing for so long.

“How’d you find us?” I asked, looking over my shoulder to see Ryan joining me.

Where’s Maria?

Just over Ryan’s shoulder I saw Enzo buying her a bottle of water from the small outdoor bar, urging her to drink it.

“Enzo had a few ideas. We checked two other clubs first. This was our third stop,” Ryan shared. “I know you said not to come, but I’m glad we did.”

“I would’ve handled it.” I faced him, and he turned to look at me. “I’m not drinking. And as you can see, I’m fine.”

“I was worried you might also be upset about ... well, the news I shared with you earlier about Anthony.” He reached for my hair and swept a few strands that were sticking to my cheek away from my face. I was a hot, sweaty disaster.

“I always assumed he cheated. I’m not upset. It’s Maria I’m worried about. Thomas is cheating on her.” Shit, I hadn’t meant to share that news, but out it came.

“He ... what?”

My shoulders fell at the sound of Enzo’s voice behind me, his tone simmering with barely controlled rage. He’d overheard my words, and Maria would most definitely be pissed at me as well.

I spun to face my angry friend, but he was focused on Maria at his side, searching for answers. “I’m going to kill him. Where is he?” Enzo seethed.

Maria reached for his arm and gently tugged, trying to calm him down. “He’s not worth it. Just do me a favor. Dance with me? Out here where it’s safe from the others, okay?”

“You’d be safe with me wherever you went.” Enzo swiped the back of his hand over her cheek.

“I know,” Maria whispered before she pulled him away from us and toward the other side of the patio.

“He has feelings for her, doesn’t he?” Ryan asked once they were farther away, and I’d turned toward him again.

“I thought he was just overprotective, but now, I don’t know.” I closed my eyes and surrendered to another deep breath.

“Today wasn’t easy for either of you. I’m sorry.”

At the feel of his hand on my forearm, I peeled my eyes back open. “I hate that she’s in pain. It’s not easy to see someone you love hurting.”

“No, it’s not,” he said roughly as he stepped closer, his eyes holding mine, and my breath shuddered.

“Ryan,” I began after a tight swallow, “I remember you looking at me like this, like how you are now, three times before, and each time right after you turned into an asshole.” My pulse raced with every passing second he peered at me. “I’d almost thought you might kiss me those times just before your mood changed.”

His gaze fell to the ground between us for a moment before he steadily worked his attention back to my face.

“You’re wrong,” he responded in a low, guttural tone that shredded me.

I wanted to blame the intense night for the tears I felt threatening, but I knew that’d be a lie. I started to turn, but he circled my wrist and spun me back to face him.

“You’re wrong,” he said again, a dagger to the heart. “There’ve been a hell of a lot more than three times I’ve wanted to kiss you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



NATALIA

RYAN SEIZED MY CHEEKS WITH HIS ROUGH HANDS AND brought his forehead to mine. He held me like that for several heartbeats before admitting in a hoarse voice, “I need you to walk away from me right now before I do it. Before I kiss you.”

My knees buckled. “I can’t do that. I can’t walk away from you.”

“Please, Talia.” He was quiet for a moment before letting go of my face, and then whispered in my ear, “I hate lavender because it reminds me of you and Anthony. When you were together. But it also kept you safe from me,” he murmured darkly. “It was a reminder you were off-limits, but now ...”

Oh God. He trailed his lips from my ear to my cheek and cupped my chin. When he lightly tipped my head back, my eyes drifted up to meet his and our mouths nearly touched. I knew Maria and Enzo were somewhere out there, but I was lost in the moment.

“I need you to walk away. If you don’t want me to kiss you, then walk away,” he ordered in a low, steady voice.

“I can’t do that. Because I’ve spent a lifetime wanting exactly that to happen,” I confessed, unable to fight the truth anymore.

His brows slashed together, and his breathing intensified. His chest touched mine with each inhale. He was still trying to maintain his resolve. To not cross whatever line he’d deemed uncrossable.

I wasn't sure if I'd always be his brother's ex to him, or if he could ever see me differently, but—

The growl that escaped his lips interrupted my thoughts, and my eyelids fluttered closed as he slanted his mouth over mine. I grasped his arms so I didn't wilt against him as he kissed me, and when he groaned against my mouth, I parted my lips as an invitation for his tongue. And the man took it. God did he ever.

I'd never been kissed so passionately before. Not once in my life had I ever felt such intensity, not even from sex. Every possible emotion crashed through me like waves on a stormy day.

His tongue didn't have to battle with mine. I surrendered to him, allowing him to take control. Needing him to guide me to a place I felt like I'd never been before. One where I felt blissfully safe.

I moaned and slid my hands up to his shoulders, drawing my body closer. He spun us so my back was to the railing, blocking our kiss from the view of others with his height and broad shoulders.

His hands caressed my cheeks, then slipped down the sides of my arms. All without ever losing my mouth.

I arched against him, circling my hips in desperate need to feel his cock against my body, every part of me electric from his touch.

And God, was he hard.

“Talia,” he rasped, breaking contact for the first time. “Fuck.” Then he kissed me again. No tongue. Just slow, sensual kisses. Sweeps of his tongue cutting along the line of my mouth without actually going in. A hot-hot tease.

His hands tore through my hair, before he held my head in place, his lips going still against mine.

“Don't,” I cried, knowing in my gut what this man was about to do.

Break my heart because of guilt. Because of loyalty to his brother.

I lightly shook my head, our foreheads touching again.

“I’m sorry.” His voice cracked with his delivery.

I had to stay strong.

No, screw that. I am strong.

I refused to crumple at the rejection I felt coming.

I pulled away, preparing myself for his next words.

When he eased back to find my eyes, a dark and haunted look greeted me. “Things are complicated right now. I shouldn’t have done that.” I lost his gaze to the dark sky. The muscle in his jaw beneath his five o’clock shadow strained. “But that doesn’t mean I didn’t enjoy every second kissing you,” he returned in a low voice, his eyes finding mine again. “More than you can possibly know.”

I stiffened, unsure what to say. “We went from trying the friends thing to making out in public pretty fast.” I forced a small smile, and he brought his hand between us, dragging his thumb along my bottom lip.

I swallowed as I waited for his next move. Or his next act of rejection. Coin toss.

“You don’t need to fake smile for me.” His forehead tightened as he studied me. “I just—”

“Now that you’re done smoochy-smooching, can we go?” I flinched at Maria’s words, and Ryan shifted away from me so I could face her.

Smoochy-smooching, really? She definitely needed to get to bed, and soon. She’d be in hangover hell tomorrow, and I had a feeling it’d be way worse than mine was earlier.

Alongside Maria, Enzo’s lips tipped into an awkward smile, like he’d witnessed his little sister misbehaving, but he wouldn’t rat me out. *Or* punch Ryan in the face, thank God.

“Let’s get them home,” Enzo suggested, eyes on Ryan.

Ryan seemed to be considering his options, stroking his jaw without giving away anything in his expression.

Was he happy to have an escape plan from our conversation? Or had he wanted to finish our talk?

“Right,” Ryan finally said, then extended his arm, motioning for us to walk ahead of him into the club.

I snatched my clutch from the table, and followed Enzo inside.

While he paid for our VIP table tab, Maria and I grabbed our jackets from the coat check. I did my best to play it cool, and not act like the man had just had his tongue in my mouth.

Ryan helped me into my black leather jacket and freed my hair from the back of the collar. Then he quickly stepped away and retrieved his keys from his pocket. “We’re in the parking garage across the street. We’ll have to come back for Maria’s car tomorrow.”

“Becoming a habit,” Enzo bit out, his brows tight, as if angered by the idea we’d come alone to the city.

“Yeah, well—”

“Don’t do this again. Not without protection,” Enzo warned, cutting Maria off. If Maria were sober, she’d put Enzo in his place. It didn’t matter how intimidating the man could be, she wouldn’t care. No one told Maria what to do.

My shoulders fell.

Except Thomas.

I wondered why she felt comfortable enough with Enzo to speak her mind, but she didn’t with Thomas.

“Seeing as though you might start World War Three with this woman,” Ryan began, clearly drawing the same conclusion I had as he tipped his head toward Maria, “I say we go.”

Maria rolled her eyes and started to walk ahead, but Enzo quickly caught up, setting a hand on her back as we made our way to the street.

I kept quiet as we walked since that seemed to be what Ryan wanted. He made no attempt to start a conversation, or even look at me, from the time we left the bar. Enzo's Porsche was parked next to Ryan's truck in the garage. I'd forgotten to ask where they'd been hanging out before they'd shown up, and the more important question—*why* were they hanging out?

“See you back at the Romanos’,” Enzo said while helping Maria into the passenger seat of his Porsche.

I hugged him goodbye, then faced Ryan, unsure whether he planned to continue our conversation in the garage, in his truck, or maybe not at all.

“Get in the truck,” Ryan abruptly snarled a moment later, his eyes focused over my shoulder. Before I had a chance to check what was happening behind me, he quickly maneuvered me around him, shielding me. But from what?

Enzo gestured to Maria to lock the doors, then moved to stand by Ryan.

“Well, well, well,” someone called out, and I lifted up on my toes to peek over Ryan's shoulder.

My stomach dropped when I spotted that same college-aged guy from the club who'd bothered me, but he had *five* friends with him.

“What do you want?” Ryan reached back, nudging his keys into my hand, a reminder to get into the truck.

I hesitantly took them and followed his order. Once inside, I locked up and slid over the console onto the driver's seat to check on Maria. Her focus was out the window, probably confused by what was going on. From her vantage point, she wouldn't be able to see everything.

As much as I wanted to call the police, I preferred to keep Enzo away from the spotlight when it came to the PD. I also had a feeling Ryan and Enzo didn't need an assist, even if it was six to two.

I switched back to the passenger seat so I could better see what was going on.

The man-child from the club had two guys on one side of him now, three on the other. One had something in his hand. A pole or pipe?

I cracked the window open so I could hear what they were saying.

“You really think you can embarrass me like you did and walk away from that?” He jerked a thumb to the guy at his left. “My buddies and I plan to teach you a lesson.”

“Oh, is that so?” Ryan asked, a little too calmly. His profile was turned to me, but he appeared to be maintaining his composure as if he wasn’t about to fight off six guys.

Enzo began rolling one sleeve to his elbow, remaining quiet.

“My friend here is a karate expert,” the man-child went on. “And this guy on my right is a wrestler.”

“Are we going to fight, or do you want to keep up with the introductions?” Ryan asked, working at his own sleeves, as the guys remained lined up maybe six feet away. “I love a good icebreaker get-to-know-you game as much as the next guy,” he added sarcastically, “but if I’m going to get my hands dirty, I’d prefer to not waste time.”

“You messed with the wrong person tonight.” The man-child reached into his pocket and produced a knife.

A light laugh left Ryan’s mouth. “Yeah, I can tell. You guys look like a cover band for the Backstreet Boys.” He didn’t seem nervous, so I was pretty sure I didn’t need to be. But I was worried one of the twenty something-year-olds would wind up bleeding out on the parking garage floor if they didn’t walk away.

“Fuck you, man,” the idiot fired back. “That bitch,” he added while jerking his chin toward me in the truck, “was asking for some guy to touch her in that dress she had on. If she doesn’t want a guy putting his hands on her, then she ought to know better than to wear that.”

Ryan’s shoulders arched back at his words, and he gripped his neck, rotating it a bit. “Now you see, I was going to show

you some mercy since you're young and obviously stupid, but you went and crossed the line with that comment.”

“Get these assholes.” The man-child waved his knife, and the other guys charged Ryan and Enzo while the coward hung back.

Ryan ducked, missing a wild swing, and then sent a hard elbow to one guy's face just before side kicking the second guy, sending him flying.

I'd never been so up close and personal to a fight before, and I never wanted one to be over me, that was for sure.

Enzo was busy destroying the three men that had come for him. I wasn't sure who to focus on. Ryan or him.

So many punches. Kicks. So much violence.

I startled when one guy's cheek smashed into the window and he slid down the truck, leaving a trail of blood on the glass.

Ryan was breathing hard, a fierce intensity in his eyes when our gazes momentarily met in the window.

“Ryan,” I cried at the sight of the original asshole charging him with the knife.

He spun around and shifted to the side, knocking the knife loose and doubled the guy over in one fast movement. Ryan was quick and efficient with each punch, elbow, and kick he delivered.

The kid from the bar started screaming when Ryan twisted his arm back. Ryan took a knee, forcing the kid to the ground, and shoved his face against the concrete with his other hand.

“I've been busy fighting overseas to deal with the War on Terror,” Ryan seethed, “but it looks like there's a war that needs fighting back home.” He continued twisting his arm, but not quite breaking it. “A woman can't dance without someone bothering her. Can't go for a run with both air pods without worrying someone might creep up on her.”

I looked back over at Maria, whose attention was fixed on Enzo kicking ass. “Enzo.” I smacked my palm against the

glass, terrified he'd kill the guy he was pummeling.

Ryan looked up at the sound of my hand thudding against the window. Winded, he let go of the guy and stood.

But ... oh shit.

I'd distracted him, and one of the guys had retrieved the pipe he'd dropped in the midst of the chaos.

I yelled out in warning, and Ryan turned just as the object connected with the side of his head.

Ryan shook it off, and then snatched it from the guy, chucked it, and flipped the attacker, laying him flat on his back.

"Enzo," Ryan snapped out. "You're going to kill him. Stop." He went over and grabbed Enzo's arm, but Enzo flung his arm defensively, nearly hitting Ryan.

Ryan surrendered his palms, a reminder he wasn't the enemy.

Enzo's attention shifted a moment later, and I followed his eyes to see the elevator door opening. Two women screamed at the sight and immediately backed into the elevator, and the doors shut.

Assuming the men on the ground were no longer a threat, and probably never were, I exited the truck and rushed to Ryan's side. "Enzo, please. They'll call the cops. You shouldn't be here."

Enzo let go of the guy on the ground and stood tall, his eyes going to his bloody knuckles as if finally realizing he'd nearly taken a life.

Ryan faced me, his breathing ragged, and I noticed the cut over his eye from the pipe. A trickle of blood ran down the side of his face from the wound. "Natalia, are you okay?"

I frowned, worried about his head. "Are *you* okay?"

"Yeah." Ryan nodded, then sidestepped me and crouched alongside the main perpetrator who was still struggling to

stand. “Keep your hands to yourself from now on. Understood?”

The guy jerked his chin my way, his teeth covered in blood when he hissed, “War on Terror, huh? Sounds like you’re some psycho vet who needs his head checked. Kiss my ass.”

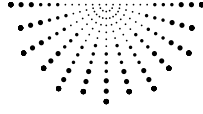
Anger fueling my bravery, I started toward him, ready to knock him out myself, but Ryan was back on his feet and blocking my path. “Easy,” he said, eyes on me. “It’s okay. I got this.” He blocked my body with his, then took out his phone and snapped a picture of him. “For target practice,” he gritted out. “And to track you down from time to time to ensure you’re behaving.”

Ryan fisted the man’s shirt, urging him to stand, and silently stared him down in warning.

“Yeah, okay ...” the guy cried, probably pissing his pants right about now.

And then Enzo joined Ryan and seethed, “Or maybe I just cut your hands off now so there’s no risk of you ever touching another woman again?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



RYAN

“I’M CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR HEAD.” NATALIA WORRIEDLY brushed her fingers at my temple as I drove.

Stupidly, I flinched at the contact, and she pulled her hand away. She’d grabbed a few Band-Aids from my first aid kit once we left the garage and covered the open wound on my bloody forehead. *My little nurse.* “I’m okay.”

I wouldn’t be okay if Mom was awake when we returned, though. I didn’t need her seeing the stains on my shirt and trying to lie my way out of it. The welt on my head would make it clear those were blood stains not red wine. I also needed to clean the side of my truck that had blood smeared on it from when I’d slammed someone’s face against the window.

“I thought you couldn’t hit your head again. Are you certain you’ll be okay?”

You’re not going to let this go, are you? I shot her a quick look, clutching the wheel a bit too firmly, anger still coursing through me at the fact we’d been jumped by those punk-ass kids. She could’ve been hurt. “I promise I’ll be fine. But Enzo ... what’s his deal?” There was more to his story. There had to be. She hadn’t wanted the police showing up with Enzo there and that screamed red flag in my book.

Natalia fidgeted with the hem of her short black dress and I fought to keep my attention on the road.

Between Natalia, the adrenaline from the fight, and my anger at those assholes, I was wound tight and needed a

release of some kind soon.

I reached over and set my palm on her hand, needing her to at least stop touching her dress and legs. We didn't need to add an accident to our list of crazy shit that happened tonight.

As it was, I was on the verge of doing the one crazy thing I knew would release all the pent-up energy—pull over, shift my seat back as far as it'd go, and haul Natalia onto my lap.

“Tell me,” I hissed, nervous at the idea Natalia possibly had a criminal cooking in her kitchen.

“Back in New York ... um ...”

“If you tell me his family is mafia, I will pull this truck over. So help me,” I warned, and let go of her hand.

“Fine, I won't tell you anything.” There was a touch of defiance in her tone. “And who I hang out with isn't your business, by the way.”

Damnit.

I wanted to pull over all right. And kiss that sassy mouth of hers.

My free hand tightened on my leg as I considered what to do with this new information. I had to deal with the fact my brother was in a mess, and now Natalia had someone with possible ties to the mafia as her head chef. I could only handle so much.

“How?” I barked out. “How in the hell did *you* become friends with someone like *him*? You're as pure as pure can be.”

“Pure, huh?”

I felt her eyes drilling through me, and when I glanced at her, her arms were defiantly folded across her chest. *So sassy.*

“Yes, pure. Innocent.” I faced the road again. “Sweet when you're not being a brat.”

“Brat? Really? You're the one who has been a notorious jackass to me over the years, or have you forgotten? Maybe

Enzo's background is unique, but he's never been an asshole to me for no damn reason."

I swerved onto the shoulder of the highway, causing Natalia to grab the oh-shit handle, and parked. She was breathing hard as I unbuckled and faced her.

It was taking all of my restraint not to reach for her right then and there.

"The only way I could survive being around you in the last decade was by being an asshole," I shared, my tone dropping low with her green eyes on me. "Don't you get it?"

She studied me, fire in her gaze. She was ready to fight. "No, I don't," she returned, the tremble in her tone betraying the attitude she was fighting to maintain.

I closed my eyes and tried to rein in the words and emotions I'd been holding back for years.

Fuck it.

Expelling a hard breath through my nose, I opened my eyes and fixed her with a hard stare. "Then allow me to spell it out for you. The only way I could refrain from taking you over my knee, and swatting that ass for having a smart mouth, was to be a jerk," I revealed. "I had to act like I hated you, otherwise, we would've fucked so damn hard, your pussy would have been swollen for days," I growled out the messy truth.

"That confident I would have been up for that, huh?" she shot back with her typical defiant flair.

But when my focus fell to her knees parting at my words, finding her trying to hide a squirm on the seat in reaction to what I'd said ... there was the answer. "Hell yes, sweetheart."

Her slender fingers slid across her collarbone like a seductive tease when my eyes returned to hers. Wetting her lips now, I realized I was more than likely losing my mind to share the truth right there, but ...

I wanted her. Always had. Always would. That was the only real truth I knew.

“What are you doing?” I asked as Natalia unbuckled, and then her hands went to her thighs, and she slowly bunched up the fabric to reveal her panties.

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but there wasn't enough light to make out the color. My guess? Black. Probably lace.

“Natalia,” I warned, the pain in my pants now far more severe than the pain in my head.

She looked up at me, startled and wide eyed, like she'd been caught doing something she didn't think I'd see. But she didn't stop either, just held my eyes as she whispered, “I just ...”

She was feeling what I called “the rush”—worked up and in need of expending the leftover energy post-fight. Or a near-death experience, in many cases for me in the past.

But yeah, I'd also just confessed the truth to her, too, so ...

Natalia quietly reached for my hand, and I couldn't tear my focus away from her legs, not if my life depended on it.

When she slipped my hand between her warm thighs and murmured, “Touch me,” I about came in my pants. In my defense, it was Natalia. The woman I'd spent a decade thinking about while beating off, only to feel like a horrible human being for it after. “If you don't, I'll do it myself.”

My hand remained still between her silky thighs, mere inches from her panties. She urged it closer to her sex, and my last shred of resistance completely dissolved.

I turned in my seat for better access and hooked her panties with my finger, shifting them to the side and then swiped the pad of my thumb over her sex.

She. Was. *Soaked*.

My breath hitched at the little sounds coming from her lips, and I lifted my eyes to her face. Her attention was laser-focused between her thighs. She covered my hand with hers, urging me to keep touching her.

We were on the shoulder of the highway. Anyone could pull over and check on us at any moment. But to hell with it. I was going to get this woman off.

She kept her hand on mine as I thrummed her clit, then she arched against my palm and cried when I penetrated her with two fingers.

Watching her lips part, seeing her small gasps of breaths as I touched her was intoxicating.

I set the heel of my free hand over my crotch, the discomfort there nearing agony as I fingered her tight, wet sex. She continued to buck and move against my hand. Visions of her letting loose and riding my cock came to mind.

So. Damn. Hot.

I leaned farther over, snatching her chin with my free hand as she kept grinding against my rough palm, and sucked her bottom lip.

I kissed her softly at first, moving my hand behind her neck to pull her closer. Then I deepened the kiss, turning it into something erotic. She moaned into my mouth, coming hard, her pussy clenching tightly around my fingers.

Fuck me.

When I finally eased my hand from between her thighs, she was panting and blinked as if in shock as she began to get her bearings back.

“Buckle up,” I gruffly said. “I need to get you home.” I straightened in my seat, surprised at what just went down. I’d have a lot to unpack later, but for now I needed to get us off the side of the road. And her out of my truck.

“I have to ask you something first.” She put her hand on my arm, and I paused from pulling back onto the road. “The fight tonight made me realize the lengths you’ll go to protect those you care about.” I knew exactly what was coming. Because I knew her. I really did. I didn’t need to hide behind my Navy training anymore to explain why I knew her so well.

I tensed as I waited for her question.

“You need the money for Anthony, don’t you? He’s the one you’re trying to protect. I don’t know why it took me until now to realize that.”

I nodded hesitantly. The events of the night were setting in like a choke hold around my neck. I didn’t look at her when I gritted out, “Like I said earlier ... my life is complicated.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



RYAN

JOLTING AWAKE, I DISCOVERED MY SHEETS STREWN AT THE bottom of the bed with my hand atop my bare chest. I was covered in sweat, and I sucked in several sharp breaths to calm my erratic breathing. *Damn, my head is pounding.*

The nightmare I'd fought like hell to wake from had been brutal, and now, I was getting my ass kicked by the painful memories it triggered.

It'd been years since I had revisited my time in the SEALs in such a horrific dream.

Sitting up, I rested my forehead in my hand, remembering the other reason my head was hurting. The fight last night. The hit I'd taken above my eye by a pipe had to be the leading contributor to the shit show of a dream I'd just had.

I grabbed a bottle of water I kept by the bed, sucked it dry, then did my best to stand. I had to remind myself I wasn't in that dream anymore. The blast that had blown me into the air, nearly ripping my limbs from my body, was a shadow of a memory within my sleeping mind.

In nothing but my boxer briefs, I walked over to the window and opened the curtains, allowing the light in. Damn, what time was it? I squinted as I focused in on my watch, still on my wrist from yesterday. It was zero nine hundred. When was the last time I'd slept in that late?

Natalia had been worried about my head last night, and I'd assumed I'd be fine—I'd taken worse. But the throbbing pain in my temple and ringing in my ear ... not great signs.

After a quick shower, I checked the purple lump at my temple. There was a small gash in the middle of the swollen area. I covered it with a Band-Aid, hoping my mom wouldn't freak when I went downstairs.

I thought back to the fight last night as I went into my bedroom to call Noah, then shared the ridiculous story with him when he picked up.

“Not to make light of what happened, but it sounds like those punks thought it was an audition for *Cobra Kai*.”

I laughed. “That karate show on Netflix?” I may have seen a few episodes. “Dad had us watch *Karate Kid* when Anthony and I were old enough to appreciate it in the nineties.” If I ever had boys, I'd do the same. *If ... fucking if.*

“At least it sounds like those guys won't be touching another woman again.”

“I sure as hell hope not.” Enzo hadn't seemed convinced last night. But now I wasn't so sure what to think about him, either.

“I can't even wrap my head around what my life will be like when my daughter starts dating.”

“Yeah, I ...” *Can't imagine.*

“But I assume you're calling for another reason?”

“Right.” I regained my focus. “I started thinking about Anthony and this mess. I still haven't heard from him yet like they said I would, and something is just bugging me about this whole thing.”

“You think there's more to the story?”

“Maybe. I want to know what my brother was up to before he wound up on house arrest with a Canadian businessman in Ibiza.” I hated that I didn't trust my brother, but with his history, it was hard to know what to think. “I checked his Instagram. He was in Monte Carlo last week before he went MIA online.”

“Casino-central.”

“Can your team cross-reference his social media pics and pull CCTV footage in the areas he visited in Monaco? I’d like to know who exactly he was hanging out with. And who he owed money to before the Canadian bought up his debt.”

“Roger that,” Noah replied. “Might take a few days to get everything you need. Our technology over in New York is decent, but Owen’s teammates have access to some better stuff. They’re on—”

“You mean Bravo Team?”

“Right.” I could hear his smile slide through the phone. “Anyways. Hang tight. When I know something, you will. And you’re still going through with the plan to get the money from your uncle, right?”

I hung my head at his words. Fake dating Calista felt like the nuclear option at this point. Especially after what happened with Natalia last night.

“I’ll hold the course for now. Unless something changes, I’ll fly to Italy as planned on Friday.” I looked over at my window and set my hand over my mouth, remembering the feel of Natalia’s lips against mine. I swallowed a groan at the memory of her bucking her pussy against my hand.

Last night had been a surprise in more ways than one.

I’d told her the truth I’d harbored for years. And her reaction was to have me touch her. My control had its limits. And it’d been exceeded.

“I know this isn’t an easy situation for you, but I suppose no family’s perfect, right? And if we don’t protect those we love, who will?”

“Yeah,” I agreed with a heavy sigh. “But at what point does the cost of helping become too great?” After hearing chatter downstairs, I quickly ended the call and headed that direction.

Once in the kitchen, I found my mother trying to force-feed Enzo a piece of her homemade bread.

Enzo caught my eyes, and I swiped a hand under my chin, letting him know the bread was *non buono*.

Mom was a lot of things. Chef wasn't one of them. And considering that was exactly Enzo's job, he didn't need to suffer through a bite of her food.

I really wanted to dislike the guy. But I knew Natalia cared about him, and he'd had my back in the parking lot last night, so I needed to hear his side of things before I made up my mind about him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"Thought we could talk out back?" He tipped his head toward the yard. "How's your head?"

Shit. About that ...

Mom lowered the bread from Enzo's face and turned.

"He walked right into a pole. Distracted by looking down at his phone," Enzo spoke up before I had a chance, a touch of humor in his tone. "You'd think he'd have better navigational skills for a soldier."

"Sailor," I said, knowing he was just screwing with me.

"Semantics." He winked.

"You need to be careful with that head of yours." Mom grimaced when her eyes fell to my knuckles. I'd forgotten my hands looked a little rough post-fight.

The pole story was officially a bust. She was smart enough to know better.

"Ryan." She sighed, then focused her attention back on Enzo. She shoved the plate against his chest, determined for him to take it. At least she wasn't going to pepper me with questions. That was something.

"I'll, um, have a bite while I'm out back talking to your son." As Enzo smiled and accepted it, Mom dropped her eyes to the ink on his arms. There was quite a lot of it, similar to my brother's forearms. Of course, Anthony didn't have fire, skulls, and what looked like death on his body.

And now I had to wonder what Enzo's kill count was. Hopefully not as high as mine since I'd always been in kill-or-be-killed situations, fighting with Uncle Sam's blessing.

Yeah, Enzo *was* right. We did need to talk. He was around Natalia way too much, and I needed some insight into his backstory.

Once we escaped Mom's kitchen and were at a safe distance from the house, he said, "I want the photo of that dirtbag you took with your phone last night."

"*That's* why you're here? Really?" I shook my head.

He closed the distance between us and seethed, "I need to make sure he truly understands what will happen if he ever touches another woman again. Keep him on a short leash."

"Dial it down." I cocked my head. "I think he knows. But since you're here, I'd like some answers. What's the son of some crime family doing down in Charlotte working in a kitchen?"

Enzo cracked an unexpected smile. "I know that's not what Natalia told you."

"She didn't have to." I slipped my hand around to my sore back, aching from taking a few body shots from that karate punk.

"My family's not mafia." He went to the outdoor trash can near the pool and tossed the bread and paper plate in there before returning. His gaze flicked over to Natalia's home, focusing on the only window on the second floor. Hopefully she didn't see us talking.

"Organized crime, then," I jabbed back with a smirk. "Semantics." I needed Advil to deal with both him and my head pain. "I don't want you near her if you're dangerous. What happens if someone from your past comes after her because of you, and I'm already gone? Not here to keep her safe."

"Gone?" The soft voice behind me sent chills creeping up my spine.

Natalia got the drop on me yet again, and Enzo didn't warn me she was coming. *Asshole.*

I slowly turned to see Natalia standing near the gate armed with two mugs of coffee, presumably for the both of us. She stalked closer, frowning.

"Here." She shoved the cup at my chest, nearly spilling it on me. *If looks could kill.* "Enzo stopped by my house. Told me he'd be here," she explained while handing him a cup as well, much more gently. "I didn't think it was a good idea for you two to be left alone." She pointed to my house. "Your mom wouldn't appreciate getting blood on her patio."

I resisted the urge to be childish and remark it wouldn't be my blood.

The crazy thing? Just last night, Enzo and I had grabbed a beer at a local bar, and I'd thought he was a stand-up guy. Then the dreaded "need to get laid" text had appeared on my phone, and we wound up fighting alongside each other less than an hour later.

"He thinks I'm mafioso," Enzo said with a humorless laugh, his eyes holding mine in a predatory stare as he lifted the mug to his lips.

"Walks like a duck. Talks like a duck." I shrugged and stuffed a hand into my jeans pocket, staring him right back down while sipping my coffee.

I forced my gaze away from him a moment later to see Natalia shaking her head, her eyes volleying back and forth between the two of us. She had her hair in a messy bun. No makeup. A white tee and high-waisted jeans that had holes in the knees. Damn adorable, and it was hard to hold a straight face right now. To not remember how her lips felt, or the way her pussy responded to my touch.

At least you have a bra on under that tee.

Her gaze lowered to her chest as if reading my mind, and I didn't miss the slight twitch of her lips.

Hopefully, she was distracted enough to forget my "gone" comment for now.

“He’s not mafia,” Natalia finally broke the silence. “I trust him. You can trust him.” She let go of a frustrated breath. “Our dads knew each other back in Sicily. Enzo’s family lives in New York, and when I was living there for a bit, Enzo watched over me. Kept me safe.”

“Yeah, assholes gravitate toward this woman,” Enzo casually said as he shrugged one shoulder. I took one step toward him, my jaw tightening at the implication in his eye contact.

“Oh, I’m an asshole now? You didn’t have a problem with me last night.” Of course, who was I to talk? *I* didn’t have a problem with Enzo last night. Plus, I had been the king of assholes over the years, my self-defense mechanism to handle being around Natalia, especially when she was dating my brother.

Natalia moved in between us and outstretched her arms. “You two are so alike it’s scary.” She turned her cheek to peer at me.

“We’re nothing alike.” I scowled.

I had every intention of calling Noah back and asking for another favor. I needed him to look into Enzo. Get his story since no one was eager to give it to me.

“The only difference between you two,” Natalia revealed in a steady but sharp voice, “is not every life he took was legal.”

“Natalia,” Enzo said under his breath because she’d just admitted he was a murderer. I wondered if he would try to deny it, but I didn’t have to wait long when he looked at me and barked out, “But it was always justified.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



NATALIA

“ARE THE BOYS GOING TO PLAY NICE?” MARIA WAS ON MY bed, holding my pillow to her chest with one hand and a bottle of “liquid IV” in the other, trying to chase away her hangover headache. Chiara was taking her morning nap, but Maria and my parents planned to take her to the park as soon as she woke up, which was why Maria needed to shake the hangover.

“Not sure if ‘nice’ is the right word.” I peeked back out my window, catching sight of Laura’s Ford Explorer backing up. Ryan’s truck was still there, but Enzo had already left.

“Honestly, I thought Enzo was going to kill those guys last night,” Maria said. She had no clue about Enzo’s past, which was how he wanted it to remain. “Is it weird that I found it kind of sexy how Enzo handled those men?”

I faced her, surprised at my innocent sister’s words.

“I almost forgot Ryan wasn’t the only vet there last night,” she went on.

I probably should’ve mentioned that to Ryan, but I knew how resistant Enzo was to anyone sharing his past. Plus, it wasn’t my story to tell. Enzo was likely already pissed I’d shared what I had, and Ryan would assume he was some kind of murderer. I’d need to do damage control at some point, but there was already so much on my plate. One problem at a time.

Maria set the bottle on the table by the bed and pointed to her forearm. “See, I have chills just from thinking about it

again. Enzo going all alpha like that ... Am I right, or is there something seriously wrong with me?"

"You're just confused. Hurt from what you learned about Thomas."

"God, you should've seen how angry Enzo was last night after he found out about Thomas's cheating." Her lips twitched into an unexpected smile. "Of course, you were busy making out with the boy next door." She freed the pillow and shifted to her knees. "I need details."

I set my back to the wall and folded my arms, remembering the kiss last night. And then the insanely hot moment in his truck after we were attacked. *I* was the crazy one, not Maria.

"Come on, I need a distraction from the fact that the father of my child is a world-class dick, and I should have seen this coming."

At her words, I went to sit by her. "I'm so sorry." I reached for her hand and squeezed. "He never deserved you."

"He never let me work. It's been ages. What do I do now?" Her dark brows slanted. "Maybe I can help out at the restaurant until I figure things out?"

And I'd love nothing more than that. But how could I tell her I couldn't afford to pay her? "You'll get through this," I deflected.

"But seriously, please tell me about Ryan. Distract me."

I released her hand and urged her to drink up. "I don't know how it happened. It just did."

"And it was amazing, right?" She grinned.

"I've never been kissed like that before, and I have no clue how to settle for anything less than that from now on."

"Who says you have to settle for less?" She took another big gulp of her drink. "I get that it's awkward. And I remember what I said to you about Ryan and Calista. But that's different."

My stomach grumbled at her words, and not from hunger. “Why would it be different? If anything, wouldn’t it be worse?” I closed my eyes, remembering his words last night. “The man hates the smell of my lavender soap because it reminds him of when I was with Anthony. I can’t imagine if we were to try and do more—what else might trigger him? Have him remembering the fact his brother had sex with me?”

“It’s not an easy situation. But, what if he’s the one you were always meant to be with? And Anthony was just the detour to get you to each other. Maybe it wasn’t your time back then. He was in the Navy, and you were focusing on your career.”

And now Anthony’s brought us back together again. I kept that thought to myself. Not that I knew the actual reason Anthony was in trouble. Ryan was acting like Fort Knox when it came to sharing information.

“I just wish there’d never been an Anthony-detour in the first place. I don’t even know why we dated.”

“Mom, that’s why. Same reason I dated Thomas.” Maria rolled her eyes. “Always setting us up.”

“Clearly she doesn’t know our taste in men,” I finished for her, something Ryan had realized, too. “It looks like you’re actually attracted to bad boys.” Not that I considered Enzo to be one, but he’d had his dark moments before moving to Charlotte.

“Mm. I don’t know. From where I stand, Enzo and Ryan are the good guys who protected us. Thomas and Anthony are the ones that caused us pain. *They’re* the bad guys.”

I hadn’t told her about Anthony’s cheating, not in light of the Thomas news. I wasn’t sure if it mattered, though. “That’s the thing, Anthony didn’t hurt me. Believe it or not, I felt relieved when it was over.” I swallowed. “But Ryan ...” My hand went to my mouth at the realization my lower lip was trembling.

“I never knew you had feelings for Ryan. You hid it well. But it’s obvious now.” Maria scooted closer. “It sounds like

you went with the safe choice in your twenties. You dated men you knew you'd never love. And kept the only man you cared about at a safe distance."

I stood, recalling something Ryan had said to me yesterday about why he'd never had a serious relationship. He didn't want to commit to someone he knew he could never love.

And I *only* dated men I knew I couldn't love. Like Anthony.

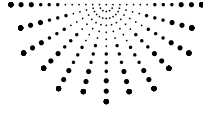
But what'd that mean for us?

My hand went to my stomach as pain twisted into a knot there.

It was too early, and too much had happened to handle any possible epiphanies.

"Well, you're a grown-ass woman now," Maria went on. "A strong, capable woman. If I can start all over again as a single mom with hardly any work experience, you can go after what you want, too." Her gaze moved over my shoulder to the window. "And also, I think I have a better idea for the tickets to the Maddox event tomorrow. One that doesn't involve Calista."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



NATALIA

“NOAH, I’M GOING TO NEED TO CALL YOU BACK.” RYAN lowered the phone from his ear, a worried look in his eyes. “I thought you canceled yoga. You need a ride somewhere else?”

Not waiting for an invitation, I walked inside his house and sidestepped him. “How long will your mom be gone?”

He closed the door and pocketed his cell phone. “She’s playing cards with some friends in another neighborhood. She’ll be gone all day.” He looked at me and frowned. “Why?”

“Okay, good. Because we need to talk.” I reached for his forehead to check the wound, which was covered with a new Band-Aid. “How’s your head? It looks bad under there. Like someone—”

“Hit me with a pipe?” he finished for me, and I nodded. “Just took some Advil an hour ago. I’m fine now. Don’t worry.” Was he still pissed about the comment I left hanging in the air? The one where I said Enzo had taken a life outside of the law?

“You sure you’re okay?” I pressed. Something in my gut told me he was lying. With his history, how could I not worry?

He removed my hand from his forehead. “I’d be better if you told me Enzo’s deal.”

“That’s a story for another day.” I shrugged.

“Today looks to be as good a day as any. How about now?”

My shoulders fell. I had to give him something. It was only fair. “Enzo’s not who you think. He served like you, but then he had a rough time afterward,” I finally admitted.

“How’d I not know that until now? Is he ashamed of his service? My mom never mentioned it, surely your mom would’ve told her, and—”

“His service reminds him of a dark time in his life. Ultimately, it’s his story to tell.” I shook my head. “I’m not here to talk about him right now.” My gaze shot to the stairs. “But I do want to talk about something else in private.”

“It’s plenty private here.” He opened his palms. “We’re alone.”

“Yeah, but I’d rather talk in your bedroom.” I turned and started for the stairs, taking them quickly knowing he’d be right behind me.

“Natalia, get your ass back down here,” he demanded.

Ignoring him, I made my way to his bedroom and let go of a heavy sigh when I spotted his bed. Pulling my thoughts back together, I spun around to find him leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, a dark look in his eyes.

“You make me crazy.”

I sat on his bed and smiled. “Not hard to do.”

“You’re right about that.” His brows slanted. “How’s your sister coping with everything?”

“Hmm. The cheating or the attack?”

“Both.”

I planted my hands next to me on the cushy bed, searching for the strength to get through the conversation I’d spent an hour preparing for after Maria left for the park. “Maria’s tough. It’ll probably take her a minute to get her bearings, but she’ll be okay. As for the fight, I think she was more surprised than scared at how fast y’all took down those men.”

“The only thing surprising about last night was the fact Enzo wasn’t packing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Anyways, Maria volunteered to drive me to and from work tonight, so you don’t need to. She wants to hang out at the restaurant to help take her mind off everything.”

“Her car is in the city. Your parents taking her to get it?”

“Yeah, after they leave the park.”

“Well, I’m still going to follow you home tonight. I don’t want you going into the parking lot alone at night.”

I thought back to last night, to the words Ryan had said to the guy. A woman should be allowed to live freely without fear of a man hurting her. Chills crashed over my skin at the reminder that wasn’t always the case. It’d take a lot more men like Ryan raising boys to be the men we needed in life to change things.

Kids? Do you even want kids? “I’m not going to get jumped again. You need to relax.”

“What? I don’t look relaxed,” he tossed out sarcastically. “And do you really need to sit on my bed?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re awfully hospitable.”

“Darlin’, you’re on my bed in my room when less than twelve hours ago you slid your dress up and set my hand between your thighs,” he murmured darkly. “And right now would be a bad time for my control to snap and remove those jeans so I can have a look at you in the daylight. So, yeah, the foyer downstairs is a much better place for us to talk.”

I pinned my knees together at his words despite the fact I wanted to do the opposite. I wanted to spread my legs for this man, wanted him to lose all self-control and do more than just look at me.

Also ...

Darlin’? Holy hell.

He’d never called me *that* before. That kiss of Southern to his words just now when I hadn’t heard it from him in so long—my heart couldn’t take much more.

“I know the timing is bad, but that’s why I thought it’d be better to do it here,” I admitted.

“Define ‘it.’”

“Talk,” I clarified, even if that was now the last thing on my mind. “I want to know what’s really going on. Before I get more involved, I—”

“You’re not getting more involved.” He straightened and dropped his arms, but he only stepped just inside the doorway. He really was worried about being close to me in his bedroom, wasn’t he?

How close is your control to snapping? I’d tested his limits last night, boldly opening my legs for him, and he’d accepted my invitation straight away.

“I want to help you.” I studied the frames on his dresser, and I knew Ryan followed my focus. I could feel the shift in energy. “Anthony’s obviously in serious trouble if you need close to a million dollars to help him. What’d he do?”

“It doesn’t matter. And honestly, the less you know, the better. Because you’re not getting any more involved than you already are. And I’m sorry you were ever pulled into this in the first place. That was my mistake.”

I tore my attention back to him, still standing rigidly just inside the door. “I’ve known Anthony nearly my whole life. He might have made some questionable life choices, but I don’t want anything happening to him.” I forced myself to stand. “You lost your father. You can’t lose your brother, too.”

Ryan closed his eyes and bowed his head. “I don’t know if Dad’s heart attack caused the car accident, or the accident caused the heart attack.” His hand at his side turned into a fist. “I guess, at this point, it doesn’t matter. I couldn’t save him. And I couldn’t save the guys I lost who I served with, either.” His tone grew deeper. Rougher. Inflicted by painful memories. My heart hurt for him, for the losses he’d suffered, and the guilt he so obviously still felt. “I’ve lost a lot of people.” He slowly parted his lids, but his gaze wasn’t on me. He was

looking at one of the framed photos. “But I won’t let anything happen to Anthony, I promise.”

A promise to your father? “I know it wasn’t easy when he died. I mean, how could it be?” I wasn’t sure if this was the conversation we were supposed to be having, but it definitely felt like the one we were meant to ... “You were nineteen, and you became the man of the house. That’s a big responsibility. Anthony was only thirteen, and—”

“And I wasn’t there for him like I should have been. Or there for Mom. So no, I wasn’t the man of anything,” he said in a low, regretful tone. Not angry at me. Just himself from the sounds of it.

“You had just joined the Navy. You couldn’t quit like a normal job.” I stood and approached him, realizing he’d been holding this guilt on his shoulders for far too long. “But you were always there for both of them whenever you physically could be,” I reminded him.

“If I’d been home to help out, maybe Anthony wouldn’t have become such a fuckup.” He tossed a hand in the air.

Will Anthony always come between us? I blew out a harsh breath, one that physically made my lungs hurt.

“He became a professional hockey player. He followed his dreams. That’s a success story, right?”

Ryan peered at me, frowning. “And what about his gambling addiction? The cheating?”

I knew Anthony loved to gamble, but had he really been addicted? I guess I never really knew him. “He is who he is, and you can’t keep taking the blame for the choices he’s made. He’s an adult. And it’s not fair to you.”

“I should’ve done better. Dad would’ve done better.” His voice cracked that time. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

I placed my hand on his chest, and he only lowered his eyes to where I touched him. “But you do want to help your brother, right?” And now I had to assume whatever trouble Anthony had found himself in had to do with gambling. He owed someone nearly a million dollars.

“Of course, and I will. I’m ... trying to do this the civil way, at least.”

“As opposed to?” I thought back to last night. To how easily he’d taken those men down in the garage. “Ah, violence?”

His mouth tightened, and he nodded.

“And after you pay off this, um, debt for him—what then? What’s to stop him from getting in more trouble?”

“I’ll get him help. Therapy or something.” He pulled his eyes from my hand to meet my gaze. “And if he falls off the wagon, I’ll be there to catch him. Like always.”

He was as loyal as loyal could be. Maybe too loyal. Guilt prevented him from seeing the downside to continually helping Anthony jam after jam. But I knew he had to do it. He wouldn’t allow himself to fail his brother. And I couldn’t allow him to put his plans in jeopardy with the wrong fake relationship.

“Then there’s too much at stake for you to choose Calista as your girlfriend. You need someone you can trust. Someone who knows you. Really knows you,” I revealed the reason I came to his house in the first place. *And here goes.* “Fake date me. Not Calista.”

I swore the man’s blood drained from his face, and he went pale. “Are you out of your mind? We’re *not* fake dating.”

“You’re telling me the thought of us dating never crossed your mind when you pitched the request for me to be your own personal Tinder?”

“Not happening,” he gritted out, ignoring my question.

I’ll do the unthinkable, then ... I didn’t want to go for what I hoped would be the kill shot, but he wasn’t giving me a choice. “I’ll accept the *loan* from you in exchange for the fake dating thing.”

“You’ll accept the money from me anyway. *My* money. From my bank account. Not my uncle’s cash.” He brought his face closer, eyes holding mine like a challenge. “And, Talia,

the only thing that will ever be fake between us is our hate for one another. Nothing else.”

“Ryan, please.”

“No,” he snapped out. “I will not involve you any further.”

“Well, too bad, because I don’t want you dating her,” I rushed out the other side of the story, the part I’d been trying to keep trapped behind my stubborn lips. “I can’t handle that.”

I started to pull my hand away, pissed off at his stubbornness and my inability to keep my thoughts to myself. He closed his hand around my wrist, and the next thing I knew, he had my back to the wall by the dresser, and I was imprisoned by his frame.

He was breathing hard as he flattened his palms on the wall alongside my face, his chest nearly brushing my body. “I told you if dating her was a problem, I wouldn’t do it. I’d find someone else.”

“This isn’t about her and Anthony. It’s about you,” I whispered. “I don’t want you ‘dating’ anyone else.” When he remained quiet, silently studying me, I went on, “Just imagine for one second it was me that’d be going to Italy with another man. Playing his fake girlfriend. How would you feel?”

Ryan angled his head, his eyes doing that “darkening” thing that was intimidating and sexy as hell.

“I wouldn’t let that happen.” His eyes moved to my mouth again. It felt as if he was doing everything in his power not to crush his lips over mine. Like he thought an angry, possessive kiss would let me know his words were facts, carved in stone.

“You’re a hypocrite, then,” I said after I freed a sharp breath from my tight chest.

“I’m fine with that,” he murmured. I lifted my hands between our bodies and set my palms on his chest, prepared to shove. But then he said, “Fine, I won’t date her or *anyone* if it bothers you.” His brows relaxed and so did his shoulders. “I’ll find another way to get the money.”

My body went limp at his surrender. Then the guilt took over. “And if you can’t?” I shook my head. “No, I won’t let you risk Anthony’s life because I don’t want you dating someone else.”

“*Fake* dating.” And with that, he pushed away from the wall and turned, clawing his big hands through his dark locks.

I took a few seconds to process everything, then pleaded, “Please, just think about it. Enzo’s going to escort Maria to the party tomorrow. She doesn’t want to be alone.” I fidgeted with the hem of my white tee. “I’d just not go, but I was hoping to talk to Kate Maddox. I was thinking about trying my hand at the catering business. And since she runs an event planning company, I thought it’d make sense for me to, at least, introduce myself.”

Ryan went still at my words, but he didn’t turn.

“It’s a long shot, I know. And I don’t plan to pitch to her at the party, that’d be rude. But any face-to-face time might help down the road if I decide to try and save my restaurant by catering.” That was one of the main reasons why Enzo and I had planned to go to the party in the first place once Maria offered the free tickets.

“Honestly, I forgot all about the party after everything that happened. Never got a costume,” he remarked in a low voice, slowly facing me. “This is *not* me saying yes to fake dating you. It’s a no to Calista, though.” He paused. “And a yes to us going to the party together. Not sure if you were actually asking, but tough shit, I’m your plus-one. I don’t want you going by yourself.”

“Enzo will still be there. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Hell, Enzo being there is one reason I *should* go. Unless you want to enlighten me now as to why I shouldn’t worry?” He stalked over to his dresser and began turning his framed photos to face the wall.

“What are you doing?”

“You wanted privacy.” He jerked a thumb toward the photos. “Doesn’t feel so private with eyes on us.”

My skin pebbled as I tried to decipher what he was suggesting. He erased the space between us and held my cheek before his hand slid into my hair to hold the back of my head.

“What are you doing?” I repeated, my voice barely a whisper as I tried to understand how we went from talking about his dad and his guilt about his brother to what seemed to be turning into a hot moment between us. Based on the last few days, he and I ran on two settings. Hot or cold. Like the weather. Arguing or nearly kissing. And, as of last night, we *had* finally kissed. And then some. Had we turned a corner?

“I’m just looking at you,” he said in a hoarse voice. “And promising you I’ll take care of you no matter what.” He let go of my head and dragged the pad of his thumb along my lower lip, tugging it down a bit. “You’re trembling.”

“I’m nervous,” I confessed.

“Why?” He cocked his head.

“Scared.” *Not for the reason you think.*

“You don’t need to be.” He traced the contour of my cheek with the back of his hand, and a quiet moment passed between us as we stared into each other’s eyes.

I looked over at the photos Ryan had turned, and it felt like the answer. His guilt and loyalty to his brother would stand in the way of his own happiness.

But I wasn’t ready to accept that bit of truth.

“Talía?”

Ryan’s voice drew my attention to him. “I turned those pictures for a reason. Privacy, remember?” He tipped his head, bringing his other hand to my face. He had my cheeks gently trapped between his palms. I focused on his lips as he whispered, “There are some lines I’m not sure I’m prepared to cross yet, but only you telling me no will stop me from tasting your mouth right now.”

And was I trembling again? I worked my eyes to meet his.

This was going to kill me.

But ...

I was determined.

“No.” At my response, he slowly released my cheeks and stepped back. “Come find me when you stop being so stubborn. Once you agree to let me help you by fake dating me, then you can have my mouth.” I worked my gaze lower to his crotch. “And anything else you may want from me.”

I found the courage to peer into his eyes as he bit out, “You’re playing dirty.” He smoothed a hand over his hard, bladed jawline.

“Dirty would’ve been coming over without a bra to negotiate.” I gulped as his eyes lowered to my breasts.

“You should go, darlin’.” A dark look crossed his face as he reached for his jeans and popped the button. “I’m planning to jerk off in my childhood bedroom for the first time in two decades. Because you make me ...”

“Crazy?” I swallowed. “With everything going on, are we insane to be thinking about sex?” My eyes remained boldly fixed on his crotch, and I remembered his naked body from that night three years ago as if it were yesterday.

“Maybe.” He sighed. “Probably.”

He palmed his dick over his jeans, and I clamped my thighs together, my panties becoming wetter by the second.

“Well, I’ll just be next door.” I tipped my head toward the window. “Touching myself, too.” My nipples were hard, and my body was coiled tight from the pressure of a much-needed release. I just wished he’d be the one to deliver it. At this point, I didn’t even care if it happened in one of our childhood bedrooms. “I’m going.”

His eyes narrowed. “By the way”—he scowled, and I smiled at how obviously fake it was—“I changed my mind.” He lifted his chin. “I do hate you.”

“Mmhmm. Sure you do,” I said as he pierced me with his intense gaze. “About as much as I hate you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



RYAN

RYAN: *IS PHONE SEX OFF-LIMITS, TOO?*

“Shit, damnit. Fuck.” I quickly deleted the message, realizing my nearly sent text would’ve gone to the group chat Natalia had created with Enzo. Yeah, that would’ve gone over real well with that man.

What in God’s name am I doing? Could I blame the whack to my head? At least the pain there had subsided and, hopefully, it wouldn’t come back.

But Natalia had been gone from my room for five minutes, and I already missed her.

My shoulders fell when I looked at the turned photos on my dresser. Would the guilt for wanting Natalia more than I wanted anything in my life—even being back on the Teams—ever go away?

My brother may have messed up with Natalia, but still, I knew she’d been the only woman he’d ever loved. And I’d never seen him so pissed at me when I demanded he tell her the truth about cheating or I would for him. He hadn’t spoken to me for six months after he’d taken the cowardly way out, lying to everyone for some payback.

It’d taken Mom bringing us back together to work things out. We’d put on a good front for her. All water under the bridge as far as she was concerned. In truth, things hadn’t been the same between us. I didn’t feel guilty for their breakup, but I did hate the strain it’d placed on our relationship.

And the fact of the matter was that I did feel guilty, but for an entirely different reason.

Because I'd been relieved he'd broken up with her. I knew I'd never be able to sit back and watch her marry Anthony and survive that. And that was selfish. Not the thing an older brother was supposed to do.

My brother and I had fallen for the same woman. Wasn't that some shit luck? I'd never stood a chance with her, and how could I? I hadn't tried. I'd barely been home while serving. Too busy dealing with war, violence, and dark shit. I wouldn't have wanted to put her through all that. *Yeah, keep using that excuse, dumbass.*

I thought back to what Dad used to say to us as kids. *We're dealt the cards we're dealt, and unless you're a cheat, you play the hand you have.* He'd been referring to both gambling and life. Sometimes, weren't they one and the same?

But my brother, he *was* a cheat. He'd always played dirty. On and off the ice. He'd lost the best thing that ever happened to him because of it, and it took him getting his ass in trouble for me to finally tell Natalia the truth.

My free hand was curled into a tight fist, my knuckles still a little raw, but I wasn't thinking about the fight last night. No, I was remembering the one and only time my hand had connected with my brother's jaw in that hotel room two and a half years ago.

"Screw it." *And screw you, Anthony.* I opened the correct text thread this time and messaged her.

Ryan: *Are you being a good girl? Or a bad one?*

I nervously tossed the phone on my bed and discarded my jeans and boxer briefs. Shirt, too.

Was the gorgeous woman next door in her bed, or maybe her shower, sliding a finger over her pussy the way I'd touched her last night? Would she make the same breathy moans when she played with her clit that she'd made for me?

My heartbeat went into overdrive at the text alert, and I grabbed the phone to read her message.

Natalia: *Define “good.” Define “bad.”*

I smiled. Of course that'd be her response. I sat on the bed, wishing she was on my lap right now, riding me. But damn, I did not want our first time—if there'd ever be a first—to be in my childhood bedroom. I felt bad enough I was sporting some massive wood in Mom's house. But I'd pretty much had blue balls since I saw Natalia alongside the road Wednesday night. No relief yet. And now it was Saturday. I must've enjoyed torturing myself.

Ryan: *Good: on your way back over here to let me handle your tension. Bad: touching your pussy.*

I reread my message, feeling insane, but sent it anyway.

I situated my back to my headboard and began stroking my rigid cock, memories from last night—that gorgeous woman's mouth on mine, the way she'd clenched around my fingers when she came—heating my body.

Natalia: *Very, very bad, then. I'm only in my white tee. No bra. No panties. In my bed.*

Of course she was only in that white tee. I cursed as I gripped myself even harder, feeling a little pressure and pain that time.

Natalia: *Ready to give in? I'm wet and waiting for you.*

This was self-imposed torture on my part.

Why not say yes? Because dating her to help Anthony felt all kinds of screwed up.

And how would I explain to my uncle that my girlfriend was my brother's ex? How the hell would my mom react? I couldn't tell her the truth, but how could I lie?

And then there was the part I'd yet to tell Natalia ... that I had to get down on one knee in Italy and ask for her hand in marriage.

Ryan: *You're making it very hard for me to say no.*

Natalia: *I make everything hard for you, remember? Well ... my hand is sliding under my tee now, and I'm cupping my*

breast, wishing it was your hand instead.

I slid the precum over the crown of my cock with my thumb and moved my hand up my shaft from root to tip, envisioning the scene. Her hand between her legs and the other on her tit. Her nipples erect, I'd tease each one between my teeth, relishing in the soft sounds of her moans.

We'd gone from zero to sixty since I'd arrived back home. Ten plus years of keeping my mouth shut about my feelings, and now we were swapping dirty messages.

Ryan: *And?*

Natalia: *You'll have to use your imagination for the rest. That's all I'm giving you.*

Ryan: *Mmmhm. How about you just be a good girl and get your sweet ass over here already.*

Natalia: *My ass isn't going anywhere, mister.*

I fisted my cock, sliding my hand up and down, my breathing turning ragged as I did as she requested and used my imagination. Fuck, I wanted her. It was torture not being able to bury my cock inside her. But she was digging her stubborn heels in, and I'd have to get creative.

Ryan: *If you were here, I'd lay you on my bed, and bury my face between your thighs. Stroke my tongue over your delectable pussy until you came. Or I could have you ride my face the way you rode my hand in the truck. Maybe have you on all fours with that "ass that's not going anywhere" up in the air so I could eat you out until you screamed my name. Really the options are limitless, don't you think?*

Dots appeared, then disappeared, and I smirked in satisfaction that I had her flustered.

Good.

She really was a brat.

But I wanted her to be my brat.

Natalia: *Welllll, thank you for that. I reached orgasmic bliss. And now I need to go shower because I smell like sex.*

I dropped the phone in frustration, then beat off like it was my first time. Too fast. Too hard. Out of control.

I grunted as I came all over my stomach, knowing the next time I found relief ... it sure as hell needed to be with the woman who had me wound up and tense in the first place.

* * *

“IF YOUR BROTHER WAS AT A CASINO IN MONTE CARLO LAST week, it had to be an underground one,” Noah informed me, not wasting time after I answered his call. “We hacked all available surveillance.”

I was in the parking lot of Talia’s Tuscan Grille, waiting for her to leave. I’d considered hanging out at the bar until close, but I wasn’t sure if I could face her in public after our sexting exchange earlier without making her blush in front of customers.

“But we did get him on camera in the city to verify he was really there. He spent a lot of time at nightclubs with the model he was dating. And I located the hotel where he and his girlfriend, or whatever she was to him, stayed. He may have been freeloading off her. She’s uber wealthy. Family money, not just from modeling. But it looks like a friend of hers stayed over a few nights with them as well.”

“Great. Sex in pairs. How fucking Anthony-like.” I’d refrained from spilling that bit of truth to Natalia when admitting he’d cheated on her. There’d been two women in his hotel room in Tampa when I caught him that day two and a half years ago. I didn’t feel like painting that picture for her. Thinking there was one woman was already bad enough.

“Damn.” Noah paused as if unsure how to follow my words. “Well, the hotel lobby is the last place we have Anthony on camera before that snatch and grab by the debt collector. No trace of how he was taken to Ibiza, though. Not sure if he was officially dating this Bianca woman, but if he did disappear on her, she didn’t file a missing person report.

Although, she did report jewelry missing from her hotel room.”

“Jeez. Knowing my brother, he stole it to try and pay back one of the loan sharks.”

“Well, she didn’t blame him if that were the case. Not in the report, at least,” Noah responded.

“I assume your guy there is also checking the underground casinos?”

“Yeah, if your brother was ever at any of those casinos and someone staked Anthony to play, he’ll find out. Give him two days tops.”

“Great, thank you.” I let go of an uneasy breath, hating the fact my brother was being held “hostage” and I was fishing around for more of a story. “Still no call from that burner phone. I’m starting to think Anthony won’t be calling. He’s probably scared I’ll pull the truth from him, and whatever that truth might be will piss me off.”

“To the point you won’t help him? I doubt that, but who knows.”

I focused back on the restaurant, my thoughts wandering to Natalia and her chef. “Any luck on the other thing? After you and I talked earlier, Natalia told me Enzo served in the military. That was a curveball I didn’t see coming.”

Noah was quiet for a moment. “You sure you want me to dig into his past, then? Maybe she’ll open up more? Also, what if you find out something you don’t like? I get the feeling Natalia won’t be so responsive to you ordering her to stay away from her chef.”

“And if Grace was working alongside someone dangerous, reformed or not, how would you feel?” Nah, I knew Noah, and like hell would he allow his wife to be around any potential threats.

“Point made,” he returned without hesitation. “I should have something for you by tomorrow.”

“And speak of the devil,” I said at the sight of Enzo exiting the restaurant, walking between Natalia and Maria.

Her eyes connected with mine as I told Noah I’d call him tomorrow.

I got out of my truck and made my way over to Maria’s Mercedes where the three of them had gathered.

“Rossi,” Enzo greeted me, ice in his voice.

“That kid’s hands still attached to his wrists?” I asked him.

“I convinced him to let it go,” Natalia spoke up.

“She’s relentless and wouldn’t leave me alone about it until I promised not to go near the fake Backstreet Boy,” Enzo said glibly, disappointment in his tone.

“Sounds about right. She’s a persistent little thing until she gets her way.” My eyes were on her now, and she knew exactly what I was talking about. I wasn’t sure if she’d shared Anthony’s predicament with Enzo or her sister, and my need to fake date for money, so I decided to change the subject. “About the party tomorrow, I went ahead and booked three rooms at the hotel where the event’s being held.”

“Three rooms?” Maria asked, sounding confused. “Not two?”

“Maria.” Natalia elbowed her.

“What? Maybe I wanted to share a room with Enzo instead of you.” Maria chuckled. “Kidding, kidding. I’m still married, and Enzo’s ...” She let her voice trail off.

Enzo studied her, and he seemed curious where she’d planned to go with that line of thought. Nowhere, apparently.

“You ever get a costume?” Natalia asked me, her eyes skating down my body, over my Henley and down to my black jeans. Her gaze remained on my crotch, probably thinking about our text exchange.

She was testing me and my ability to not go hard at every damn turn. “I did not,” I bit out, impatient for her to stop torturing me, and to draw her attention somewhere safer. Not

sure where exactly that was, but not pointed at my dick, would be a good start.

“You can be her Clark Kent,” Maria suggested. “I can just do some skull face paint on Enzo and call it a day?”

“Face paint?” Enzo looked over at her, his brow pinched.

“That or tights. Your pick.” Maria winked, and Enzo shifted uncomfortably. Why’d I get the feeling that man would do just about anything she asked him to do, though? She had him wrapped around her finger.

Maybe Enzo felt the same as I had toward my brother? He was pissed at Thomas for cheating on Maria, but was he also relieved they’d be splitting? It was clear he wanted a taken woman.

“I can find something for you to wear if you let me in your closet,” Natalia offered, eyes returning to my face.

The idea of this woman in my bedroom again without bending her over and ...

“Or maybe you look?” Natalia suggested as if reading my dirty thoughts, realizing she was provoking a beast, and deciding it wasn’t the best idea.

“Sure.” I unlocked my arms from across my chest and took an uneasy step back, knowing I had to let her leave at some point. I was frustrated she wouldn’t be going with me. I held the back of my neck, finding knots of tension there as I swiveled my focus around the parking lot.

At the sight of a parked car on the road parallel to the restaurant, I frowned. I’d seen it in the same spot yesterday. I couldn’t tell if anyone was inside the black Acura right now, but something had me on edge about it.

“You recognize that car?” I released my neck and discreetly tipped my chin in the direction of the Acura.

Natalia followed my gaze. “No, should I?”

“It was here the other night.” I knew Natalia wouldn’t question my memory and ability to recall specific details, minor head injury or not.

“I’ll go check it out,” Enzo offered, but I extended my arm, a request for him to hang back.

“Stay with them instead.” I went over to my truck and unlocked my glove compartment. I’d decided to travel with my 9 mil after last night’s events.

“Ryan,” Natalia hissed as I tucked the firearm under my shirt at the back of my pants. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” But with everything going on with Anthony, I couldn’t dismiss the fact my gut told me differently. “If the car hauls ass away, then we’ll have the answer,” I told her as I slowly started toward the edge of the parking lot near the street.

The Acura’s lights immediately flicked on, and as I’d predicted, whoever was behind the wheel hit the gas pedal, taking off.

“I’m going after them,” I said on the move back to the truck. “Get them home,” I ordered Enzo, not waiting for a response.

Once behind the wheel of my truck, I tore out of the parking lot. I hadn’t been back in town long, but I remembered all the back roads. I had a feeling I knew the direction the Acura would go, and I knew exactly how I could cut them off.

Instead of pursuing the vehicle, I turned down a side street, made a few quick turns, and then swerved back onto the other road just before the Acura got to me.

The driver slammed on the brakes instead of crashing into the side of my truck.

Not bad for a solo vehicle interdiction. It’d been awhile, and I was rusty, but at least I still had it.

Before the driver had a chance to throw the car into reverse, I hopped out and trained my 9 mil on him. He shot his hands into the air in surrender, and fortunately his passenger did the same.

I looked around, grateful the road was still quiet given our location and the time of night. No other cars were there. Not

yet, at least. I'd have to make it quick.

I steadily walked over to the driver's side and motioned for him to roll down his window with my free hand.

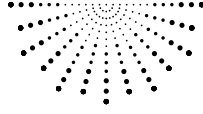
"Hands on the wheel," I ordered the driver. "Who are you? Who sent you?" I peered into the vehicle, checking for weapons.

The driver, probably in his fifties, with a yellow stain on his white polo shirt and a McDonald's wrapper still on his lap, gripped the wheel and grimaced.

"Who the hell are you?" I rasped, my patience worn out.

The driver let go of a heavy sigh as if disappointed he'd been made. "We work for your uncle. He sent us."

CHAPTER TWENTY



RYAN

“HE *WHAT?*” I LOWERED MY WEAPON AND HID IT, NOT ANXIOUS for any oncoming drivers to call 911 at the sight.

“Maybe we can pull over somewhere else to talk?” the driver suggested.

I didn’t have much of a choice but to trust he wouldn’t take off. We could only be in the middle of the road for so long before we drew unwanted attention. “Fine. But if you make a run for it, I will hunt your ass back down. We clear?” The driver nodded.

I went back into my truck, locked up my 9 mil, and kept a close eye on my rearview mirror as the men followed me to the nearest parking lot—the Starbucks where Natalia had her doctor date of all places.

Once parked, I texted Natalia a quick, *Everything is okay, just go home*, message.

I tossed the phone on the passenger seat and exited the truck.

“What’s going on?” I folded my arms and positioned my back to the truck, waiting for them to join me.

The driver swiped his hands over his shirt, brushing away crumbs from the sandwich he’d been eating before I’d spotted him outside the restaurant. “Your uncle was worried you were trying to pull a fast one on him. That you might be faking all the dating stuff to get the money. He sent us to—”

“To spy on me?” I cut him off, not all that surprised my uncle had gone to such lengths to safeguard Rossi money. “And what’d you determine?” I asked when he remained quiet. “What’d you tell my uncle?” The idea these two idiots had been following me around, and even worse, I hadn’t realized sooner, pissed me off to no end.

“Your uncle identified your girl in the photos. Said he knew her already,” the driver said, his Italian accent fairly thick. “You’re in love with your brother’s ex? Isn’t there some sort of code against that?”

Code? Yeah, there was an unspoken rule. Don’t date your brother’s ex. Sure. But ... “Show me your phones. I want to see what pictures you sent my uncle.” I opened my palm. So help me, if there were any inappropriate images of Natalia, I’d lose it. Screw the money.

The driver reached into his pocket, unlocked his phone, and hesitantly handed it over.

I swiped through his latest photos, seeing a few bathroom selfies I wished I could forget. From the looks of it, the men had been spying on me since yesterday.

They had images of us rock climbing and eating in the back of my truck. Kissing on the patio in the city later that night. “What, no pictures of those guys attacking us in the garage?”

“What attack?” the second guy asked, his already wrinkled brow tightening in surprise.

“Never mind.” I shoved the phone back into the driver’s hand. “What does this mean? What the hell do you want from me?”

“Your uncle’s not a huge fan of your brother, so he’s not upset you’re dating Anthony’s ex. But from what we gathered by watching you two—you aren’t bullshitting him. You love her. That’s what we told Maurizio.”

Fuck. I hung my head and set my palm to my forehead.

“You can’t be upset your uncle didn’t trust you. You’ve never shown any interest in the money, and now all of a

sudden you care? And where the hell is your brother, anyway? And why isn't he making more noise about you dating his ex? Your uncle would be a fool not to be suspicious," the man went on, stroking his smooth jawline.

I wasn't sure what to do. "Tell my uncle I'll be in touch," was the best I could do for now.

I waited for them to leave before getting back in my truck to check my phone. There were a few worried messages from Natalia.

Ryan: *We need to talk. You home yet?*

Natalia: *Just turning in the neighborhood. Enzo is following us. What's wrong? What happened?*

Ryan: *Wait for me. Okay?*

Natalia: *Of course.*

I was in this mess because of my brother, and now so was Natalia. And I wasn't so sure if he even deserved saving anymore.

He needs you, I could practically hear my father tell me, and my shoulders fell.

And I need you, Pops. I closed my eyes and gripped the wheel with my free hand, fighting the surge of emotions tearing through me. *I need you, too*.

* * *

"CAN WE TAKE A RIDE?" I MOTIONED TO MY TRUCK. "WE need to talk."

Enzo stepped forward before Natalia could respond. "What happened with that car?"

I lifted my eyes to the pitch-black sky and dragged a hand through my hair. "It's complicated."

"I highly doubt that," Enzo snapped. "Tell me."

When I lowered my face, he was standing in front of me, his jaw locked tight. He didn't trust me, and maybe he was right. Maybe I was the dangerous one? Because I was putting Natalia in the middle of my family drama, and all Enzo was trying to do was keep her safe.

I covered my mouth, trying to figure out what to say, because I knew he wouldn't back down. He wouldn't walk away if he believed there was a threat to Natalia's safety. I pivoted my focus to where Natalia stood alongside Maria, both of them staring at us as if unsure what to think, say, or do.

Me, too. "Anthony's in trouble," I finally revealed. "He has a gambling problem, and he owes a lot of money. I have to pay off his debt." I set a hand to my chest, shocked I was sharing the truth with this man. Despite Enzo's questionable history, I believed I could trust him. Maybe it was his intense devotion to keeping the woman I cared about safe? "My uncle has the kind of cash I need, and that car had two of his men in it. They were checking up on me."

Enzo's forehead tightened as he processed the news, then he took a step back, giving me some breathing room.

"I was never supposed to know they were spying on me, which was why they took off," I went on, my gaze moving back to Natalia. She'd understand what that meant.

"I'm guessing your uncle won't just write you a check?" Enzo pocketed his hands, frustration in his tone. Angry at Anthony? For sure. But probably at me, too.

"It's an inheritance thing. I can only access the money if married. But I made him a deal to try and get a portion now. I just have to prove I'm in a serious relationship." *And propose.*

"That's why you were going to date Calista?" Maria asked, putting the pieces together, and I nodded.

Enzo turned to look at Maria for a moment before focusing back on me.

"But my uncle's men think I'm dating—"

"Natalia," Enzo cut me off. He eliminated the distance again, setting a hand on my chest.

“Enzo, please.” Natalia rushed to him and grabbed his arm, but he didn’t budge.

I slowly lowered my attention to Enzo’s hand, doing my best to remain in control, to not lose my shit. If I were in his shoes, I’d react the same.

Enzo looked at me square in the eyes and said, “You’re not involving her in your brother’s bullshit mess. I don’t care. Not happening.”

“That was never my intention.” I let go of an uncomfortable breath, resisting the urge to physically remove his hand from my chest. That act might lead to a fight, and it definitely wouldn’t help anything or anyone right now. “I’ll find another way to get the money.”

“No.” Natalia let go of Enzo, demanding my attention. “I’m helping.”

Enzo’s hand fell as he faced her. “Why in God’s name would you do anything to help the man who broke your heart?”

Natalia looked to me, then back at Enzo. “Because he didn’t break my heart,” she shared, her tone soft. “He couldn’t. Because he never had my heart. I should never have dated him either time.” She shook her head, and Maria was by her a second later. “And then Mom and Anthony begged me to say yes after I said no, and—”

“You said no?” That was the first time I’d heard that.

“I didn’t want to marry him. But Mom and Anthony ganged up on me in private, and all but forced me into a corner. They made me feel like I had no choice but to say yes. They said I couldn’t embarrass him in front of all the guests. And I just ... I gave in for the time being, to keep the peace, make everyone happy, but I never wanted to marry him. And I know I wouldn’t have gone through with it. I kept putting off the wedding discussion. Refused to set a date, look at dresses.” She swiped at her cheek, searching for the tears there. “I’ve hated myself for ever letting them talk me into it. I was a coward. Because he’s not who I ...”

“This doesn’t change anything,” Enzo said before I had a chance to digest her words. “I won’t have her doing this. Not for him.”

“It’s not up to you.” Natalia faced Enzo. The fire in her eyes and determination in her voice made it perfectly clear she was done going along with others to make them happy and keep the peace. “And I’m doing it for Ryan, not Anthony. And if anyone should understand what it’s like to lose—”

“Don’t,” Enzo hissed. “Don’t go there.”

I had no clue where “there” was, but it’d triggered him. He turned his back to everyone and crouched on the driveway, diving his hands through his dark hair.

“I’m sorry.” Natalia lowered in front of him, gripped his shoulders and rested her forehead against his. The gesture spoke more about their relationship and closeness than his protective attitude toward her ever had.

Maria peered at me, a sad look in her eyes, then she came closer and leaned in to clue me in without Enzo overhearing. “His twin sister was murdered,” she whispered.

My knees buckled. I finally understood him. Understood his rage toward the guys in the parking garage.

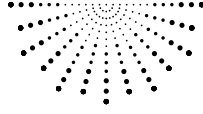
You took the life of the man who murdered your sister, didn’t you? And I knew, without a doubt, I’d have done the same.

“I won’t lose you, too.” Enzo slowly rose, and Natalia stood with him. “I won’t let something happen to you because you got mixed up in more of Anthony’s bullshit.” His eyes met mine, and I clamped down on my back teeth, my hands diving into my pockets as *his* painful past hit me like bullets to the chest.

“He won’t let anything happen to me.” Natalia pointed my way. “And you know that.” She folded her arms and tipped her chin with confidence. “You both know how stubborn I am. So, I’m helping,” she added while looking back and forth between us. “No one is going to die. Are we clear?”

Enzo cursed before closing the space between us. “When it’s time to pay off his debt, you tell me when and where.” He cocked his head, the warning embedded in his tone daring me to deny his demand. “I’m going with you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



RYAN

“HOW’S YOUR HEAD TODAY?” IT WAS SUNDAY MORNING, AND we’d be heading to the hotel for the party later that afternoon. I was surprised I’d yet to hear from my uncle. Something didn’t feel right about his silence.

“As good as good can be.” I wrapped my knuckles against the side of my skull and winked.

“You’d tell me if not, right?” Natalia perched her hip against the counter in Mom’s kitchen and stirred sugar into her coffee. Thankfully, Mom was out shopping, so Natalia and I had the place to ourselves. Jury was out on whether that was a good or bad thing.

“I promise.” And in truth, the bruise looked worse than it felt. “So.” There was a reason I called her over to talk over coffee, wasn’t there? I was distracted by the way her pale blue V-neck tee dipped low enough to show her cleavage. At least she was wearing a bra today. Although, with the way it accentuated her assets, it was as distracting as her braless-white-tee look. “Um.” I forced my focus up. “How and when are we telling our parents about this insanity?”

“We’re all having dinner at my parents’ tomorrow, right? What if we drop the news on everyone then?”

The dinner? Shit. I swiped a palm down my face. I’d forgotten all about that. Would I be able to sit through a meal with her parents and not lecture her mother about pushing Natalia into accepting my brother’s marriage proposal?

I let the scene play out in my head, knowing I'd struggle not to open my mouth. I was done keeping quiet about my feelings.

"Yeah, but are we being honest and telling them it's fake to help Anthony? Or are we going to let them believe—"

"That there's really something between us?" Her voice broke, and God, was she scared I'd change my mind? That I'd flip some switch and decide there *wasn't* anything between us? "Do you know why I kept asking you why you convinced Anthony not to marry me?" She did a cute one-shoulder shrug. "Well, before you told me the truth."

I quietly studied her, waiting for her to continue, unsure if I actually wanted to know the answer.

"I was hoping you couldn't stand the idea of him marrying me, because you wanted me for yourself." A sheepish, embarrassed smile played across her lips, and her cheeks turned pink.

I advanced closer, took the mug she was now trying to hide behind, and set it off to the side. "I've felt guilty ever since the day he broke up with you because I was relieved it was over. And I wasn't sure what kind of person that made me, to be happy about a broken engagement," I confessed. "But in truth, I never would have been able to watch you walk down the aisle with him. I would've tried to stop it from happening if it came down to it."

Her eyes widened at my admission, and she chewed on her lip.

She deserved to know more. To hear the full truth from me. To know how long I'd wanted her. I toyed with the strands of her hair, rolling the locks between my fingers as I shared, "I'm going to be forty next year, but I feel so much older. We must age in dog years in the military, because I feel like I've already lived three lifetimes." I let go of her hair and set my palms on the counter, trapping her in my new favorite position—right in front of me, close enough to feel the energy between us without being completely consumed by it. "I've had a lot of time to rack up regrets."

Natalia's hands went to my abdomen and climbed to my chest, her eyes never leaving mine. "What are you trying to say?"

"When I came home that Christmas when I was twenty-eight, and it was the first time I saw you in years ... one word came to mind."

"What was it?" she whispered, her brows slanting.

"Mine," I answered without hesitation, remembering that moment nearly eleven years ago as if it were yesterday.

"But you were twenty-one, and I felt like I was fifty by then. The shit I'd done. Seen." I pushed aside the flashbacks attempting to penetrate my thoughts. I didn't have time for them, I needed her to understand, to know the truth. "I couldn't consider making a move on you. You were too young. I was coming up on my tenth year in the Navy, and I knew I'd be in for a lot longer. I couldn't push that life on you."

I closed my eyes and bowed my forehead to hers.

"When Anthony shared the news you two were dating, it felt like the door was closed forever. Even if the time ever became right to ask you out ..." I didn't need to finish. She'd understand.

"And if I told you I wish you'd been honest with me that day anyway, because I'd had a crush on you for years, what then?"

My stomach dropped at her words, and I pulled back to find her eyes again.

"I ended things with Anthony so quickly back in college because I felt guilty dating him when all I could think about was you. I felt like a horrible person." I could hear the emotion catching in her throat. Witnessed it in her glossy green eyes as she admitted, "And then I spent years dating the wrong men while I waited for the only one I wanted to come for me. But he never came."

I'm here now. I pushed away from the counter and gripped my throat, feeling as though it were closing up.

“And when Mom pushed Anthony and I back together again, I said yes because I’d already given up on you. Thought you hated me. I also knew Anthony could never break my heart. No one was capable of breaking my heart. Because no one was you.” Her lower lip quivered and her eyes fell shut. I reached for her and circled my arms around her, holding her tight.

Her heart was pounding so intensely, it felt as if the rhythm intertwined with mine, and we shared the same heartbeat.

Smoothing her hair away from her ear, I whispered hoarsely, “I didn’t know.”

“How could you?” She eased back, and I cradled her face with my palms. “We both made mistakes. Kept fighting the truth that was right in front of us. Maybe we were both scared? But you keep fighting—”

“Until you can’t,” I growled out before my lips crashed over hers. I was done fighting my feelings, hiding behind excuse after excuse. I couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t resist her.

I was fucking tired of fighting.

Natalia moaned against my mouth and her tongue slid between my lips. I eased one hand into her hair, and held the back of her head, drawing her as close as possible.

Every part of me was on fire. Hot. Tense. Aching.

But it was how my chest felt that was going to do me in. That tight fist squeezing my heart, that clutch of guilt, went away.

And I could breathe again.

I lifted her onto the counter in one fast movement, and she hooked her ankles around my back, arching into me.

I planted my hands on the counter on each side of her so I could nudge my cock against her. I was losing my damn mind with lust.

My lips broke from hers, dragging tender kisses down her neck, nipping her earlobe, trailing my mouth along her

cheekbone on my way back to that sultry mouth of hers.

She buried her fingernails into my back, lightly moaning from the contact before I sucked her bottom lip and kissed her again.

I was two seconds away from losing all self-control right there in Mom's kitchen when ...

“Oh. My. God.”

Natalia flinched at the sound of my mother's voice echoing around us.

My lips froze against her mouth, and my fingertips curled into my palms on the counter as I tried to calm myself down before we faced her.

“Ryan Rossi,” Mom whispered, and I'd never been so grateful to not have a middle name. “What's going on? When I said you should be friends, I didn't mean make out with your brother's ex-fiancée on my kitchen counter.”

I slowly helped Natalia down, her throat and cheeks flush with embarrassment. I wanted to shield her, protect her from whatever my mom was going to say. Because I knew Mom and loved her to death, but Anthony was Anthony.

He'd had to become the man of the house at too young of an age because I'd been serving. I'd immersed myself in training to run away from the pain of losing Dad.

But Anthony had been there for her since day one and every dark day after that when I was physically and emotionally incapable. I was grateful he'd been there for her, but he'd been too young to take on such a heavy load. It'd been too much for them both to deal with, but they did it together. And they were closer than close because of it.

Annnnd there's that familiar ache of guilt.

I set a hand to my chest and seized a lungful of air before turning to face my mother. As our eyes met, I slowly sighed out that breath, preparing for the inevitable confrontation.

Mom set her purse on the kitchen table and threaded a hand through her silver hair, eyes going back and forth

between the two of us. Waiting for answers.

Well, shit. What version of the truth was I sharing? We hadn't agreed yet, and I thought we had until tomorrow to decide.

Before I had a chance to say anything, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Noah. "I have to take this. I'm sorry." I frowned and looked back at Natalia, offering her my hand. "We'll be back."

"Sorry," Natalia murmured, accepting my palm and moving quickly as she kept up with me on my way to the backyard.

I shut the door and brought the phone to my ear. "Tell me you have news," I answered, letting go of Natalia's hand.

She walked over to the patio furniture and dropped down with an exasperated sigh.

"Hey, man. Which news do you want first? Brother or Enzo?" Noah asked.

Based on the sound of his voice, I probably should have sat down, too. How much more could I handle? And I still had to play dress-up and act like everything was just fine tonight. "My brother," I decided.

"My guy was faster than I expected. Anthony didn't owe any loan sharks money. At least, no one staked him in Monte Carlo. But Anthony did drop two fifty large the same day his model girlfriend reported her jewelry stolen. And he lost every cent that night."

"Are you kidding me?" I cursed, and looked at the concrete pavers.

"My guess is he stole Bianca's jewelry and fenced it. Then he used that cash in hopes of turning it into a profit that night. If that's the case, let's just hope whoever gave her such expensive jewels doesn't find out."

"So, how'd he wind up on house arrest in Ibiza with that guy claiming he owes nine fifty?" I looked over at Natalia. Her eyes narrowed as she glared at me. That was the first

she'd learned the specific details about Ibiza and my brother's "house arrest" situation there.

"Someone's lying," Noah said. "Maybe a few people, I don't know."

"What's the next step?"

"I'll try and confirm my jewelry theft theory. Then find out where and how this Canadian holding your brother hostage came into the mix. There's a major disconnect somewhere," he explained, and I was extremely thankful Noah hadn't left Ibiza after all.

"Thank you." I held the side of my head, the pain flaring up again. *Wonder why?* My brother was the cause, not getting whacked by that pipe. "And the other thing?"

"Right." Noah was quiet for a moment. "Lorenzo Costa. Thirty-six. Born in Sicily but his parents moved to New York when he was a young kid. Here's where it gets interesting. His dad was rumored to be part of some secret organization back in Italy. *La Lega dei Fratelli*, aka, The League of Brothers. They're now only known as The League."

"The *what?*" I dropped my hand at his words.

"Some type of do-gooder-slash-vigilante group if you can believe it," Noah shared. "Costa left the organization when he moved to the U.S. Each of his three sons served in the military here before joining the family business. Maybe that was his way of keeping his justice-type legacy alive somehow, but uh, legally?" He paused. "Then one of his daughters was murdered. With his money and influence, it's not a stretch to believe he started his own version of The League Stateside after that. I don't have concrete proof, though."

"I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around this." I looked at Natalia. She knew about Enzo's past, and I'd rather hear it from her. "I need to call you back," I told Noah, abruptly ending the call.

When I shoved the phone into my pocket, Natalia slowly stood, asking tentatively, "Your brother, is he okay?"

“I don’t know what’s really going on, but I have to tell you something.” I stepped closer and reached for her hand, drawing her closer. “I asked my buddy to look into Enzo.” She opened her mouth to protest, but I shook my head as a plea to let me finish. “Your safety is important to me. I had to find out the truth. I mean, you told me he illegally killed someone, what’d you expect me to do? I’d rather hear the story from you, though, than my friend.”

She pulled free from my touch and peered at her house instead of my way. I guess I deserved that for going behind her back.

“I know who his dad is, or well, who he used to be in Italy. But then ...” *Please finish this for me.*

“Enzo was planning to go to culinary school, but his dad insisted all of his sons serve at some point before they started their careers. He was deployed in Iraq when his twin was murdered. He was twenty-four at the time, and it was near the end of his contract, or whatever that’s called.” She let go of a shaky breath, and now I knew another reason why it was hard for her to share this story with me. My father died while I was serving, and I’d felt helpless.

Enzo’s sister had been *murdered* while he was overseas, and the thought made me physically ill.

Natalia’s eyes met mine. “I didn’t know Enzo at the time, but he told me his family barely survived her death. Enzo returned home once he was done with his service. His older brothers, Alessandro and Constantine, were already working at the family business. And well, once they were together, the three of them spent every hour of every day working to track down her killer.”

I covered my mouth, unable to imagine the picture she painted. Of course, even as big of a pain in the ass as Anthony was, it would take putting me in the ground as well to keep me from doing the same to the people who took him from me.

“They found the man responsible and gave the police a chance to handle it. When the justice system failed, they took matters into their own hands.” She blinked away tears. “After

that, Enzo went down a dark path. He changed. Became someone else. Someone he realized his twin would hate him for, a fact his younger sister and mother frequently reminded him. But it took me inviting him here to work in my kitchen for him to finally start over. He'd always loved cooking. A natural. Guess he never needed culinary school to begin with. And now that he's here, he's trying to be the man he'd set out to become before his sister's life was taken."

I mentally did the math. Twenty-four then. Thirty-six now. "That's a big gap." I wanted to know more about the "dark path," but instead of pressing, I dropped down in the chair she'd previously sat in, trying to process what little *I* did know.

"His story is a bit more complicated than that, obviously, but he's not a bad guy."

"And your dad knows all of this? Asked the Costas to watch over you when you were in New York?"

Her innocent lift of the shoulder had me back on my feet. "Enzo's father saved my mother's life back when my parents were dating, and that's how they became friends. In Dad's mind, who better to look out for me in New York?"

"Right," I muttered.

"Batman without the scary suit and gadgets." She forced a small smile, one meant to calm me, but I wasn't there yet. My heart was still thwack-thwack-thwacking against my rib cage.

"I bet Enzo had an Alfred, though." Where had that come from? I wanted to smack the comic-book-loving kid inside me for that comment. Because no, I wouldn't admire a vigilante, if that was even what he'd been.

"I knew you'd understand."

"Hardly," I scoffed. I truly had no clue how I felt about any of it. But I also knew I'd never be able to change Natalia's mind when it came to having Enzo in her life, regardless of my opinion.

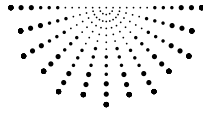
"He's a good man that got lost."

“Tragedy has a way of doing that,” I whispered, understanding that all too well. “But going all Gerard Butler from *Law Abiding Citizen* on the world because of it ... I don’t know.”

Natalia reached for my arm and squeezed. “And if someone took my life?”

The blood drained from my face as I responded without a second thought, “I’d burn the fucking world down a million times over until I found a way to do the impossible. To bring you back to life.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



NATALIA

“THEN WHAT HAPPENED? DON’T STOP THERE, IT’S JUST getting good,” Maria begged as I helped zip up her gold Belle dress from *Beauty and the Beast*. She looked absolutely stunning in the gown, her dark wavy hair clipped and hanging over her shoulder. Her eyes met mine in the full-length mirror of our hotel room and I knew she wasn’t going to let this go, but I wasn’t sure just how much to tell her, and how much to keep for myself for now.

I thought back to the morning in Ryan’s kitchen when his mom caught us making out on her counter. “Well,” I began, heading to the bed to put on my vest, “after laying it all out there, no more lies, Ryan snatched my hand and we walked back into the kitchen to face his mom. He told her, *We’re together. And you’ll need to find a way to get over it.*”

“Bold.” Maria faced me and smiled as I buttoned up the vest. “But *are* you together-together? Or is this part of the charade for the money?”

“I think we’re together.” My tongue pinned to the roof of my mouth as I remembered his kiss, and what he’d said to me in the kitchen *before* that kiss.

“So, did his mom say anything to you two?”

“I don’t think he planned to give her a chance for a rebuttal anyway, but his dad’s old friend, who Ryan ordered the parts for my Jeep from, happened to show up before she had a chance to say anything. He was a day earlier than expected,

and Ryan took full advantage of it. He spent the next few hours busy with my Jeep.”

“Oh good, so you have a working vehicle again. That’s something.” She bunched her skirt, lifting it so she could walk without tripping. “Still confused why you sold your Rubicon in the first place, though.”

“It was just time.” I grabbed the fake Daily Planet ID badge and fidgeted with the lanyard. “Anyways, have you talked to Thomas? He’s not going to show up here tonight, is he?”

“He texted me he’ll be home in time for Halloween so he doesn’t miss Chiara’s first time trick-or-treating. Not that she can eat the candy.” She frowned. “We haven’t spoken on the phone yet. He’s clueless I’m aware he’s a cheat. But I’d love one worry-free night before I face reality.” She twirled while holding the skirt. “Play pretend.”

“You deserve that, but I’m here for you if you need me. Always. You’ll get through this.”

She waved her free hand by her face, and I knew she was trying not to cry. “I spent too much time on this eyeliner,” she said with a choked voice. “So, um, Calista’s still coming tonight, right?” she deflected. “Even though Ryan’s not her date?”

“Yeah. I talked to her earlier while Ryan was working on the Jeep and explained Ryan no longer needed to fake date her.”

“Did she care?”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t tell her I was taking her place, though.” Maria didn’t try to stifle her snicker at that information. “She’s interested in someone else anyway. No idea who. But my guess is he’ll be here tonight since she wanted to use Ryan to make him jealous.”

Maria lifted her eyes to the ceiling, letting go of an exasperated sigh. “Of course that was her motive,” she tossed out as someone knocked at the door.

“Probably our dates.” I put on my lanyard and headed for the door. Swinging it open, I almost stumbled back at the sight of Ryan standing there, wearing the costume I threw together at the last minute. He looked every bit Clark Kent with the black-framed glasses and his dark hair slick and styled to the side.

His dark dress pants and white button-down shirt, sleeves cuffed just below his elbows were enough to turn heads. But the hint of a blue tee and the top of the S peeking out from where he’d undone the top few buttons made the trip to Target for the Superman shirt worth every minute.

I’d been shocked when he’d tossed me the keys to his truck and told me I could take it to the store while he worked on my Jeep. No guy had ever let me drive his vehicle before, especially not Anthony.

“*You’re sure?*” I’d asked in surprise.

“*Just be careful with the curbs, I know you have a thing for them,*” he’d teased before ducking back under the hood.

“Hey, you.” Ryan tipped his head, eyeing me with a devilish smile, and I caught my lip between my teeth as my gaze moved to the red and black tie that hung loose around his neck. The things we could do with that later ...

Le sigh.

“My sexy reporter,” he murmured in a low voice, his gaze traveling from my black pumps up to my gray pencil skirt and over the white blouse beneath the fitted vest. I’d straightened my wavy hair so it hung straight down my back and wore minimal makeup aside from some red lipstick. Lipstick that’d look brilliant on his neck. “You’ll always be my Lois Lane now.” He smirked.

“Well,” I began, sounding a bit breathy, “you’ll always be my Superman.”

“You already have a Batman, I suppose.” The slight twitch of his lips had me wondering whether he was fighting a frown or another smirk.

Was he jealous of my relationship with Enzo? Or still worried about the man in terms of my safety?

Maria came up behind me and poked me in the back. “You two want a minute alone?”

I didn’t have time to consider if she was serious, and how I’d reply, because I spotted Enzo striding down the hall our way in dark slacks and a white button-down shirt that was partially open. “What, no skull face paint?”

“I convinced him to be the Beast after he turns back into a man at the end of the movie,” Maria replied. And was she sounding a little breathy herself? Standing next to Ryan in the doorway, Enzo’s gaze cut straight to Maria.

“Wow,” was all Enzo remarked, and he tossed a hand over his chiseled jawline, studying her. “Clean up nicely, kid.” I couldn’t fully contain my smile as he tried to recover from his “awed” state at the sight of my beautiful sister in a ballgown, looking every bit a princess.

“You too, *Daddy*,” Maria tossed out sarcastically, giving him a hard time back.

When I turned to peer at her, I saw the color rise in her cheeks as if realizing the way she’d said the word had come across differently than maybe she’d intended. Or had it?

“I’m only eight years older than you, *bellissima*,” Enzo said, his accent appearing that time. And oh, he dropped a “*bellissima*” on her. Would my sister melt like I did when Ryan had called me darlin’?

Still married, I had to remind myself. *To a cheating asshole, though.*

“Anyways.” Ryan waved a hand as if trying to cut the weird tension he detected happening between my married sister and best guy friend. “I do want that minute alone with her, if you don’t mind?” He reached for my hand, urging me into the hall. “In my room.”

“We’ll wait for you here, then,” Maria offered.

Maria leaned in and whispered, “He wants to shove his tongue down your throat in private. Let him shove that tongue wherever else he wants, too.” She needled me in the ribs, and I pulled away, trying not to laugh.

I nodded at Enzo, not exactly sure why, then walked with Ryan to his room three doors down.

Once we were alone, he slowly turned to face me while removing the glasses. His eyes pierced mine, and I found myself whispering a tiny, “Hi.” Because all other words were absent from my brain with that dark look on his face. “Took us three years to get to this party, but we’re here, huh?” *Shit, why’d I bring that up?*

But he smiled, at least. Then he pocketed the cheap frames and took his time perusing me as if seeing me for the first time. “Turn around.” His surprising, rough order sent a fluttery sensation between my legs, and I obeyed. Hell, he could boss me around in the bedroom all he wanted. And I’d eagerly surrender to him.

I slowly whirled and gasped at the feel of his big hand on my backside.

He flicked my hair away from my right ear and brought his mouth to my neck. I felt his warm breath as he said, “Your ass in this skirt is going to drive me insane all night.”

I closed my eyes, relishing in his touch. “Oh yeah?” I whispered. “What do you want to do to me?”

His hand left my ass, and he circled my waist, pulling his body flush to mine so I could feel his hard length press into me. “Bend you over a desk, hike up your skirt, and enjoy the sight of your ass. Your pussy. Finally see what’s mine.”

“Yours, hm?” My panties were soaked.

“Yes,” he growled out, and his palm skated from my hip to my center. I wished there wasn’t a clothing barrier between us. I needed to feel him. Skin to skin.

“I’m yours,” I confessed. “Always have been.”

“Always will be,” he added as if there were any question.

He abruptly spun me around and hooked my arms over his shoulders. “We don’t have time to do everything I’ve been waiting a lifetime to do. But I’ll die if I don’t see you. Taste you.”

My nipples pebbled at his deep, raspy tone. “We wouldn’t want that.”

His hand was already at my waist, prepared to work down the zipper when he angled his head and asked, “May I?”

“Yes,” I cried, desperate for his touch. Whatever restraint he’d had while waiting for my answer snapped, and he crushed his mouth over mine, probably smearing my lipstick. Not that I cared.

He unzipped me and shoved down my skirt while kissing me, and I stepped free from it, leaving on my panties and heels.

I reached for his palm and placed it between my thighs as I’d done in the truck. His finger hooked my satin panties, and I gasped at the contact.

“Fuck, Talia. You’re always so wet for me,” he said against my lips before he startled me by lifting me from the ground.

He walked me over to the bed and set me there, then knelt on the floor, hooked my legs at the knees with his hands, and pulled me to the edge. He ran his finger over the satin, along the line of my sex, but he kept his eyes on mine. I arched my back, resting on my forearms as I watched him touch me without breaking the barrier.

“Torturing me for what I did to you on the phone yesterday, huh?” I breathlessly asked.

“Trust me, this is torture for the both of us.” He adjusted himself with the hand not touching me. “And my patience is paper thin when it comes to you.”

I moaned when he finally brought both hands back to the hem of my panties. I lifted my ass from the bed so he could drag them down, and he slid them to my ankles.

He cocked his head and gently parted my thighs even more, then slowly slid his hands up my legs, his eyes focused on my wet sex.

I was on the verge of orgasming from just the look in his eyes. “Ryan,” I begged, needing his mouth on me.

He leaned in and softly stroked my wet folds with his tongue, kissing my pussy the way he’d kissed my mouth not long ago. A hot, delicious tease that had me lightheaded.

Is this really happening? Watching the sexiest man I’d ever met go down on me, take care of me in such an erotic way was ... well, I had no words. My mind was blank except for the sheer feeling of pleasure engulfing my senses.

“So beautiful,” he murmured while plunging two fingers inside me, moving his fingers rhythmically with his tongue.

Every part of me tensed as I resisted orgasming so soon. But with my bare ass on the bed, and this sexy man kneeling before me, his mouth on my pussy, I was done for.

I cried out his name not even a minute later, then whispered a string of curses while climaxing.

I grabbed hold of his hard shoulders, bucking against his face, but he didn’t pull back. He held me against his mouth as I rode that orgasm higher than I’d ever been.

He slowly worked his mouth to my inner thigh as I came back down, and set a kiss to the inside of my leg before straightening his posture.

I was panting when our eyes met, and he looked positively lust-drunk. “I can’t let you go to the party with that, um, situation in your pants.”

“The pain of waiting will be worth it, I promise.”

He helped me rise, only to spin me around and squeeze the flesh of my ass cheeks. “You have no idea how badly I want to take you right now. But I won’t have our first time be a quickie,” he growled with barely concealed restraint. And with that, he let go of me as if he didn’t trust himself to touch me any longer without losing control.

Sad it was over but excited for later, I went into the bathroom to clean up and put myself back together again. When I left the en suite, I found Ryan on the bed with his phone to his ear, one elbow resting on his leg while he held his forehead.

“He knows him? You’re sure?” A pause. “They were at that underground casino in Monte Carlo together? You’re shitting me.”

Oh God. Anthony? Ryan had told me that afternoon that he had a friend keeping an eye on his brother while he worked on getting the money.

I sat next to him, not wanting to interrupt his call, but when Ryan’s eyes fell shut, I squeezed his leg, worried about him.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Call me when you get the rest of the story. Thanks, man.” Ryan ended the call and sat up, then twisted to look at me, cradling the phone in his palm as if he wanted to crush it. “That was my friend, Noah. And apparently, Anthony lied.”

“What do you mean?” When he stood, I went up with him resting my hand on his arm in silent support.

He tucked his phone into his pocket and fidgeted with the tie around his neck. “I was told my brother owed money to several loan sharks, and that this Canadian businessman now holding my brother prisoner bought up his debt.”

“And that’s not the case?” I frowned.

“Not only did my brother not owe any loan sharks in Monaco money, he was seen hanging out with the Canadian at one of the underground casinos. The same one where he lost two fifty the night he went missing. I don’t know if this guy staked him that money, but if that were the case, why lie?”

“Maybe he’s trying to get more out of you?” I proposed.

“Who? The guy holding him hostage?” He grimaced. “Or my brother?”

“You don’t really think Anthony would fake being in danger to try and get money, do you?”

Ryan let go of a deep, frustrated breath. “He knows I’d do anything to save him. I don’t want to think he’s capable of going to such extremes for cash, but at this point, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Before I could respond, there was a hard knock at the door.

I assumed it was Enzo or Maria, but Ryan checked the peephole, and cursed. “It’s my uncle’s men.” He looked over at me, and stretched out an arm, an order to stay back. He opened the door a moment later, standing directly in front of them to block me from their view. “What do you two want?”

From where I was standing, I couldn’t see the men in the hall. I heard one say, “Your uncle has had a change in plans. If you need the money soon, you and your girl need to leave tonight. He has an unexpected business trip and will be gone for two weeks. You can wait or come now.”

Two weeks? That’d be too late. I stepped into view, catching sight of the two guys out there. “We have plans. And ___”

“It’s your call. But if you need to make this happen now, you can fly with us on the company jet.” The man checked his watch. “We leave in forty-five minutes for *Firenze*. It’s a short drive to your uncle’s place in *Toscana* from there.”

Ryan’s shoulders fell, and he turned to face me, still holding the door open. I knew he was weighing his options. On the verge of telling the men to leave without us in light of the new information he’d just received from his friend. But if something happened to Anthony because of that decision, he’d never forgive himself.

I reached for Ryan’s arm and squeezed. “We’re coming.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



NATALIA

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’RE DOING THIS,” RYAN REMARKED IN A deep voice, sitting across from me on a leather reclining chair. There was a table between us with an untouched bottle of champagne on ice there.

At no point in my life did I ever imagine I’d be flying to Florence on a private plane to spend the night at a vineyard in Tuscany.

Ryan twisted around to look at where his uncle’s men were sitting watching a football game. They were in leather reclining chairs as well, but they were facing the cockpit, their backs to us.

He’d called his uncle from the hotel room to ensure the trip was legitimate, and also, a necessity. Maurizio confirmed he had business in Dubai and had to leave Tuesday morning. So, we had Monday to win him over, and then he’d write the check before his flight.

“Well, you don’t know for sure if this is a hoax by your brother. And I hate to think he’d go to such extremes because of his gambling addiction.”

“I’m not sure which is better, to be honest.” He swiveled back around to face me. “That he’s being honest and really in danger. Or he’s safe and lying to extract money from me.”

“We’ll figure this out. But you need the money just in case. So, we didn’t have a choice but to come.”

“*You* had a choice.” He set his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his head onto his palm. “I hate this.”

Ryan looked down at the S on his chest as if forgetting he was still in the Superman tee. He’d removed his white dress shirt and tie and chucked the fake glasses in the trash before we’d left the hotel.

Maria had been shocked and concerned at our abrupt departure, and Enzo had reacted as I’d expected. Pissed.

Once I convinced them they couldn’t change my mind, I’d swapped my Lois Lane outfit for yoga pants and my Carolina hoodie, and then Ryan and I took his truck to the airport.

“Well, I’m pretty sure Enzo wants to kill me when we return.” Ryan frowned. “Not that I’m scared of him.”

“Wasn’t there a Superman versus Batman comic movie?” Okay, maybe I was being a brat now, but I needed to get his mind off the reason we were going to Italy—to save his brother. “I do *not* want to see that fight, by the way.” I lifted a hand in the air. “Just so we’re clear.”

“He’s nuts if he thinks I’ll really let him join me in Ibiza when I go for my brother,” he reminded me. “You’ll need to talk some sense into him.”

“Yeah, I will. Don’t worry.” I checked the time. It was already ten at night. If everything went smoothly, I could be home by Tuesday night or Wednesday morning, at the latest.

One night away from work wouldn’t be bad, I supposed. My team could handle things without me. And technically, they could survive without Enzo for a few nights. He’d been sick before, and his number two had stepped in and everything had worked out.

I need to learn to let go a little.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to meet Michael and Kate tonight.” Ryan shook his head in disappointment. “I know you were looking forward to that opportunity. You missed that party two times because of me.”

“Not your fault. Besides, Enzo’s there tonight. He’ll try and get a word in with them. And if not, I’ll figure something else out.” I slid the untouched champagne to the side so I could reach across the table for him. I opened my palm, offering my hand. Two hours ago, his head had been between my thighs, and now we were in the sky on our way to Italy. *Seriously. Life is weird.* “*Never out of the fight, right? I won’t give up.*”

He reached for my hand and winked when he gave it a gentle squeeze. “That’s my girl.” But his smile dissolved quickly. “What about your parents?”

Ah, so that’s where your mind is at.

“Will they hate me? Will your dad kill me after he hears your voicemail?” He arched a brow.

“It’s not like I said we’re running away to elope.”

“Just dating your ex’s brother who is taking you to Italy for two days. With zero heads-up. Sure, sure. He won’t wonder.” He let go of a heavy breath as I gave his hand a squeeze. “And you’re going to miss trick-or-treating with Chiara. I know you were looking forward to that.”

“Would you stop being so grumpy? We’re going to get this thing with your brother over with,” I added in a low voice. “You’ll be able to relax once he’s out of trouble. And then we can ...”

Well, I didn’t know what exactly, but somehow we’d figure that part out next.

“I just think that maybe we should—”

“Wait to be together? Until Anthony’s situation is resolved?” I finished for him, worried he was going to suggest that, so I beat him to the punch.

Within hours, we’d gone from him setting me on the bed and spreading my legs, devouring my pussy, to sitting on a private jet, chaperoned by his uncle’s men, in hopes of getting a million dollars to save his brother’s life. I could understand his mood change.

He had his brother's safety to consider, and he was conflicted. Angry at Anthony. But obligated to help him anyway. Was he still conflicted about me as well?

"If that's what you think is best, I understand," I said softly. I tried to hide my disappointment, but I was pretty sure he'd read it on my face anyway. "We can start with a clean slate. A new beginning." I was starting to ramble, nerves getting the best of me as I contemplated how I'd survive being alone in a bedroom with him in Italy without touching him. "We spent over a decade behaving," I went on when his gaze remained undecipherable. "I think we can wait another few days."

His brows tightened as he tipped his head, continuing to quietly observe me.

"I could find some lavender body wash to use as repellent in the meantime," I joked, trying to get any kind of reaction from him other than the broody, dark look washing over his features. "I ... you won't think about him and the fact he ..."
Oh my God. Was I really asking him if he'd think about Anthony having sex with me on a jet to Italy? *What is wrong with me?*

Ryan leaned back in his seat and clutched the armrests, his jaw locking tight. He continued to stare at me, perfectly still and silent despite the chorus of insanity continually leaving my lips.

"You're killing me," I admitted, then peeked around his chair to check on his uncle's men. They were wrapped up in the game, so we were still good.

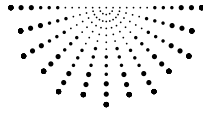
"What do you think you're doing to me?" he asked in a low, unsettling voice.

It was your idea to behave, but I didn't need to remind him of the obvious. "I shouldn't have brought that up. I guess I'm just nervous that will be in your head when we finally, well, you know." I spun my hand in a circle as if that was the motion a dick made during sex, which was laughable.

But that dark, haunted look in his eyes was doing things to me. Making me both wet and worried at the same time. An awkward and uncomfortable combination.

His nostrils flared. “I need to be very clear about something.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, clasping his hands together. Casual, yet also like he was struggling not to strangle someone. “I don’t want to think about any man that’s ever had you. Doesn’t matter who,” he murmured in a low, dark tone. “Because it makes me want to commit murder.” He cocked his head, his gaze dropping to my mouth. “We’ll wait until this is over,” he added after a hard swallow, “but I can assure you I won’t be thinking about anything or anyone but *you* when the day comes that we’re finally together.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



RYAN

“THANK YOU FOR THE TOUR.” NATALIA SMILED AT MY UNCLE’S assistant. She’d shown us most of the Rossi estate, which was more like a mini kingdom that required golf carts to get around.

“One last stop.” The woman opened a door off to our left, and motioned for us to head inside.

Natalia and I were still adjusting to the six-hour time difference. We’d managed to take a nap on the flight over last night, so we weren’t completely worthless once we got there. We’d yet to see my uncle, though, and I’d nearly turned down the tour.

Now I was glad I didn’t. It wasn’t like we had all the time in the world anymore. The least I could do for Natalia was give her a day to remember.

Watching her eyes light up when we’d taken in the sights, listening to her describe the details ... I’d nearly forgotten why we were even there. She was in love with the place, and I could see why.

From the rolling hills dotted with 400-year-old cypress trees, to the ruins and churches that inspired Leonardo da Vinci himself, Natalia had said she felt like she was inside a fairy tale.

“I thought we could pick out a bottle for dinner tonight,” I listened to our guide say after I’d pulled myself back to the present.

Natalia ran her fingers along the casks of red wine inside the room. I wasn't a wine aficionado, but I was pretty sure the barrel-shaped containers were called "casks." Maybe I could spruce up my vocabulary while I was here.

The woman offered Natalia a bottle, and while Natalia was fully focused on the wine, my gaze was riveted on her. Seeing her so relaxed and at ease was a beautiful sight.

At my insistence, she'd done a little shopping when we were in town. I loved the way she looked completely in her element in one of the purchases I'd made for her. The red linen pants paired with a sheer white blouse over a cream-colored camisole accentuated her classic beauty. It was classy but also carefree, perfectly Natalia. I'd been unable to resist buying her a dress for tonight as well, especially when she'd brushed her fingers over it on the hanger in the shop and murmured, "*Mm. Rabbit Beach blue.*"

Natalia had also pressed me to get some clothes, and I'd reluctantly let her pick out a few things. I guess fair was fair.

"How'd I never know this was your family's brand of wine?"

I forced my attention from her to the bottle.

"I carry it at the restaurant. This is top-shelf stuff for us." As Natalia handed it back to the woman, I eyed the label noting the sketch of a vineyard beneath one large burgundy-colored R.

"I honestly had no clue what labels of wine they produced, just that they had a winery," I admitted.

"This is one of our bestsellers," the woman told us. She was an American living in Italy, but of course, of Italian ancestry. I hardly doubted my uncle would've recruited her to work for him otherwise, given my family's history of wanting everyone and everything to be "authentic" Italian. "Obviously made from Sangiovese grapes. It's medium-body. Acidic. Tart. But cherry and earthy." She smiled. "Let's open it at dinner tonight, yes?" I nodded, and she grabbed a second bottle of the stuff, then motioned for us to head out.

“Perhaps it’s time I show you to your room? You can shower and clean up. Dinner is at eight in the courtyard.”

How late was it? I checked my watch and realized I’d lost track of time. Damn the time change.

I raked my hands through my hair, my stomach in knots over the thought of being alone in a room with Natalia. I was dying to kiss her again.

But I needed to remove the obstacle I felt was still in our way before we took things further. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise that we’d been interrupted at the hotel. At least, that was what I needed to convince myself of so I didn’t ravage her later in the bedroom.

“You okay?” Natalia reached for my arm, and I stupidly flinched at her touch.

Damn, I was wound up.

“Shit, sorry,” I mouthed when she pulled her hand back in alarm. “Good to go.” I didn’t like the shock and hurt on her face. Or the fact I’d put it there. *Fuck. This was going to kill me.*

“Right. Well then. Let’s head to the main house, shall we,” our tour guide offered. I just nodded in acknowledgement rather than actually thanking her like I should have since I’d forgotten her damn name. I’d been so enamored with Natalia and watching her soak in the sights all day, my memory recall and attention to detail had dramatically failed me.

I forced myself to get a move on, setting my hand on Natalia’s back, figuring that was a “boyfriend” thing to do. And since we had eyes on us, why not?

After taking the golf cart back to the main house, we were invited in through two huge double doors and stood in the large foyer, taking it all in.

“Your belongings are already in your room,” our guide informed us. “You’ll find your room on the second floor.” She pointed to the double staircase as if we didn’t know which way was up. “Third door on your right.”

A small smile played across Natalia's lips, and damn was I in trouble once we were alone.

I nodded my thanks to the woman, and she went down another hallway, leaving us alone.

"Your dad," Natalia whispered, her eyes set on a room open to the foyer. I followed her into a library to see what had caught her attention.

A family portrait hung on the main wall over a small desk that looked like it belonged in another time period. Most likely, it was just for show. As was a lot of what we saw today, and I imagined a good portion of the antiques the house contained.

But the painting was of my grandparents, father, and uncle. My dad had to be eighteen or so, Maurizio about twelve or thirteen.

"Surprised they kept up any reminders of him since they felt like he rejected this life." I touched my chest at the aching sensation there, rubbing the heel of my hand in small circles. Maybe I could pretend that feeling was from something deep fried I'd eaten that wasn't sitting well with me. It was a hard dose of emotional reality I didn't want to confront.

"You okay?" She turned to me and reached for my free hand.

"Yeah." I cleared my throat. "We should shower and get ready." I sent one last look at my dad, the similarities between us obvious. Sometimes when I looked into a mirror, I'd swear I could see him looking back at me, too. "Let's go." I kept hold of her hand, and we went up the fancy marble staircase and searched for our room.

Once there and the door was shut, she let go of my hand and tossed her purse on the bed, probably worried her phone would vibrate from yet another text from her parents. They'd been calling and texting all day, searching for answers. She'd put their calls to voicemail and kept responding with generic, *I'm okay and you need to relax*, messages.

My mom's reaction hadn't been great, but she hadn't been shocked since she'd caught us making out in her kitchen yesterday morning.

"Now this really is a fairy-tale setting." Natalia went to the balcony and opened the French doors, revealing a view of vineyards in the distance. "It's breathtaking."

She was the only sight I cared to look at. "I have to tell you something." I tried to sound nonchalant as I approached her and failed. But it was now or never. Time was running out.

Natalia faced me, her mouth tight with concern.

"To get the money, I have to propose to you at dinner," I quickly shared.

"Oh." She took a few seconds *and* nervous breaths. "And um, what happens if he finds out it's not real? Will he demand the money back?"

"Kind of a risk I'm taking regardless, right?" But I wouldn't have the money to give him back, so I wasn't sure what that'd mean. I'd cross that bridge if it came to it. "I'm sorry to ask this of you. I had planned to tell you before we flew here."

"But everything happened so fast." She maneuvered around me and went back into the room.

"Right." I stood in the doorway and folded my arms, propping my shoulder against the interior frame as I studied her, waiting for her decision.

She scanned the lavish room, a fairly empty space aside from a few pieces of furniture, with a modern feel, which was surprising considering the exterior of the house still looked like it belonged in the 1800s.

"We didn't come all this way to quit now, right? But do you have a ring?"

"Fuck." I closed my eyes. "I don't."

"Well, um. Maybe I have something we can use?"

I opened my eyes a few seconds later to see her crouched and rummaging through her small travel bag. “I have these hoop earrings. I think I can turn one into something that looks like a gold band. Better than nothing.”

I uncrossed my arms and went to her as she stood. I hated putting her in this position so damn much. “I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault.” She shook her head. “It’s his.”

“But he proposed to you, and I don’t want this to cause you any pain.”

“I only felt relief when we broke up,” she reminded me. “And your brother’s proposal felt fake, anyway. Flashy and attention-seeking. Surprised he didn’t have a plane skywrite the message.”

That’s something he’d totally do.

But damn, when her shoulders collapsed, I took an uneasy step back, worried Anthony was somehow still coming between us.

Her guilt. Mine. However you wanted to define it. There was *something* there. In our way. And it fucking killed me.

My only hope was that after I bailed out my brother, there’d be nothing standing between us anymore. No more barriers in our way.

“I really don’t know what to say.” I set a hand to my throat, a bit startled at the emotions making my voice hoarse.

“I’m doing it. So there’s nothing to discuss. I just want this charade over soon so we can live normally. Or as normally as a relationship with my ex’s brother can be.” She tipped her head toward the bathroom. “In the meantime, I’m going to check out the shower. I’m betting it’s the most luxurious one I’ll use in my lifetime.” She smiled, a hint of teeth showing, so I knew it was an act. But then her eyes went over my shoulder, and her lips flatlined. “How are we going to share a bed tonight?”

I turned to look at the four-poster king-sized bed with black leather headboard. It was covered in a white comforter

with too many decorative pillows. “It’s going to be a challenge to share a bed with you and not ...” *Take you in my arms and make you mine.* “I’ll sleep on that couch thing,” I decided, spotting the black leather piece of furniture against the wall by the French doors.

“I think that’s a bench.” She smiled, a real one this time, because it reached her eyes. “You’re too tall. And it’s too narrow. You’d be better off on the floor.” Her hand went in the air as if to protest her own words. “And I’m not letting you do either. We’ll make the bed work.”

No, no we would *not* make the bed work. But I’d deal with that fight later. First, I needed to survive little-miss-drive-me-crazy taking a shower so close to me.

“You know, I’ve been wondering ...” Her lip went between her teeth for a hot second. “Did you get off that day when we were, um, texting? Or are you still a shade of blue? Not Rabbit Beach blue but—”

“I hate you,” I teased, then snatched her wrist and pulled her toward me in one fast movement.

The earrings fell to the hardwoods in the process, and I held her chin, guiding her eyes to meet mine.

“I did get off, but I am most definitely still in blue-balls-hell,” I gruffly shared, my cock uncomfortably hard and angry again. All thoughts of my brother’s situation were gloriously free from my head. “So, I’ll be jerking off in the shower.”

I let go of her chin and dragged my thumb along the seam of her mouth. The memory of going down on her was still fresh in my mind, and I’d be reliving that hot hotel moment while I stroked my cock.

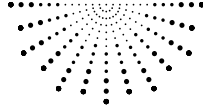
“You sure you want to wait?” she murmured, closing her eyes.

My breathing picked up as my gaze went from her long, dark lashes to her luscious lips. “No, I don’t want to wait. But I owe it to you to do exactly that.”

Her eyelids fluttered open, and when she kissed my thumb, my balls tightened. “Then I guess I’ll be a bad girl and touch

myself while in that shower, too.” She paused, her gaze tight on my face. “The only question now—who gets to go first?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



NATALIA

THIS IS ACTUALLY NICE. CONSIDERING THE FACT MAURIZIO HAD sent two guys to spy on Ryan, I was shocked I was enjoying myself so much tonight at dinner.

Maurizio was at the head of the eight-person table in the courtyard talking about the family business, and Ryan kept politely nodding as if he cared. Maybe he was starting to? I wasn't quite sure.

His uncle had the same rich, dark hair as Ryan but with silver at the temples. His eyes were a similar brown to his as well. He was only in his late fifties and had yet to marry. From what he'd said over dinner, he was too wrapped up in running the business to fall in love.

I guess I'd been expecting some suave asshole, or a cliché movie villain, but Maurizio was far from *The Godfather* or a comic book character I'd painted in my head.

After devouring several courses of food, I was somehow still energized and hanging in there even with the time change. Maybe it was the cozy setting?

The courtyard was comfortable thanks to the standing heaters to keep us warm. Throw in the soft music flowing from the speakers, the gorgeous colorful flowers, Italian lanterns with lit candles, strings of lights overhead, and the burbling fountain ... and well, it made for the perfect backdrop for a fake proposal.

In truth, I was mainly enjoying myself because of the sinfully handsome man across from me. The khaki linen pants

and stunning turquoise-green linen button-down I pretty much forced him to buy earlier fit him perfectly, accentuating some of his best features. The top few buttons were undone just the way I liked, showing enough to hint at the strength and power in his chest, but not enough to seem too relaxed and casual in the current setting. And I wanted to dive my hands into his sexy-messy hair while he kissed me stupid.

I couldn't help but tune out his uncle going on about the family business whenever my gaze fixed on Ryan, especially his strong, corded forearms, on display below the sleeves he'd cuffed to his elbows. *Mmm. That. Right there. That's my thing all right. Arm porn.*

He'd opted for his fancier watch instead of the typical black band Apple watch he wore, and he kept checking the time every few minutes as if he had somewhere else to go. Or maybe he was nervous for when the time would come to drop to one knee?

I took a quick sip of wine, my throat going dry at the idea of Ryan proposing and it'd be fake. I'd have to try and survive that somehow. I'd probably also need a second shower later. The uncomfortable tension between my legs had yet to be dulled, even after pleasuring myself in the shower before dinner.

As if Ryan had read my dirty thoughts, his knowing brown eyes cut my way, staring right through me. *Yup, your eyes. Also my thing. That broody look and devilish smile. Heaven help me.*

Ryan swirled his wine while holding my gaze, slowly raising the glass to his mouth, his tongue peeking between his lips as he took a sip. He knew what he was doing. And I didn't miss the reminder of when he'd gone down on me last night.

I shifted uncomfortably on the cushioned chair and searched for some type of willpower so I didn't self-combust in front of his uncle, sitting only two empty chairs away.

Of course, we'd been doing this little flirtation song and dance for the last two hours. Tempting each other. Teasing. Somehow, without our control snapping. *Yet.*

It was foreplay without touching, and it was making me crazy.

When he'd left the bathroom before dinner, only a towel hugging his hips just above that sexy V line, his hair messy and wet, I'd decided on some payback.

I'd asked him to zip up my dress, knowing full well the zipper started at the hem of my panty line. As he'd slowly slid the zipper up, I'd peeked back at him over my shoulder, and he'd leaned in, nearly kissing me.

Chills coasted along my spine at the memories from the room. Considering he was still devoted to looking at me as though he were mentally undressing me, I knew one of us would have to sleep on the floor if we were truly to share a room and restrain ourselves tonight.

I tipped my head toward Maurizio, reminding Ryan to focus back on whatever his uncle was saying about the business, but he didn't obey. Nope, beneath that salt-and-pepper facial hair, I saw the hard clench of the muscle in his jaw flex as he studied me.

"Laura said you can't hit your head again. What happened?" Maurizio's abrupt change in topic from business to personal finally snagged our attention, ending our erotic staring contest.

"My mother?" Ryan shifted back in his chair, suspicious eyes set on his uncle now. "You talked to her? When?"

Maurizio, who had a George Clooney thing going for him, drummed his fingers on the table by his wineglass. "We talk once a month. I check on her. Make sure she's doing okay and that she's never in need of money."

Ryan's eyes fell to his own wineglass, and he took a large gulp as he processed that bit of information, clearly surprised by it.

"I offered Laura the money after my parents passed as well, and like you, she rejected it. She asked for something else, though. To keep in touch. And we've been talking regularly ever since."

“I don’t know what to say,” Ryan returned, sounding more regretful than bitter.

“I have to admit, I wish we’d done this sooner. Your mother said we’d get along. I guess I was too afraid to reach out to you again after you told me the last time to stay out of your life the way I’d stayed out of Dante’s,” Maurizio shared, moving his hand to his chest as if the reminder of losing his brother hurt his heart.

“I was angry. Young.” Ryan finally looked at him again. “You could’ve tried harder. But then again, I suppose I could have as well.”

Maurizio unbuttoned his gray suit jacket, and a frown pulled at his lips. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust your intentions with Natalia. Sending my men to spy on you was a bit extreme, I suppose.”

“You think?” Ryan set his now-empty glass down a little harder than necessary.

“There’s something I need to explain, Ryan.” Maurizio’s brown eyes journeyed my way for a moment before going back to Ryan. Now he seemed to be the nervous one. “You have to understand, when Dante met your mother while she was studying abroad here, he was only nineteen. Same as you were when you left for the Navy.”

“And the age I was when he died,” Ryan tossed out the uneasy reminder, staring blankly at his empty wineglass.

Maurizio’s brows tightened. “I have many regrets, but one of the biggest is blaming your father for leaving here. Choosing Laura over the family. Leaving me when I was only twelve, when he’d been more of a father to me than our own had. I felt abandoned.” He lifted a hand to his chest and lightly tapped his fist twice as if restarting it, seeing if it’d beat again.

And oh God, had his uncle now given Ryan ammunition to draw parallels between himself and Anthony?

“What I failed to understand then was that your father didn’t leave me. *Our* family left him. Kicked him to the curb, as that saying goes, because of who he loved. It wasn’t his

fault. And I think I hated him even more when he died. Left me again, for good, and before we could make things right.”

I wanted to reach for Ryan and squeeze his hand. It wasn't easy for me to sit there and listen to his uncle's confession. I couldn't even imagine the pain it had to be causing Ryan.

“I truly am sorry we're only now doing this. Breaking bread together.” He sounded sincere, but would Ryan believe him? “Anthony was the only one who ever made an effort to see me here in all the years, but it was always for money.” The disappointment in his tone matched the sad look in his eyes.

And *that* had Ryan's attention. His focus snapped back to his uncle, eyes narrowing, jaw tight. I slid my palms along the shawl covering my arms at the chills the conversation had provoked and the direction it was about to go.

“Anthony offered to marry for the inheritance, even though he knew it was technically your money,” Maurizio shared, and my stomach tightened. I could handle the news, but I was worried what it would do to Ryan.

“He proposed to *me* to try and get the ten million dollars?” I asked, beating Maurizio to the reveal. When I stole a look at Ryan, his jaw was working overtime, and I half expected the arms of the chair he was gripping to splinter.

“I didn't understand why a hockey player needed the money, but he said not all pros make a ton of cash. And since you kept turning it down, and I knew Laura was always worried about Anthony's future after hockey, I agreed.”

“That son of a ...” Ryan pushed away from the table, probably leaving off “bitch” since technically that'd be referring to his mother, and not because he was just too angry to speak anymore. “That's why Anthony was so mad at me after I found him cheating and demanded he be honest?” Ryan stood so forcefully, the heavy chair rocked and fell backward. “*That* was why he was pissed at me? Because he'd lose the money?” He spun away from the table and maneuvered around the fallen chair, his hands going to his hips while bowing his head.

“I didn’t think you knew about that, and it looks like I was right.” Maurizio said a few words in Italian I didn’t understand as I hurried over to Ryan.

Standing behind him, I gripped his muscular arms, hoping my presence and touch would calm him.

“When he asked me if he could still have the money if he married someone else,” Maurizio began while opening his palms to the sky, “well, at that point, I’d changed my mind. Told him *you* were the only one who could access it, and to never bother me for money again.”

I urged Ryan to face me, but he wouldn’t budge. I knew he was questioning Anthony’s “hostage situation” and whether or not it was bogus.

“So, you understand my concerns when you called me asking for the money. I had to make sure you were serious. I was worried your brother put you up to it since it was the first time you’d reached out in your life.” The feet of his chair scraped against the pavers as Maurizio stood and turned to face us. “Looking at you two together, there’s nothing fake about your love. That much is obvious.”

Ryan lowered his hands and pivoted to the side, forcing me to let go of him.

“I know this is a bit awkward in light of the news, but if you want to do what you came here to do, then I suggest you go ahead. I do have to catch a flight early tomorrow. But perhaps you could come back and visit again? Or I could come to you? We have time to make up for, if you’re open to the idea of course.”

I backed up from Ryan, bumping into the table, as I tried to comprehend how fast everything was moving yet again.

My shawl fell to the ground, and I nervously shook my hands out at my sides as I waited for Ryan to face me, unsure what he planned to do in light of this new information.

He had every right to be angry and hate Anthony for using me to try and get the money then, *and* for now placing Ryan in the same exact spot to use me for money yet again.

I also knew Ryan wouldn't take the risk and assume Anthony was lying. He was still his brother, and if there was even a small chance Anthony needed help, he'd do it.

He couldn't spend the rest of his life living with regrets the way Maurizio had, and I wouldn't let him.

I reached for Ryan's hand and lightly tugged. "Is there something you want to ask me?" I whispered, reminding him of what he needed to do, and letting him know I was on board.

Maurizio was right, though. There was nothing fake about us. Anthony had been the only piece of fiction in my life. Nothing about him or our relationship had been real. And I only hated that I allowed myself to be in that position in the first place.

But I was human, and I'd have to forgive myself. And I wouldn't let that guilt stop me from being with the man I should have been with in the first place.

Ryan turned slowly, and I released his hand as he shifted around. He peered at his uncle for a brief moment, his jaw clenched, before focusing on me.

His gaze thinned as he slid his hands into his pants pocket, probably searching for the makeshift ring I'd created from my hoop earrings.

Drawing in a deep, ragged breath, he reached for my hand and interlaced our fingers. When he slowly lowered to one knee, I watched his anger for his brother take a backseat to the hero he'd always been, and I knew he'd always be.

Holding the ring in his other hand, he lifted it up and our eyes met. His breathing picked up as he quietly studied me, and I brought a hand to my chest, my heart beating wildly despite knowing this was all for show.

The second he closed his eyes and shook his head, I realized a proposal wasn't coming.

"I'm sorry. I won't do what he did to you. I can't," he gritted out, his lids parting. "I'll find another way to save him, if he even really needs it. Even though he doesn't deserve it."

“Stand up, son,” Maurizio said in a surprisingly even-toned voice. I kept my hand locked with Ryan’s as he stood and slipped the earring-ring back into his pocket. “I should have known you didn’t want the money. You’re like your father in every way.” He sighed. “How much does your brother need and why?”

Ryan released my hand and smoothed his palm over his jawline. “Loan sharks. Pay-up-or-die kind of people. Well, if Anthony’s telling the truth.” He paused. “He owes nine fifty.”

Maurizio shook his head. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I’m sorry I lied to you.” Ryan’s shoulders fell, but his eyes remained steadily on his uncle. And God, I wanted to reach out and hug the guy.

“You’re an honorable man. Just like Dante.” His mouth tightened, and he lightly nodded. “You’ll have the money in the morning.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



NATALIA

“I’M SO SORRY. FOR SO MANY THINGS.” RYAN CLOSED THE bedroom door and set both palms to it. His broad back flexed, the muscles drawing tight beneath the linen as he bowed his forehead between his hands.

“You don’t owe me any apologies.” I reached for his shoulder, hoping he’d face me, but his hands only turned into fists against the door. “That dinner wasn’t easy for you for so many reasons.”

Chills rolled over my skin at the memory, and I absentmindedly searched for the shawl, forgetting I’d left it outside. I folded my arms and ran my hands along them to try and chase away the chills.

“I think it would have been easier if Maurizio had been the asshole I’d made him out to be in my head all these years.” He finally turned around, and I stepped back to give him space. “Then to discover my mom talks to him regularly ... that was the icing on the cake. The fact she didn’t think she could share that with me sucks. She was probably worried I’d be pissed or something.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

“Whether Anthony’s lying about the danger he’s in now or not, what he did to *you* is unforgivable.” He tilted his head, studying me as if I somehow had the answer to a question he’d yet to ask. “I don’t know how to move on from that.”

I closed the space between us, completely unsure of what to say. On one hand, Anthony had been fully prepared to

marry me for ten million dollars, and to be used like that was hard to swallow. But then again, I never loved him, so it truly didn't hurt.

No, what pained me was seeing how the news impacted Ryan. The pain *he* felt at that betrayal was what did a number on me.

"I want you to forgive him." And I meant that. "I think he'll find even more ways to come between us if you don't." I reached for his shirt and tugged, a plea to listen. To not be stubborn. "He's your brother, and if you let what he did to me destroy your relationship, then I'm pretty sure it'll eventually destroy ours. Maybe even before it actually starts." And that thought scared me to death.

"Fuck him," he said, his voice hollow. And yet, his eyes were glossy with unshed emotions.

I shook my head and tightened my hold on his shirt, drawing myself closer. I could feel the tension and rage coiled just beneath the surface of his large, muscular frame.

Ryan's arms remained at his sides, but I knew him. I knew what he wanted. To touch me. Hold me. But he was too afraid to because of his anger. "I won't let him come between us anymore." This time his voice dropped so low the hairs on my arms stood. "I'm done."

I rolled my lips inward, searching for the right words when I truly didn't have them. Because I didn't know what to think or say.

Last week, I'd been worried I'd lose my restaurant. Now, I was worried I'd lose my heart.

It only beat for one man, and in that moment in the courtyard, I knew it'd never beat without him.

"Look what happened between Maurizio and your father." My shoulders fell. "You don't want a lifetime of regrets like your uncle. You'll save your brother because that's who you are. You don't quit on family."

"Saving his life is one thing. Forgiving him is another." He gently removed my hand from his shirt, forcing me to let go.

His breathing was still heavy and intense, but that dark look in his eyes transformed into something else. Instead of anger, there was ...

Lust.

Desire.

Need?

He angled his head, his mouth becoming a hard line of indecision.

He wanted me now. Didn't he?

I turned, unable to look him in the eyes and not lose myself in his embrace. I wanted to forget the heavy weight on our shoulders and free myself of our burdens. Even if it was just for one night.

“Unzip me, please?” I asked, my quivering lip hidden with my back to him.

I inhaled sharply as he shifted my hair around to my chest, his hand sliding along my shoulder, sending new waves of electricity down my spine.

He brushed his knuckles over my heated skin, following the current, as he slowly lowered the zipper to the hem of my panties.

He slid his hand across my bare shoulder and over to my collarbone, skating his rough palm to the column of my throat and securing my body to his.

“What are we doing?” My eyelids fluttered closed at the contact.

“Something we should have done a long time ago.” His hot breath feathered over the sensitive skin near my ear. “The only barrier in our way now are these clothes.”

With his hand still gently grasping my throat in a possessive and—holy hell—sexy way, I tilted my chin toward my shoulder.

His index finger brushed my chin at the movement, but his hand remained steadily in place as I opened my eyes.

His dark gaze was fixed on me, and I couldn't resist. When I offered him my lips, he leaned in over my shoulder so our mouths could connect. He brushed his lips over mine while his free hand swept the one sleeve of my dress from my shoulder.

My dress slid to the floor, leaving me in just my panties and heels. *Built-in bras, such a perfect accessory.*

He pulled his lips from mine and slid the hand at my throat up and over my mouth. I closed my eyes and kissed his palm as he worked it across my cheek before moving it back to my throat again.

Why was it so hot to have his hand there? Holding me like that?

I arched my back as he held me tight to his frame, and I shimmied my ass against his hard length, the light fabric of his linen pants barely a barrier between us.

I wasn't sure how we'd gone from discussing his brother to his hand slipping beneath my panties, but I didn't care. In the moment, it was just us. Everything else could wait.

"Ryan," I cried when he palmed my wet sex beneath my satin panties, his other hand remaining firm at the column of my throat.

When I opened my eyes, our heated gazes collided in the reflection of the full-length mirror. It was one of the most erotic moments of my life.

I hooked my arm up to grip the back of his neck, needing him even closer to me as he slowly fingered me in the most provocative way. My full breasts were on display, rising and falling as I whimpered and moaned from his touch.

His eyes moved to my erect nipples in the mirror, and his hand slid down from my throat to cup my breast. "You're so beautiful, Talia," he growled into my ear at the contact.

"You," I choked out, deciding he needed to know the truth. "You're why I named my restaurant Talia's. Because whenever you called me that, I felt safe. I don't know how to describe the way you make me feel. Even when we were fake hating each other, I just ..."

He stared deep into my eyes, his chest meeting mine with each deep inhalation. “You don’t have to describe it. I feel it.” His finger went still against my clit, somehow heightening the intimacy of his words. “I placed you on a pedestal years ago, and no one has ever come close to comparing to you. No one ever will.”

My chest tightened, the intensity of the emotions we both felt hitting me hard, and when he started moving his fingers again, I resisted the orgasm threatening to carry me away.

It was too soon. I needed more. More time with the sensations he brought out within me. He knew my body so well for only touching me the first time the other day. He’d ignited a fire inside me, and it raged and burned only for him.

“Make love to me?” I murmured as he held my eyes in the mirror. He nodded his answer, lifting his hand from my panties and releasing my breast.

I lowered my arm, and he circled me while working the buttons of his shirt free. I slid the material off his powerful shoulders and pushed it down his arms, anxious to take in the sight of him. I caressed the hard planes of his chest and ran my hands over his rippling abs, but he didn’t give me a chance to finish undressing him.

He grabbed my hips, trapping my hands between us as he pulled me against him. He kissed me passionately, his tongue twining with mine, before slowly working his mouth down my body. He paused at my breasts, taking his time to suck each nipple, drawing them into hard points with his teeth, before lowering completely to his knees.

He held onto my thighs while looking up at me, and I shuddered when he slowly dragged my panties down, never breaking eye contact.

Standing there in only my heels, feeling both exposed and protected, I glanced at the mirror. His taut back muscles flexed, and the pale marks from old wounds made my heart ache.

“I’m going to make you come on my tongue, then again once I’m inside you. Is that good with you?”

I swallowed and looked into his eyes as his fingertips buried into the flesh of my ass cheeks, before sighing, “Yes, please.”

A dark and sexy smolder flashed in his eyes as he kissed my sex, a look I was lost in before my head fell back at the flick of his tongue. The man was gifted. After a few heavy breaths, I dropped my focus back to the mirror, only to lose my breath again at the sight of my naked body, in only the black heels, and this sexy man on his knees for me.

My knees buckled.

My face was pink and warm. My hair a mess. My hard, pink nipples a match to my swollen lips.

I tore my hands through his dark locks and swiveled my hips, grinding my center against his face, taking what I needed and loving every moment. But I was anxious for our bodies to connect. I needed to feel him inside me. And I hoped like hell he brought protection, because I wasn’t on the pill.

He kept his face buried between my legs, licking and sucking. I tried to draw out the pleasure, mute the sensations coursing through me. But he was too sexy. Too good. And my stamina was poorly lacking.

When the hand at my ass cheek shifted to my wet center, and he pushed a thick finger inside my tight channel, I cried out and climaxed, unable to stop it from happening. “Yes, yes, oh God yes.” I didn’t care if anyone in the massive house heard me.

Legs quivering, and trying to catch my breath, I nearly doubled over when he pulled his mouth from my pussy. His strong arms steadied me before I stumbled forward in my heels. *You’ll always catch me, won’t you?*

Holding my arms, he kept his eyes on mine while rising. Drawn to his full height, he gazed down at me and slowly dragged his thumb along the line of his mouth as if tasting me again.

“I’m starving for you,” I whispered, my gaze dropping to his pants, and I began to unbutton them. “My turn.”

“I need to feel you, sweetheart. I can’t wait.”

“And I need to get on my knees for you.” I shoved his pants down, revealing his khaki-colored boxer briefs. “I’ve fantasized about this for too long.” My lips teased into a smile as I steadily worked my gaze up over his muscular body. “I’ll bring you just to the edge. Okay?”

He held my chin, gently drawing my face to his. “You’ve had me on edge since Wednesday night,” he rasped. “I’m not sure I can take much more.”

“You’ll take it until you can’t, I’m sure.” Oh, I was provoking a bull right now, wasn’t I? One that had yet to release his tension as I had.

Ryan’s brows slanted as he studied me, and I got the feeling he was on the verge of taking me hard. My thighs squeezed together at the idea of him losing control and being rough with me.

He pushed down his boxers. “On your knees, then,” he said darkly, his nostrils flaring.

Kicking off his loafers, he stepped free from his pants and boxers, leaving them between us as padding for my knees. *God, this man.*

He managed to keep hold of my chin as I slowly sank before him, forcing my gaze to remain on him as I went down.

He angled his head, eyes still riveted on mine, and I ran my tongue slowly between my lips as I waited for him to free my face so I could take him into my mouth.

His jaw locked tight when I took his cock in my hands. “Please,” I begged, desperation taking over, and his cock twitched in my palms.

He let go of my chin, but as I lowered my eyes to take in the sight of his thick, veiny length, he fisted my hair and tugged. I gasped in surprise as his grip forced my eyes back up. “Just to the edge, sweetheart, the place you love to keep

me. Do not get me off, so help me,” he hissed the warning, and I tightened my thighs at his rough tone.

“Yes, sir,” I said, my voice sounding so sultry I barely recognized it as mine.

His jaw tightened as he bit down on his back teeth, then killed me when he murmured, “Good girl.”

I grabbed hold of his muscular thigh for support while holding his cock in my other hand, opened my mouth, and slid my lips down the length of him, taking as much of him in as possible.

His leg muscle flexed beneath my palm when I moved my mouth slowly up and down his shaft, working him with my hand, too.

I swirled my tongue around the crown of his cock, catching the precum on my lips before dropping back down over him. I took my time, my sex getting wet and ready for him all over again.

He controlled my head with my hair, either preventing me from or resisting the urge to have me go harder. Faster.

He wanted it. But I knew he'd fight it. He'd wait so he could come for the first time inside me.

“Stop,” he growled out a moment later, and I hesitantly obeyed and eased back. When I looked up, his longing was clear in the depth of his eyes. “Up,” he grunted, and I smiled, imagining his ability to talk was limited because the blood from his head was rushing one way. South.

Ryan released my hair and helped me stand. His brows tightened. “I'm too wound up to be gentle,” he confessed. “But I swear, after I recover from fucking you hard and fast, I'll take my time and make love to you.”

I shivered at the promise and brought my body closer to his. My nipples rubbed against his skin, and I was greedy for him to touch me everywhere. To give it to me in every possible way. “You own me,” I blurted, unsure where that came from, but knowing it was the absolute truth.

Ryan frowned and shook his head. “You’re not a possession, Talia.”

“But I am yours,” I whispered.

He brought his mouth to mine, eyes still locked together. “Fuck yes you are.”

He kissed me fiercely. Passionately. Hands roaming over my body. From my face, through my hair, to my back and ass. He kept touching me as our tongues twined. And I never wanted him to stop.

“Condoms,” he said between hungry kisses, “are in my bag.” Another long, hot kiss before he pulled away.

He took a step back, dragging his hands through his hair, his eyes roaming over my naked body in the process. His hands tightened at his sides as if trying not to surrender to the urge to just take me bare. The thing was, I’d let him. To feel him skin to skin for our first time would be worth the risk.

But just because I yearned for something didn’t make it right, and Ryan was more than likely on the same page.

I kept my eyes on his tall, hard frame as he went to retrieve a condom. His glutes were every Renaissance sculptor’s dream. *Who am I kidding? Everyone’s dream.*

Ryan returned with an entire box of Durex. He retrieved a foil wrapper and dropped the box on the floor. “I meant what I said,” he began, his surprisingly steady tone a contrast to the wild look in his eyes. “I don’t think I can go slow our first time. My control when it comes to you is—”

“I want that, too.” I closed the space between us as he ripped open the package with his teeth.

“But I’ll break my own arm before I come first,” he said with conviction. “So, when the veins pop in my neck, don’t be surprised,” he added with a small smile, “that’s just me not dying from not coming first.”

How could I be so turned on, and yet, fighting laughter at his statement. “Lucky for your veins, I’m already hanging on by a thread.”

He rolled the condom over his hard length, his eyes turning feral as he reached the root. He came at me so fast I walked backward and fell onto the bed with him on top of me. He shifted me to the center and braced himself over my body with his strong arms, using his knee to nudge my thighs apart.

“Are you ready for me?” He brought his mouth near mine.

“That’s an understatement.”

“You’re going to be tight.” He set the head of his cock against my entrance, and I arched off the bed.

“Give it to me hard anyway,” I begged. His brown eyes flicked to my open mouth, and I prepared myself for the shudder of breath I knew was coming once I surrendered my body to him.

Bringing his eyes back to mine, he sank into me, filling me deeper than I’d known was humanly possible. I grasped his arms, my nails digging into his biceps, and lifted my hips as I took all of him. A harsh groan came straight from his chest, energizing every nerve ending as our bodies fully connected.

Worried he was still working to find some type of resolve to slow down, I whispered into his ear, “Lose control with me, Ry.”

He laced our fingers together, supporting the rest of his body over mine with one forearm. I hooked my ankles around his back and anchored my heels against his skin as his mouth crashed over mine. Kissing me hard. Fucking me even harder.

He squeezed my hand, driving deep and pulling out almost completely, over and over, continuously hitting the sensitive nub of my sex with each movement.

His lips left mine, and I opened my eyes to see him staring at me with each thrust. A vein in his forehead was visible, along with one at the side of his neck. I was sure if I looked, every vein in his arms would be popped right now.

“I need you to come for me, darlin’,” he rasped. “Please.” The word was more of a groan, desperate and demanding.

I followed orders. How could I not? I'd never felt like that before. Experienced a high like that. And I could no longer fight it.

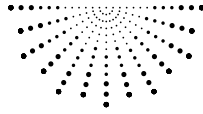
I came.

And hard.

My body shuddered, every part of me trembling as I rode the orgasm, crying out his name in the process.

I felt Ryan's body go rigid above me just before his release took him over the edge. As he settled gently on top of me, he brought his mouth to my ear and hissed, "You really are trying to kill me, aren't you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



RYAN

ONCE KNOCKING EVERY PILLOW TO THE FLOOR, I YANKED THE bulky comforter from the bed and added it to the pile. It was time to slow things down and worship the woman in front of me like she deserved. I wanted her on full display with nothing but the silk sheets around.

I'd lost all control with her our first time. By some small miracle, I'd held out, not coming until she had. I'd been close to breaking. She was so damn hot. And the little breathy moans and cries from her as I'd driven in and out of her had me losing my mind.

I began stroking my cock again, preparing myself to take her. Not that it'd take any effort. I was already hard again.

She climbed onto the bed and got on all fours. *Yup, I'm done.* Stiffer-than-stiff. "You think I can go slow in that position?" I laughed at the idea of doggy style with this woman, knowing that slamming my cock into her with that tight ass of hers against me ...

Not happening. Not this time, at least. I'd last all of two minutes. Opposite of what I wanted.

She playfully wiggled her ass, moving her hips side to side, then shot a saucy look at me over her shoulder. When she reached between her legs to touch her clit, I groaned and joined her on the bed.

"You're not playing fair."

She gasped as I flipped her to her back. When she asked, “Who said anything about fair?” I nearly gave in and flipped her back over, giving her exactly what she thought she wanted, but definitely not what I knew she needed.

“Giving me a hard time again, huh?” I positioned my thighs on each side of her legs, imprisoning her with my body.

“You seem so comfortable on that edge.” She lifted her head from the pillow, pulling her eyes from mine as her gaze skimmed down my body, and reached out with her hand to torture me. Her fingers danced over my skin just above the root of my shaft.

Bad girl. “Spending the last decade around you, I had to learn to live on that edge,” I reminded her.

I leaned over her gorgeous, naked body, allowing my heavy cock to touch her pussy as she rubbed her clit in small circles, every instinct practically begging me to fill her bare.

As much as I’d kill to do that ... we couldn’t. Not yet.

She circled her hand around my cock, eyeing me innocently as if she weren’t slowly jerking me off.

I was still having a hard time believing I was in my uncle’s house in Italy, in bed with the woman of my dreams. I refused to think about the reason we were there. All that mattered was she looked happy, and *I* was the cause of that. And she made me deliriously happy, too.

I leaned in, ready to kiss her again, *yeah, I’m done playing dirty*, when my phone began ringing. It was still in the pocket of my linen pants on the floor, and not even remotely what I wanted to be focused on. I ignored it and set my mouth to hers, but her lips froze against mine.

“What if it’s important?” she asked, releasing my shaft to push against my chest.

“Nothing could be more important than being with you right now.” *And that’s the truth.*

“It’s late at night. What if it’s Noah calling about something that can’t wait?”

I closed my eyes and hung my head. The worry and slight tinge of fear in her voice was the only thing making me reconsider all the ways I could make her forget the phone even existed. The ringing had stopped. Only for it to pick back up again. Another attempt to reach me.

“Don’t move, then,” I demanded. “Stay wet and ready for me, okay?” I dropped my eyes to her full tits and inched down her body to take one nipple into my mouth. My light nip had her pussy bucking against me, and I nearly slipped right inside. “Do. Not. Move,” I gritted out again, hating I was giving in and getting up from the bed.

But this was now call number three.

I stood and snatched my pants from the floor. My eyes remained on my gorgeous woman as I pulled my phone from the pocket. She didn’t obey. Of course not. She moved, but it was only to sit up and set her back to the leather headboard.

I held a palm up, a warning not to move again.

Only her eyes moved. *Good girl*. Her gaze followed my free hand as I wrapped it around my dick and slid it up and down. I wasn’t even sure she realized what she was doing when she opened her knees to show me her pink, swollen pussy. *Fuuuuck*. I needed her again. Right now.

“The phone,” she reminded me while it rang, and I let it go unanswered in my hand, too distracted to think straight.

Reluctantly, I let go of my cock and brought the phone to my ear, finally paying attention to the name on the screen. “Noah, what’s up? Everything okay?”

“No, man, it’s not,” Noah shared in a grave voice, and the eruption of gunfire in the background had my stomach dropping. My body went cold, and instantly on alert. “The property’s been breached. The home is being hit by ground and air. Over ten tangos by my count. It’s a full-on assault.”

I went to the bed and dropped down at the news, my heart racing in shock.

“What do you want me to do, man? There’s only two of us. But we’ll go in. Say the word. I’ll do my best to save him,”

Noah said, heavy breathing making his voice sound ragged. I could tell he was on the move.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, still processing. “Stand down,” I said at the feel of Natalia’s hand on my shoulder. “Don’t infil.”

“But your brother—”

“You’re outnumbered,” I cut him off. “I won’t have you sacrificing yourself,” I hissed. The hand holding the phone was shaking as I demanded again, “Stand. Down. That’s an order.”

The rumble of enemy fire in the background had my stomach twisting, and I could barely breathe. My vision blurred as I listened to the sounds of war over the line, knowing I was sitting there unable to do anything while my brother was more than likely dying.

* * *

“THEY TOOK HIM OUT ALIVE. THAT MEANS SOMEONE WANTS TO talk to him, right?” Natalia fidgeted with the strap of her silk robe, her gaze tracking my movements as I paced, waiting for Noah to call back. “There’s time to save him.”

I stopped wearing down the floors and faced her. “It depends on where they’re taking Anthony. What if we don’t have time to get to him? What if I’m too late?” I’d doubted my brother. Thought he was lying to me. Dropped the fucking ball. And now he was on his way to God knew where with a small militia of men who’d gone full-on war mode to get to him. “He pissed off the wrong people. But I don’t know who —” I let go of my words at the memory of what Noah had said to me the other day.

“What is it?” She closed the space between us and reached for my arm.

“I think my brother stole jewelry from the French model he’d been seeing in Monte Carlo,” I shared, reaching for my

phone to call Noah with the idea. “He probably sold it, then used that money at a casino.”

Her brows tightened. “I’m not following.”

“This model clearly has shit taste in men,” was all I could manage before calling Noah instead of waiting for him to get back to me. “Where are you now?”

“At the airport,” Noah returned. “I was about to call you. I know who has your brother and I have a final destination. We hacked the system to get the flight manifest. They’re heading to Monte Carlo.”

Where it all started. “Who? The model’s ex?”

“Yeah. He must’ve hung back at the airport while his men infiltrated the property. But I easily identified him when they all met up here.” Noah paused. “Your brother is banged up, but he’s still breathing.”

“What do you mean you easily identified him?” My heart was going to break free from my chest at this rate.

“Hugo Bernard has your brother,” he revealed, and it took me only seconds to put two and two together. Noah knew I was well aware of that name, because every Teamguy knew that fucking name. He wasn’t just a criminal, he’d been financing terrorist activities all over the world for the last decade.

The military had been hunting him for years. Hell, my own team had gone after him before. Unfortunately, the intel had been bad, and the mission had been a failure before it even started.

“Of all people for my brother to get mixed up with,” I said as my head fell back and I stared at the ceiling in frustration.

Noah was quiet for a moment before sharing, “My assumption is Hugo dated that model. She has to be the connection between all of this. I don’t have the details, but this is now a Bravo Team mission. Luke, Owen, and the others are being pulled from their current mission and being rerouted to Monte Carlo. This situation takes priority over whatever else they were working on.”

“Wait, what?”

“Hugo is now their HVT. The mission.” Noah paused to let that sink in, and I peered at Natalia, my body trembling at the turn of the events. “They’ll save your brother, too, don’t worry.”

“I’m going, too. Get me the location. I’ll meet them there,” I rushed out. “And don’t you dare try and tell *me* to stand down on this one.”

“Bravo One has orders—you’re not allowed on the op. You have to trust his team. It’s what they do,” Noah dropped the bomb as gently as possible, and I knew he was closing an eye and turning a cheek, waiting for a metaphorical blow from me over the line.

Bravo One? Has to be Luke. “Luke can kiss my ass when I see him. I’m joining the op. End of story.”

“This is a few levels above us, brother. I’m not allowed on the op, either.”

“I don’t give a damn about rank or chain of command. Their orders can come from the President himself, and nothing would stop me from joining.”

Natalia was now the one pacing, and my shoulders fell at the sight of her.

“It’s not just that. You’re not allowed to operate. Remember?” *Like I needed the reminder.*

“I’ll wear a helmet. Just get me the location. So help me God, Noah, don’t keep me in the dark on this.” I ended the call, not giving him a chance to argue.

I chucked the phone on the bed, anger spearing me from every angle. I had no clue if Anthony would still be alive by the time we arrived, but I refused to allow Bravo to go without me.

“You’re going,” Natalia said softly. I wasn’t sure if that was a statement or a question, but the sound of her voice broke my heart either way.

I looked over at the crumpled bedding. Making love would have to wait. “He’s my brother, and I can’t have my friends risking their lives for him while I sit on the sidelines.” I stepped in front of her, stopping her, and her hands slid to my bare chest, then she smoothed her thumb over a scar near my heart.

A moment later, I pulled on my linen pants. The fact I didn’t have my own boots to wear into battle would be an inconvenience I’d have to deal with when the time came.

We’d most likely be operating soon, but we’d need to hurry. We didn’t want to be chasing daylight, but we’d most likely be hitting Hugo’s place near sunrise given the hour now.

Hugo had escaped my team in the past, and like hell would I let him get away now. Not when he had my brother, and we were so close to an actual location for him.

“I’m going to take my uncle’s jet. His trip can wait.” *Whether he likes it or not.* “But I need you to stay here and wait for me. I don’t want you heading home without me, okay?”

“I want to come with you.”

The wobble of her chin nearly destroyed me, and I reached for her jaw. “You can’t. I need you here and safe. I won’t be able to focus on Anthony if I have to worry about you, too.”

“But your head.” Her eyes went to the wound by my temple. “Let your friends do this. From the sounds of it, they can handle it.”

“I can’t do that.” I let go of her face, and her hands fell from my chest.

“I asked you to forgive him. Not die for him.” She angrily swiped at her cheeks as she pulled away from me, resuming her pacing, and it crushed me. She was on the verge of breaking down, and it was my fault.

She came back at me, clenching her hands into fists, setting them to my chest as she bowed her head.

“Don’t do this, please,” she begged, the tears coming down steadily. I stood still, my body tense.

Knowing I could still lose my brother before sunup, regardless if I went to Monte Carlo or not, was starting to weigh on me. I didn’t want to risk losing her, too.

But ...

“*Never out of the fight*, remember?” I held her wrists, waiting for her eyes to meet mine. She slowly lifted her head and walked her gaze up to my face. “This is my last mission, though. I promise. But it’s one I have to go on.” I swallowed. “You told me I needed to forgive him. Have no regrets.” I ignored my own tears, focusing on hers instead. “Maybe you’re right.”

She caught some of her tears with her lips, swiping them along the seam of her mouth as she peered at me.

“Let me do this. It’s who I am. What I’m good at.”

“You told me in your truck you’d just be *my* hero,” she whispered, her tone fragile. “Uniform or not, you’ll always be everyone’s hero.” Her eyes fell closed. “Come back to me,” she murmured, her lids parting again to reveal shimmering green eyes. “No matter what, okay?”

That wasn’t a promise I could make. And it was one reason I’d never shared my feelings for her back while on the Teams. I didn’t think I was strong enough to do that to her. Put her through the wringer of emotions every time I spun up.

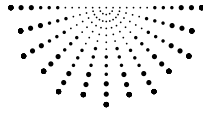
To have her worry like my friends’ wives every time the doorbell rang while they’d been deployed, too afraid to answer, terrified someone would be there in dress blues informing them their spouse wasn’t coming home.

I smoothed the pad of my thumb over her cheek before drawing it to her lips. “No matter what happens,” I said, repeating part of her request, “you should know that I, um ...”

Her mouth opened, and I pulled at her bottom lip with my thumb. More tears fell as she scrunched her brow, studying me. “Hate me?”

“Mm.” My lips twitched into a slight smile. “More like the opposite.” I leaned in and set my mouth to hers, praying to God I’d survive to tell her the real words that’d been on the tip of my tongue.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



RYAN

THE FACT NO ONE DREW THEIR RIFLES WHEN I PARKED BEHIND the three black Tahoes alongside the dirt road, meant Noah had given Bravo the heads-up I was en route. And he most likely waited until the last second to do so, or my phone would've been blowing up with calls from Owen already.

I exited the Explorer I'd rented and started toward the team as they geared up. From what Noah had told me, they were a half klick away from Hugo Bernard's temporary digs. Noah wouldn't be coming from Ibiza to join us. Luke had made up his mind. A Bravo-only mission.

Well, tough shit, I'm here. And God willing, Anthony was still alive for the rescue.

"You shouldn't be here," was Owen's greeting as he walked over to meet me halfway. I overheard Luke curse behind Owen, but I relaxed a bit as it didn't seem to be about me.

"I hate this place. Bad memories," I heard Luke saying to no one in particular. I wasn't sure what that was about, but I didn't have time to find out.

"I need clothes and a rifle." I one-arm hugged Owen, then eased back and waited, hoping he'd be on my side. It was zero four hundred, and we were short on time.

"Luke's in a pissy mood. He hates Monaco. A story for another day. Actually, it's a classified story, so forget I said anything. But you're going to have to convince him to let you operate. You know I've got your back if you want in," Owen

said with a shrug. “If my brother was in there, whether he was a dickhead or not, I’d go after him. No one would be able to stop me.”

“And it’s my understanding, he’s a real dickhead,” I heard one of the guys gruffly remark, and I turned to locate a familiar voice.

Asher Hayes? I jerked a thumb his way, but I shouldn’t have been shocked to see him there. He was married to Luke’s sister. It’d been a long-ass time since I’d seen him, but he’d once been part of DEVGRU, too.

I let that development sink in as I turned my attention to the other two recognizable men off to Asher’s left. One of the world’s best snipers was there. As well as my friend from BUD/S, Knox, the President’s son. And yet, no Secret Service in sight.

Luke, a Viking of a man with his tall frame, Iclander-blue eyes, and blond hair, headed my way. I couldn’t tell if the look on his face meant he was going to hug me as Owen had or knock me out for being there. “This is a regular day for us. *You* haven’t operated in three years. Plus, it’s personal for you. Personal makes shit dangerous.”

“Yeah, you’re not one to talk, man.” Owen pointed to the woman sitting inside one of the SUVs, a bulky computer on her lap. It’d been a long time, but I recognized her as Luke’s sister. “Don’t act like you haven’t made it your personal mission to save Jess on more than one occasion.”

Luke reached for my hand and pulled me in for a quick hug instead of hitting me. “I’m sorry this is the reason we’re finally getting to catch up with each other. And I’m even more sorry to tell you that you’re going to be sitting your ass out on this one.”

I peered around at his crew that made up Bravo Team. They could use a sixth man. And they’d be getting one, regardless. “Don’t make me pull rank on you, brother. I served longer, and I’ll—”

“If we’re going to get into a rank pissing match, then so be it.” Luke folded his arms, standing his ground. I glanced at Owen for support, but he just tossed a hand in the air as if to say, *I’ll let you two duke it out, I’m not involved*. Luke waited for Owen and the others to busy themselves with the gear before talking again. “Technically, I never really left the Navy. So, actually, I outrank you. And now that you know the truth, POTUS will need you to sign something to promise you won’t share that bit of news with the world.”

Clearly, I was right. Clandestine ops for the President. I shook my head. “Well, I’ll sign whatever you need if it means letting me operate.”

Luke glanced at his teammates as they unpacked the gear and weapons from the trunks of the SUVs. My attention moved to Jessica, who was once CIA, and most likely the brains of the op tonight. At least, she was probably the one who put together the intel needed to infil Hugo’s property.

“Listen, I don’t know how your brother got himself mixed up with a guy like Hugo, but I do know we’ve been after this man for a long time. In some weird twist of fate, your brother’s helping us bring down one of Interpol’s most wanted men,” Luke stated as if that were supposed to make me feel better about the insane situation my brother was wrapped up in.

“Go figure all it took to lure an internationally wanted criminal was an ex-lover,” Asher spoke up, eavesdropping as he packed his vest with magazines. He went over to Jessica in the SUV. “Maybe the Agency should use that as a strategy to get the bad guy from now on?” he suggested. It felt like a bit of a jab toward her previous employer. Interesting dynamic between them. Even if Anthony wasn’t involved, it might be fun to hang around just to see them in action.

She slapped the air instead of his face, then turned her attention back to her laptop, ignoring Asher and his laughter. Was he looking to get into a fight to have some makeup sex post-op? Knowing him? Probably.

“Anthony’s my responsibility.” I focused back on Bravo One, the only person I’d need to convince to operate tonight. “You deal with your HVT. I’ll rescue my brother.”

“We could use the extra numbers. This is a last-minute job with nearly no prep,” Jessica spoke up, turning on her seat to look at me for the first time, and I nodded my hello. “Let him roll with the team. POTUS will get over you breaking orders when you bring Hugo in alive.”

I collapsed my arms over my chest, my nerves wired. I was grateful my uncle had allowed me to “commandeer” his jet and forgo his work trip, but even more thankful my uncle’s men had fetched us from the hotel in Charlotte ahead of schedule. If they hadn’t, I’d never have made it to Monaco in time.

Everything happens for a reason. “I’m here, and I’m going in.” Maybe Knox can convince his father? Call the President to get permission for me?

Luke stroked his jaw, his eyes trained on the dirt beneath his boots. “You know I would’ve recruited you back in twenty thirteen if I thought you would have joined, right?”

That wasn’t what I’d been expecting him to say. And I didn’t know how to respond.

“I didn’t think you’d want to leave Alpha,” he added when I remained quiet. He let go of a deep sigh, held one hand up to me, and muttered, “Give me a second.” Luke left my side and went over to the SUV, exchanging a word with Asher and Jessica.

While waiting for him, I reached into my pocket and addressed Owen. “I need you to do me a favor,” I said quietly. He allowed his strap to catch the weight of his rifle as he let go of it. “Here.” I offered him the note I’d written on the plane ride over, but he didn’t take it. “If something goes sideways tonight, get this to Natalia Romano,” I shared, my voice low so Luke wouldn’t overhear. “I have a hundred K in my savings, and you have to make sure that goes to her somehow, okay?”

Owen's brows snapped together as he studied the letter. "No." He shook his head. "Like hell am I taking that from you. You know what will happen if I do." He lifted his palms in the air and backed up. "That'd be a death sentence for you. Fuck that."

"Please. I can't go in there not knowing she'll be taken care of if something goes wrong," I admitted, my voice raw with emotion at the idea of leaving her like that.

Owen gripped my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. "Then don't go in there."

"If something happened to you because of my brother, I couldn't live with that." *Hell no.* "Over my dead body are you going in without me."

"Dead body?" Owen winced and pulled his hand back only to give me the bird. "You really do have a death wish talking like that." He waved his hand, telling me to put the letter away. "I agree with Luke now. You're sitting your ass out on this one. *I* wouldn't be able to live with something happening to *you*." When I didn't budge, he let go of a heavy breath. "Look, this is what I do now. Last-minute, barely planned ops with a hell of a lot of risks," he steadily went on, the implication clear that I *didn't* do that. "We've got this."

Before I could challenge him, Luke called me back over, and I shoved the note in my pocket as I approached him. "Yeah?"

I had my back to Asher and Jessica, but I hoped they'd have my six in all of this. That they'd convinced their stubborn team leader to let me join.

"I'd love to work alongside you again, like old times. If I didn't have orders, or if I wasn't so worried you'd get hurt." Luke's mouth tightened apologetically. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you go." His eyes went to the sky. "And I'm sorry for this." He tipped his head to the side, and before I knew it, there was an arm around my neck.

Asher had me in a choke hold. "Sorry, brother, just putting you to sleep."

Luke turned as I struggled, as I tried to resist Asher. I was strong, but exhausted from jet lag, and frankly, nowhere near in the same shape as Asher. Plus, the guy had a definite height and size advantage over me. Not to mention he'd been an underground MMA fighter once upon a time ago.

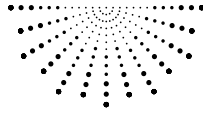
I'd fight until my last breath, though. I had to go in there, even if Luke, and now Owen, were too damn stubborn to agree with that.

Everyone except Owen was there now, assisting Asher, since I was fighting them like an angry bear, trying to free myself from his grip. I felt a pinch near my shoulder and realization hit me harder than any blow they would land.

They weren't trying to knock me out for seconds with a choke hold. They were *drugging* me.

And damn it ... I could feel the lights going out, and my eyes slowly fell shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



RYAN

“WAKE UP, RYAN.” WAS THAT A WOMAN’S VOICE? AND WAS someone slapping my shoulder?

I forced my eyes open, trying to remember where I was and what was going on.

I was in the passenger seat of an SUV, and we were on the move. *What the hell is happening?*

And then I remembered. Luke had me taken out so I wouldn’t be a pain in his ass and force my way onto his op. I knew he was only following orders, and trying to protect me from destroying my head for good, but ...

“What’d you guys give me?” I hissed, focusing on the driver of the SUV as I rubbed my arm at the memory of the needle jab.

“Nothing dangerous, and something we could reverse if needed.” Jessica abruptly turned the wheel to make a sharp turn, throwing my sore arm against the passenger door. “And it’s needed.”

I sat taller as her words sunk in, the reality of it hitting harder when I discovered a rifle by my legs, and a vest with night-vision goggles attached to a helmet on my lap.

“You’re getting your wish, you’re going in,” Jessica rushed out. “The guys are in trouble, so I’m driving you closer. It’s a risk, but we need to save time. They split into two teams. Bravo One, Four, and Five breached from the north side to take down the HVT. Bravo Two and Three took the south side

where we believed your brother to be. They're working on rescuing him now." She paused for a breath. "We'd thought there were only four snipers positioned on overwatch."

I forced away the remnants of sleep and slipped on the plated vest. "I should have gone with them. Your husband shouldn't have listened to Luke and—"

"And if you'd gone in with them, you'd be pinned down, too. There's a fifth sniper somewhere on overwatch outside the compound, but the guys can't get a clear shot without risking taking a bullet themselves."

I secured the helmet on my head and knocked the goggles up.

"This was a last-minute op. I didn't have all the details," she continued. "I managed to put up a small drone while you were lights-out before the guys went in to detect heat signatures, but I missed someone outside the compound on overwatch."

Shit, she was blaming herself for not knowing about the fifth shooter.

"You're Luke's contingency plan," she added before pulling over. I spotted the compound up ahead and heard gunfire. "He knew he might need backup if things went sideways, but he didn't think you'd agree to remain benched until called up."

"Sounds like him." With a quick nod, I reassured her, "I've got this. I won't let anything happen to them." As I reached for the door handle, she handed me a comm and what looked like a watch, but it was the GPS tracker to find the boys.

"You're Bravo Six tonight," she said as I positioned the wireless comm in my ear and strapped the tech to my wrist. "Once you take out the sniper, you can either join the second team to help grab your brother on the south side, or head back here. Your choice."

"You already know what I'm doing." I checked the screen on the watch, which showed an aerial view of the compound. The footage was taken about an hour ago, so it wasn't in real

time, but it was enough to work with for now. I just needed to find the sniper's location and take him out. "See you soon."

Shutting the door, I ran to the nearby bushes, then used the brush for cover as I maneuvered toward the property. What was probably at some point a rich man's paradise was now a battleground.

I activated the comm and said, "This is Bravo Six. Advancing into position."

A pop of static filled my ear, followed by close range gunfire and Luke shared, "This is Bravo One. That's a good copy." He was quiet for a moment. "And also, sorry."

"Yeah, yeah." I hurried to my next position, finally at the perimeter of the compound, and knocked the NVGs into place. From the corner of my eye, I spied movement in the woods at my nine o'clock.

Shit, maybe Luke was right. Had it been too long since I'd operated?

But when I fired my first round at the unexpected tango, my training kicked in. Like riding a bike.

Pushing aside the fact I'd killed someone for the first time in years, I continued moving.

"This is Bravo Five. I have the fifth sniper's location. Sending you the coordinates now."

"This is Six, roger that." I checked the watch and waited for the location to show up. "I have it. On my way there now. What's my brother's status?"

"This is Two. We have eyes on him," Owen responded. "He's being held in another building away from the main house. Sort of looks like a two-story barn. Maybe a car shop. I can see him on the second floor through the window. He's bound and gagged in a chair, but we can't infil with this sniper still out there."

He's still alive. I let go of a heavy breath. "Roger that. Don't worry, I've got you. Just give me a minute." Finding a relatively safe position atop a nearby hill, I took a knee. The

coverage was shit, so I'd need to act fast before the sniper made me.

I steadied my breathing as much as possible and readied the long gun, working to locate the bastard in the woods in his overwatch position. When the sniper sent out his next shot, it gave away his exact location. *Gotcha.*

"This is Six. I have the target in my sights." I said a quick prayer, knowing I could handle it, but it would've been nice to have the world's best sniper out there on the long gun instead.

"Send the shot," Luke ordered. I quickly fired off the round, then used the scope to check if I nailed him.

My shoulders fell with relief as the lifeless body hit the ground. "This is Bravo Six. He's down. You're free to move."

"That's a good copy. Nice work," Luke responded. "Bravo, heads on a swivel. Charlie Mike."

Charlie Mike. *Continue mission.* And I knew what I had to do next.

I quickly slid down the hill to maneuver through the side wall the guys had opened up with a breacher charge while I'd been Sleeping Beauty. "En route to you now, Bravo Two and Three."

"This is Two. Roger that," Owen returned, no pushback at the fact I was joining.

Once inside the compound, with shots from an unknown location being fired, I took cover by the helo parked there.

Bullets pinged off the bird, and I crouched, narrowly avoiding a headshot. Cursing, I lowered to one knee, spun around and pegged the prick who'd come charging at me. Now *he* definitely had a death wish.

Once I laid him out, I checked the view on my watch to try and locate the barn, which I'd yet to lay eyes on.

"This is Two. I'm taking heavy fire. These bastards just shot at something highly flammable," Owen rushed out, breathing hard. "The place is going up in flames quick."

“My brother, is he out?” I rasped as I took off, heading for their presumed location.

“Yeah,” Owen quickly responded. “Bravo Three has him, but I got backed into a corner while I gave them cover. I can’t exfil yet.”

“I’m coming back for you,” Three rasped over the line.

“I’ve got this,” I said at the sight of the barn. “Just get to safety,” I told Asher.

Static filled the line, and I heard Luke’s voice. He was trying to say something, but the signal was too corrupt to understand. Based on the sounds of war in the distance, he was in the middle of his own gunfight.

“Don’t come in here. Either of you,” Owen hissed, and I heard more rounds from his rifle firing off. “I’ll find a way out of here. Just help the others,” he ordered, drawing the same conclusion about Luke’s situation.

The way I saw it, Bravo Team never would’ve rushed to infil if my brother’s life wasn’t on the line. They’d have done a lot more recon beforehand. But they knew my brother’s chance of survival decreased every minute he was held captive by Hugo, so they had no choice but to go in hot and quick.

This is my fault. Anthony’s fault.

Making my way to the barn, I charged the side entrance, taking out the first tango that came into view. The next asshole I encountered earned a double tap to the head.

“Where are you?” I called out, just missing a round to the chest. From the looks of the place, I needed to get Owen the hell out of there fast before the place blew.

Owen took down the guy who’d shot at me and emerged from behind a car at the back of the barn. “Let’s roll,” I told him now that it was clear, and he started maneuvering between the rows of antique cars to get to me.

The wooden beams on the second floor were up in flames, and when I looked around the place as Owen advanced, I

realized the full gravity of our current situation. And we were about out of time.

Tanks of gasoline off to the side of the cars were leaking onto the floor, and there was a noticeable slick on the ground not far from Owen.

“Owen,” I called out, noticing a beam snap overhead. He deftly dodged the thick piece of wood that came down in a ball of fire.

“Go.” He waved his hand while running through the large space, motioning for me to get a move on.

I located the entrance, then waited. Like hell was I walking out of there ahead of him.

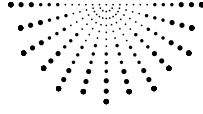
But I also had a keen awareness of what was about to happen. The smell of fuel and smoke filled my nostrils just as the cars went up in flames, exploding behind Owen, the blast propelling us both forward.

Everything felt as though it were happening in slow motion. I connected with the ground a moment later, and my helmet went flying. I lifted my chin to try and locate Owen. I could feel the heat and fire licking the air all around us, and I rolled my aching body to the side to see the roof overhead on the verge of collapsing.

Spotting Owen, who appeared out cold, I crawled over on my forearms, dragging my legs behind me as I struggled to stay beneath the smoke.

“Owen,” I yelled, then threw my body on top of his just before the roof came down.

CHAPTER THIRTY



NATALIA

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS,” MARIA SAID OVER FACETIME, sitting out in her car for some privacy while Chiara slept inside our parents’ house. “You don’t have to listen to me ramble when you’re waiting for news.”

It was six a.m. in Tuscany, the middle of the night back home, but Maria had stayed up, “holding my hand” through the phone, keeping me from breaking down.

“Seeing Chiara in her adorable costume last night is not a hardship.” I swiped through the trick-or-treating photos she’d sent me from earlier that night. “And also, the fact you’re prolonging telling Thomas the breakup news because of what’s going on here, well, ramble away, please.”

“When I saw Thomas earlier,” she said, eyes on the screen, “having to pretend I didn’t know he’d had his tongue somewhere else a few days ago made me physically ill. But I played the game. Got through it. Thankfully, he didn’t question my request to sleep over at Mom and Dad’s again tonight. I can’t share a bed with that man ever again.”

Chills darted down my spine at her words.

“I think I’m just ...”

“What?” I sat taller at the drop of fear that managed to penetrate the phone line. “Has Thomas ever hurt you?” Every part of my body snapped to attention at the idea he’d ever set a hand on Maria.

“No, no. Nothing like that.” She clutched her thick, cotton robe, holding it tight to her chest. “He’s just not the man I thought he was. It’s making me a little nervous about how he’s going to react when I tell him I know he cheated. And that I’m moving out. What if the courts won’t let me get a quick divorce because I don’t have proof of his cheating? Too bad I picked up the call and didn’t let it go to voicemail.” She frowned and began emphatically shaking her head. “I can’t do some year-long separation period with him.”

“Maria, I—”

“Let’s change the subject. Please. Tell me about your first time together. You know, before you were interrupted. Was it a lot different from Anthony?”

I stood and began pacing the bedroom Ryan and I had shared last night. I peeked at the mirror where I’d watched him on his knees, devouring my pussy, not that long ago. The memory rendering me motionless.

We’d had sex. Wild, hot sex. And before we could make love passionately, he’d been taken from me.

“Or do you not want to compare? Is that a horrible thing I asked?” Maria’s question jarred me back to reality, stealing my attention from the echoes of what should have been a night to remember. And still would be, but for very different reasons.

“There is no comparison,” I admitted. “Anthony was selfish in the bedroom, and Ryan’s already proven he’s devoted to putting me first. It’s not what I’m used to, in general.”

“You deserve to be put first,” Maria said softly. “And he’ll be okay. You’ll finish what y’all started.”

“I hope so.” I checked my watch and stopped pacing.

“I still can’t believe Enzo has a private jet on standby in case we need to tell Laura, um ...” Maria let her words hang, knowing the only reason we’d tell Ryan’s mom anything would be because there was bad news. The kind of news that required her to fly overseas at the last minute.

“Yeah, well, his family has the kind of money to pull off a jet on standby. Money I won’t let him use to help the restaurant.”

“What do you mean? What help do you need?” My sister scooted in her leather seat, sitting taller at my accidental slip about my money issues. Issues which should’ve been the last thing on my mind with everything else happening.

But Maria was right. She needed a distraction from Thomas. I needed one from the helplessness I felt over Ryan’s situation.

“Things are just tight, money-wise, at the restaurant. Typical new-business stuff. And you know Enzo, offering to help at every turn,” I said, doing my best to play it off as no big deal.

“Is that why you wanted to talk to Kate Maddox at the party? The catering idea? Would it help you?”

“Just a business idea. No worries Enzo couldn’t talk to her at the party.” I thought back to our earlier conversation, and the fact Enzo had been the man Calista wanted but couldn’t have. According to my sister, she’d tried to steal him away from her at the party, and he’d verbally knocked the princess from her throne when she’d insulted Maria. Yeah, bad move.

Once again lost in my musings, my heart jackhammering in my chest, I realized I had an incoming call. I stared at the name associated with the number Ryan had given me as a “just in case” before taking off.

Noah Dalton.

“I have to take this. It’s Ryan’s friend.”

“Okay,” Maria rushed out. “He’ll be okay!”

“Yeah, I—I hope.” Fear gripped me as I wondered why Noah was calling instead of Ryan. I switched the call over to him. “Hello,” I meekly answered.

“Hey, this is Noah. Ryan gave me your number. I’m ...”

No, no, no. I heard the dot-dot-dot in his tone, and I fell to my knees on the hardwoods as I waited for him to continue.

He cleared his throat, obviously struggling with his own emotions. “I was in Ibiza during their, uh, operation in Monaco, and so I’m on my way there now. I’m heading to the hospital.”

Hospital? Hospital means survival but injury, right? “Tell me Ryan’s alive. Please,” I cried in desperation.

“He’s alive, yes.”

“So then why are you calling instead? Is he not capable of calling?” I already knew the answer but needed him to spell it out for me.

“The team originally didn’t want Ryan to operate. From what I was told, they actually put him to sleep because he was so stubborn.”

You’re stalling, damnit.

“When shit went sideways, and the guys needed an assist, he was the only one who could go in and save them.”

I closed my eyes and fell back onto my heels, the weight of my body too heavy to remain upright.

“Our friends, Owen and Asher, went to rescue Anthony inside an auto body barn, and Asher was able to get Anthony out as planned with Owen providing cover. But then more guys unexpectedly flooded in, cornering him with no viable way out. The place caught fire, too, and ...”

Oh my God.

“... Ryan ran in to help him. They took out the armed tangos together and were heading to exfil when the cars blew up. The guys weren’t right in the blast, which was good, but they were thrown from their feet.”

I covered my mouth, trying to keep the sobs at bay. *Ryan’s head.* Tears flew down my cheeks, my attempts to swipe them away with the back of my hand completely futile as I tried to hold myself together and not totally break down. Eventually, I stopped trying to fight the emotion and just let the floodgates open.

He was taking too long to get to the exact reason Ryan was in the hospital, which was such a bad sign.

“Asher ditched Anthony to head back and save them. Shockingly, Anthony went back and helped, too. But the structure was collapsing and—”

“So help me, Noah. Please, you’re making me wait to hear the end result. What do I not want to hear?” I couldn’t take it anymore. “Is Ryan going to be okay?”

Noah was quiet for a moment. “He’s in surgery,” he finally shared. “They found Ryan on top of Owen, shielding him with his body beneath a lot of debris, and well, part of the roof.”

“Surgery for what?” I cried.

“There was some internal bleeding in his chest from the trauma, and they’re working to contain that bleed. And they’re monitoring some minor brain swelling as well. There were also some burns, respiratory things from the fire, abrasions on his body, too.” He paused to let it sink in. “Ryan took the brunt of the trauma since he protected Owen, but he’ll pull through. Try to be optimistic. I, uh, thought you’d want to head to the hospital and be there when he wakes, though.”

I swallowed the fist-sized lump down my throat to answer, “Of course. I’ll find a way there. Please, um, keep me updated if anything changes.”

“I’m so sorry,” Noah said. “He’s tough. He’ll make it.”

“He has to.” I sniffled. “But three years ago, the doctor told him if he had another blow to the head, he may wake up but not remember who he is,” I whispered, my voice too hoarse and my heart too hurt to utter the words any louder.

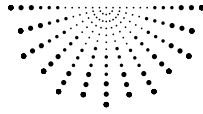
“I, uh, don’t know, Natalia.”

I dropped the phone, leaving Noah waiting for a response. Dazed, I made my way to my feet and left the bedroom in search of Maurizio.

I finally found him awake and in the kitchen, and the color drained from his face when he saw me.

“It’s Ryan,” I cried, my lower lip trembling so bad I wasn’t sure if he heard me. “I need to get to the hospital in Monte Carlo. Can—can you help get me there?” I asked. He reached me just in time to catch me as I collapsed into his arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



NATALIA

“HEY, I’M NOAH. WE SPOKE ON THE PHONE.” INSIDE THE private waiting room, a tall, well-built guy reached for my hand, but I threw myself at him instead. He flinched at the unexpected contact, then hugged me back. “Shh. It’s okay.” He smoothed his hand up and down my back a few times, murmuring, “He’ll be fine.”

I was probably soaking his tee with my tears, but he didn’t seem to care and continued to comfort me as I got my emotions back under control. I had a feeling the other men in there that looked like they’d been to hell and back were also Ryan’s friends. I’d need to face them in a second and not be a total disaster. “I’m sorry.” I finally pulled myself together and stepped free from his embrace. “This is Ryan’s uncle, Maurizio.”

Maurizio shook his hand, both men probably grateful to avoid an awkward hug, and then Noah turned his attention to the others in the room. Four men and one woman were there, regarding us with what could have been sympathy or empathy depending on what Noah was about to tell us.

“Just before you got here, the doctor told us Ryan’s surgery was a success.” When Noah revealed the incredible news, I went right back into his arms again, nearly collapsing with relief.

“Thank God,” I cried.

“The bleed was contained, and the swelling in his brain came down on its own, so they didn’t need to induce him into

a coma. The doc said he's lucky given his prior head injuries," Noah went on.

I peeled myself free from his embrace a moment later and swiped at my cheeks, struggling to get my voice to operate. "Is he awake yet?"

"He should hopefully wake up on his own soon."

Hopefully? My legs were going to give out again, and Maurizio caught my back with his hand as if realizing I needed the support.

"They'll need to monitor Ryan for another forty-eight hours before they consider him totally out of the woods, but they're optimistic," Noah went on.

Forty-eight more hours of worrying?

"He'll be okay," Maurizio said in a tight voice, sending me strength with a determined, although obviously distressed, glance.

Noah cleared his throat, most likely shoving down his own emotions, then jerked a thumb toward someone else now on their feet in the room.

"This is Asher, the one who dragged Owen and Ryan out, with Anthony's help." Noah pointed to a guy who could've been Aquaman's stunt double.

I did my best not to launch myself into his arms next. "Thank you," I said with a nod as the blonde woman next to him rose, offering her hand.

"My wife, Jessica." Asher tipped his head toward her.

"Hi." God, my voice was still strangled by emotion. And it'd be that way until Ryan opened his eyes and I knew he was okay, his memory intact.

"Owen's in the room next to Ryan. He wanted to be nearby when Ryan woke up so he could chew him out for going Superman on him, covering him with his body like that," Asher shared in a deep, gruff tone.

Superman? Of course, you did that. “Knowing Owen is okay will be the first thing Ryan wants to hear when he wakes up.”

“Fortunately, we can give him that good news,” Jessica confirmed, and her worried blue eyes pointed my way. “Anthony’s in Ryan’s room right now, just so you know.”

“Once they dealt with Anthony’s burns from going into that fire, and patched him up from the beating he took before we got there ... well, we’ve been unable to get him to leave Ryan’s side,” Noah continued, a tremble of anger in his tone.

My hands tightened at my sides at the mention of Anthony. He may have run into a fire to help save Ryan, but Ryan was in that hospital bed because of him in the first place. And if anything happened to Ryan, there’d be no forgiveness. No mercy.

A moment later, a tall, blond guy in the room snagged my focus and introduced himself as Luke. “We’ve been in this situation before.” He jerked his chin toward one of the other men, who was sitting next to someone I’d swear was President Bennett’s son. That’d be impossible, though. But the man pulled at the brim of his ball cap as if worried I might recognize him, so ... “My friend here had to be induced into a coma after a blast, and—”

“I’m here and fine.” The guy winked. “So, no worries, okay? Ryan’s a tough bloke. He’ll be fine, too.” Was that an Aussie accent?

Who were these people?

I wasn’t sure if I was all that comforted by the fact these guys were used to such blasts, but I’d do my best not to panic any more than I already was.

“I’d like to see my nephews after you, if you don’t mind?” Maurizio sought my eyes for permission.

“Of course.” I nodded, then peered at Noah. “Will you take me to Ryan’s room?” I couldn’t wait any longer to see him.

“Sure.” Noah swapped places with Maurizio, his hand going to my back in a silent gesture of support and strength.

I looked around the waiting room at the others. “I’m sorry Anthony put you in this position. I hope you were able to get the, um, bad guy who took Anthony, though.”

“We always get our mark,” Luke said in a firm tone, letting me know in a semi-cryptic way the bad guy was down. That was more good news, at least.

“Well, thank you for being there for Ryan. Looks like he has amazing friends.” I forced a smile, worried I’d do the opposite and cry in front of them again if I tried to say anything more.

Luke stepped forward and pulled a folded piece of paper that looked like it’d seen better days from his pocket. Crumpled. A burnt edge or two. He eyed it solemnly before raising his eyes to mine. “I didn’t want him going in there. Tried to keep him out of there, in fact. I wish we hadn’t needed his help, but—”

“Never out of the fight, though, right? That’s what Ryan always says to me,” I interrupted, knowing Luke, who I now assumed was in charge of whatever went down, was weighed down by guilt. “Ryan’s Ryan,” I said, and Luke sent me a tight nod as if in agreement.

“This has your name on it. Pretty sure he wrote it for you before the op.” Luke handed it to me.

An if-something-happens-to-me letter? My hand trembled as I studied the piece of yellow paper Ryan had probably torn from a legal pad aboard his uncle’s jet.

“Are you saying I should read it?” I whispered, tears filling my eyes.

The guy with the Aussie accent looked at me. “Maybe read it *to* him? When I was down for the count, and my wife was worried I wouldn’t wake up and remember her, she read me something, and well ... it, uh, helped.”

I surrendered to a few more tears, which had Noah lightly patting my back to comfort me. “Okay, thank you.” I gulped, eyeing the note one more time before Noah directed me to Ryan’s room.

I ignored the vibration in my pocket, knowing it was probably Maria calling again for an update.

“You ready to see him?” Noah asked just outside the room.

“Yes,” I mouthed, then followed him into the room a moment later. I slowly worked my eyes from the laminate floor to the bed, and wilted at the sight of Ryan lying there with his head wrapped, arms dressed in bandages, a breathing tube in his nose, wires and monitors everywhere and ...

It was too much.

My eyes remained down as I worked up the nerve to peer at Ryan again, and when I spied hospital socks come into view, I tore my gaze up to see Anthony before me.

He had on a hospital gown as if he'd been in his own room at some point. His right eye was rimmed in black and blue. His lip split. Bruises on his neck. His inked arms were covered in bandages. And all I wanted to do was hit him. Set my fists to his chest and pound every ounce of anger, hurt, and frustration into his arrogant, self-absorbed body.

“What are you doing here?” Clearly, no one had clued Anthony in about my involvement.

“I hate you,” I cried and backed up, slamming into a muscular wall behind me. Noah stepped alongside me and protectively hooked an arm around my back as if a warning to Anthony to keep a distance.

Anthony held his mouth, tears in his eyes, then slowly turned to the side to look at Ryan. “This is all my fault. I'm so sorry. I screwed with the wrong people.”

I didn't want to ask Anthony questions, to find out why Ryan was in that bed. I just needed to focus on Ryan waking up.

“I think you should head to your own room right now,” Noah firmly suggested, reading my mind. “Your uncle is here and would like a word with you as well.”

“Maurizio?” Anthony faced me.

“How else did you think Ryan would get the money for you in time?” I hissed, keeping my eyes steady on Anthony, because if I looked at Ryan lying motionless in that hospital bed again, I’d totally lose it. And my fists would most definitely connect with Anthony’s chest.

“Yeah, I just ... how’d you get brought into this? I never thought Ryan would go to you.” Anthony’s eyes fell to the floor.

“Time to go,” Noah said as he freed his arm from my back and motioned to the door, a clear signal for Anthony to leave. “*Now.*”

A heavy sigh fell from Anthony’s lips. “Does my mom know we’re here?”

“She does know. I called her before I got here. A friend of mine had a private jet, and they’re taking off soon.” I looked at Anthony. “I’m sure you have quite a few missed calls.” *Since you’ve been hiding in here*, I almost said out loud, but then I’d feel a twinge of guilt about it, because maybe he really was at Ryan’s side because of love.

“Shit. What do I say?” Anthony tore his hands through his hair as he walked to the door, but I wouldn’t help him with his guilt.

I focused back on Ryan, willing my legs forward steadily, hoping they’d get me to him without collapsing. “Be in the hall,” Noah told me once I made it to the chair by the bed, then he shut the door.

“Ryan,” I whispered and reached for his palm, smoothing my thumb over the top of his hand. Just like he’d done to my ankle in his truck bed what felt like forever ago. His eyelids fluttered at the contact, and my heart jumped at the sight.

I remained like that for a few minutes before I looked down at my other hand still clutching that letter.

“You,” I cried. “Why’d you write this?”

I gently set his hand alongside his body, deciding to open the letter, remembering his friend’s suggestion that it may help.

Tears blurred my vision and slid down my cheeks as I eyed the words, and I reached for his hand again, hoping he'd hear me.

“Talia, if you're reading this, well, things most likely didn't go as planned. And I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. How sorry I am that I won't be able to spend the rest of my life with you, which I can admit to you now is all I want. Well, that and to have babies that look just like you. With your green eyes. *Green*. My favorite color because of you.” A sob escaped my chest, and I had to pause for a moment to try and get a hold of myself. “A family and life with you is all I've wanted for so long, but I never thought it was possible. And then somehow, my brother managed to bring us together. And although I haven't had you for long, I'll take those days over nothing. I'll cherish them in whatever eternal world I wind up in.”

I tightened my grip, doing my best to swim against the current of emotions that were hammering me left and right.

“I guess I always knew I'd die young. Like father, like son, right? Maybe that was also why I kept my distance from you for so long. I guess I just hoped I—”

At the feel of a squeeze back from Ryan, I dropped the letter in shock, and it fell to the floor.

“You can stop reading, I'm not dead.” I jumped up from my chair at Ryan's low, raspy voice. I leaned over him, desperate to see his eyes, ensuring I hadn't hallucinated his words. “I'm okay, Talia. I'm so sorry, but ... I'm okay.”

With our locked hands against my chest, I brushed my lips over his dry ones, and he managed to return my kiss.

“Superman without the tights,” he said around a cough. “Remember?” I laugh-cried as he finally opened his eyes. His light moan of pain as he lifted his other arm and reached for my cheek brought fresh tears. “Owen, is he okay? The others?”

I nodded, the tears dropping onto his chest. “Everyone's okay,” I assured him.

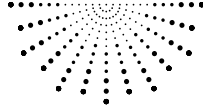
“That’s good,” he said, closing his eyes again and whispering, “I did stop you before you got to the best part of the letter.”

“Which was?” I wet my lips, experiencing relief like I’d never known in my entire life.

“The obvious part.” Without opening his eyes, he met my mouth for another soft, quick kiss. “That I love you,” he said, just before his free hand went to his chest. He groaned in pain and his left arm plummeted to his side as the monitors started wailing.

He was crashing ...

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



NATALIA

“HE GAVE UP EVERYTHING FOR YOU. ALWAYS TOOK THE HEAVY hits meant for you. He was willing to trade his life for you and now ...” This time, I couldn’t help myself. I pounded Anthony’s chest with my fists in the hallway outside Ryan’s room.

It’d felt as if my own heart had stopped beating as I watched a team rush into the room, working to save Ryan’s life. And then they’d forced me out into the hall.

“I’m so sorry,” Anthony returned with a sob, and when he dropped to his knees in the hallway, I about went with him. Someone caught me from behind, hooking my arms to stop me from crashing, too.

I turned to see a guy I didn’t recognize, but he was in a hospital gown and looked pretty banged up. “Owen?”

His room was next to Ryan’s. He must’ve forced himself to stand and come find out what was happening. “Hi,” he said, still holding me despite the fact he’d just survived an explosion, but his eyes weren’t on me, they were pointed at Ryan’s room.

“He ... what if this was a heart attack like his dad had?” I rushed out, my body going limp. I didn’t want Owen to have to use up his strength to help me, but I couldn’t seem to control myself. “Let go. Let me fall,” I begged, becoming dead weight in Owen’s arms.

Owen took a knee, going down with me. “I got you. It’ll be okay,” he murmured, pulling me against him. He was the last

person who should've been helping me, given the injuries he'd sustained, but like hell would I let Anthony touch me. The connection I felt to Owen after knowing him for less than thirty seconds was already stronger than the one I had with Anthony after everything he'd done.

When I looked up, I saw more of Ryan's teammates and his uncle filtering into the hall at the commotion.

Ryan's door shot open a moment later, and the doctors and nurses wheeled his bed out in a hurry, then turned down a hall, and I had to sit there and watch them take him away from me.

"What the hell happened?" Noah barked out, terror in his voice. Two of Ryan's friends helped us to our feet, but they ignored Anthony who now had his back to the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him. His eyes were set on the only remaining nurse from Ryan's room, who eyed all of us crowded there in the tight space, waiting for answers.

The nurse removed her gloves. "In rare cases, trauma to the chest can induce a heart attack. At the rate his BP dropped, too, it's possible there was another bleed. Or his brain ..." She let her voice trail off. "When we know more, we'll fill you in. But does his family have a history of heart—"

"Yes," Anthony cut her off. "Our dad died of a heart attack at forty-five. Or the car crash caused the heart attack, but yeah ..."

"The doctors will do what they can, I promise. And if he needs heart surgery, we have the best heart surgeon on call," the French nurse said. "He's in good hands." She looked at Owen and frowned. "We need to redress your wounds, and perhaps run a few more scans to be on the safe side given what happened to your friend."

"I'm fine," Owen said, accepting Noah's arm around his back for support as he wavered on his feet.

"Do it. Now," Luke roughly commanded, arms going across his chest. "That's an order. Your wife is en route, and she'll have my head if you don't."

Owen let go of a deep breath and reluctantly nodded. “Okay.”

Noah and the nurse helped Owen back to his room, and the rest of the guys looked around as if unsure what to do next. They probably felt helpless, and they didn’t seem to be the type of people who knew how to handle that.

“Ryan was talking to me just before he, um, coded?” *Crashed?* I’d heard his nurses use both terms. “He told me he loved me and then ...” I had no idea why I’d shared that, but Anthony’s eyes narrowed on me in shock.

Jessica must’ve noticed I was going pale or on the verge of falling, again, because she stepped around Anthony’s outstretched legs and reached for me. “I’ve got you.” Turning to Anthony next, she said, “I’ll let my husband scrape you off the floor, though, and toss you into your bed. I’m thinking Natalia doesn’t want to be near you right now.”

“Ryan’s young,” Luke spoke up. “He was already here in the hospital when he went into cardiac arrest, well, if that’s what it was, and um ...” He swiped a hand over the back of his head as if his nerves were getting to him. “So hopefully that means there’ll be minimal damage to his heart.” He looked at me and added, “He’s got a long life ahead of him. From the sound of it, that life will be with you.”

* * *

“THEY SAID HE’LL BE OKAY,” NOAH REMINDED ME FOR probably the tenth time that hour, but Ryan was still in the post-op recovery area, and they hadn’t let any of us see him yet.

“Yeah, and the doctors said that hours ago. He’s still not awake yet.” I hated being a pessimist, but my anxiety was maxed out.

“Ryan’s mom will be here soon, right?” Noah deflected.

I checked the last text from Enzo on my phone. “Yeah, they’re almost here.”

“Enzo, huh?” Noah said his name as if he was familiar with him, and then I remembered why. Ryan had asked him to look into Enzo’s background. With everything that had happened since, that felt like an eternity ago.

Walking over to the mirror in the waiting room, I did my best to swipe away the black smudges of makeup beneath my eyes. I didn’t want Ryan’s mother to see such a frazzled version of me. Maybe if I looked like I was keeping my shit together, it would be easier for me to pretend everything wasn’t falling apart. I wondered how many other women had stood in front of this same mirror and thought the same thing.

I’d thought Ryan was fine, only for him to lose consciousness following an “I love you” and a kiss, leaving me here to explain the entire clusterfuck to his mom. A woman who had lost her husband to a heart attack. At least she had Enzo with her. He couldn’t fix anything this time, but ...

“Enzo insisted on coming. Screw the restaurant. Nothing will matter if Ryan’s not okay.” My words drew Asher’s eyes in the reflection. *I guess I said all of that out loud.* Jessica was stretched out in the chairs with her head on his lap, and he was smoothing his fingers through her hair as she slept.

“And he will be fine,” Asher said with a firm voice. “The doctor said his head is okay. They contained the ruptured-whatever-it-was that caused the new bleed, and his heart attack was very minor—a rare side effect from the trauma to his chest. Otherwise, his heart is healthy and in good shape.”

“He needs to wake up and *stay* awake this time.” I untucked my hair that was hidden inside the hood of my Carolina sweatshirt, then tossed my long locks into a messy bun before facing the room, only the four of us in there as the others on the team had left to “commandeer” a room in the hospital to make a special call to “someone.”

Maurizio had left to pick up Laura and Enzo from the airport and bring them to the hospital before going to reserve a few rooms for everyone at a hotel. Not that I planned to leave Ryan’s side.

At the sound of a chime, I turned to see the elevator doors open and my shoulders fell at the sight of familiar faces. Enzo and Laura looked exhausted from their long flight.

“Whoa, wait, you’re friends with Lorenzo Costa?” I turned at Asher’s question, curious how he knew Enzo. He carefully shifted Jessica’s head from his lap to the cushioned seat and stood.

Before I could respond, I was abruptly turned by Enzo, and he pulled me into his arms for a tight hug.

“Where’re my boys?” Laura asked, thumbing away tears.

“I’ll take you to Anthony, but Ryan’s still in recovery. We can’t see him yet, Miss Rossi,” Noah said, and she looked at him, a hint of recognition in her eyes. “We were at BUD/S together,” Noah added, answering the question she hadn’t yet asked.

Laura nodded, then gave me a hug before Noah escorted her to Anthony’s room.

“Asher Hayes?” Enzo started for him. “That really you?”

“As I live and breathe, man,” Asher said, offering him a hand before pulling him in for a quick one-arm hug.

Enzo looked over at me and tipped his head to Asher. “My first job in a kitchen was in his family’s Italian restaurant up in New York. I was just a teenager. We go way back.”

“Mom said you were a chef in Charlotte now.” Asher peered at me. “It’s your restaurant?” he asked, putting two and two together, and I nodded. “Wow. Small world.”

“How’s your sister?” Enzo asked him.

“She’s a single mom now. She’s tough. Doing the best she can,” Asher commented, and his words sent my thoughts drifting back to my sister’s situation.

Enzo faced me. “Any news?”

“Not since my last text to you. Thank you for coming here, for bringing Laura. That wasn’t easy for her, but she adores

you, and I'm sure it was helpful you were with her on that flight."

"Ryan's awake!" I turned at Anthony's abrupt announcement, appearing breathless from where he stood in the doorway. "Mom took off for him, but I thought you should see him next."

My hands covered my mouth as I let go of a cry of relief. *He's awake. He's going to be okay.*

Enzo set his hand on my back. "Come on. I'll walk you that way." He saluted Asher, and as we walked away, Asher fished his phone from his pocket, probably to find the rest of his team to provide an update.

"I can't believe this all happened," Enzo said as we walked down the too-bright hall. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to help him."

"And I'm surprised you didn't punch Anthony just now when you saw him," I murmured, and I felt him nudge my side a little with his elbow.

"Looks like he's banged up enough. He's just lucky Ryan's going to be fine. Otherwise, we'd be having words, trust me."

I peeked at him. "Friends again with Ryan now?"

"He loves you, right? You love him. That much is obvious. So yeah, I'll cut Ryan some slack and play nice," Enzo said, a small smile on his lips.

"I know it was hard for you to leave Maria while she's struggling." My shoulders fell at that memory. She'd wanted to join Enzo on the trip, but she couldn't leave Chiara behind.

"Maria will be okay once she's free from Thomas," Enzo bit out. "All that matters right now is everyone's alive," he added in a lower voice this time, and my heart hurt for him, knowing he was thinking about his twin. That one important person in his life he'd been unable to save.

Once outside the doors leading to the post-op recovery area, I gave the nurse Ryan's name and my information, and

she opened the doors. Enzo reached for my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

I hugged him, then walked through the doors with the nurse, my heart colliding with my rib cage as I followed her to Ryan's bed.

I knew we were nearby when I heard Laura's voice, and when the nurse peeled back a curtain a moment later, I cried at the sight of my man sitting *upright*, with his mom by the bed, holding hands.

Ryan's eyes met mine, and he frowned. "I'm so fucking sorry," he rasped, tears forming in his eyes. "I'm sorry I crashed on you." *He* was apologizing?

"I'll leave you two alone," Laura said while standing, holding my gaze, her face full of relief and empathy. With a slight smile, she patted my shoulder, then followed the nurse who then closed the curtains to give us some privacy.

I reached for the cup of crushed ice from the nearby tray table, unsure what to do with myself. I was emotionally wrecked, but I refused to break down in front of him. On top of everything else, he didn't need to feel bad for how terrified I'd been.

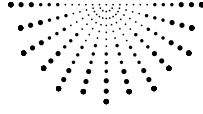
"I kind of do hate you," I said while sitting next to him, setting the ice by his bed.

He reached for my hand as the tears I tried to keep at bay started to fall. "Nah," he said while closing one eye. "You love me, admit it."

I rolled my tongue over my lips, then gently leaned in while holding his hand and murmured, "Damn right I do." I kissed him softly. "I'll love you until I can't. Until the day I die."

He eased back to find my eyes, tears now gliding down his cheeks. "And I'll love you even after that."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



RYAN

“MY MONEY IS ON TWO WEEKS,” I OVERHEARD OWEN AND Asher chatting near the door of my temporary digs.

“What’s two weeks?” I asked, but based on the smile parked on Owen’s lips, it was something they wouldn’t be discussing if Natalia was present.

“Two weeks until you break doctor’s orders and have sex.” Asher smiled. “You’re young. And it was barely a heart attack. And internal bleeding?” He held his palms open as if to say, *No biggie*. “Been there done that, right?”

I laughed, then grabbed hold of my side while coughing, a reminder I was still injured. Plus, I’d inhaled some smoke before the guys pulled us out of the burning barn, so my lungs were aggravated and angry as hell. “Shit, man. Give me some time to recover before you have me laughing.”

“Or having sex,” Luke said while entering the room. “Goes for you, too.” He pointed at Owen. “You’re pretty banged up as well. Tell Samantha you’re benched for a week, at least.”

“Look at Bravo One playing doctor dad,” Asher teased, earning a scowl from Luke.

“I need a word alone with Bravo Six.” Luke swiveled his ball cap backward, then tossed a thumb toward the hall, an order for the boys to scatter.

Bravo Six? Damn did I like the sound of that. I closed my eyes at the reality that I’d never be Bravo or Alpha, or

anything, relating to an op ever again. And lying in a hospital bed right now was proof of that.

“Yeah, yeah, go easy on Luke,” Owen teased. “He only drugged ya because he cares.”

“Sure, sure.” I parted my lids at his words and let go of my ribs. “No one has told me jack shit about what happened since I woke up. I just know we’re all alive, and my brother’s too afraid to talk to me.”

“He should be afraid of you.” Luke dragged a chair by the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” I honestly answered. “And I almost went out the same way as my old man, so I’m a bit messed up in the head about that. But I’ll be okay.” *I have Natalia, so yeah, I’ll be better than okay.*

“Damn, brother, I don’t know what to say.”

“Never been a man of many words,” I joked. “It’s all good.” I lifted my chin, knowing he was there for some parting words as well, not just to check on me. “What’s up?”

He shook his head. “We have to spin up. I’m sorry to leave when you’re still here. Well, we’re leaving Bravo Two here as well. But that op we were working before we got pulled here needs to be wrapped up.”

“You’ll be down a man.” I set my palms on the bed and tried to scoot upright a bit more.

Luke leaned in and helped prop my pillow. “We’ve got some new recruits now. Flying a few boys over there as we speak,” he reassured me. Not that I knew where “there” was, nor would I ever be privy to those details, because he *didn’t* recruit me in 2013. He’d been right not to try though. I wouldn’t have left my platoon. “POTUS is demanding I have you and Natalia sign that NDA, though. I assured him you wouldn’t open your mouth about our team, but he likes his T’s crossed, yada yada yada. You know how it goes. Sorry to throw that at you right now.”

“I understand. But I am surprised he lets his son operate—especially for a team that doesn’t officially exist.”

“Well, you know Knox,” Luke said with a smile.

“*Never out of the fight*,” I responded with a tight voice. “Tell me you all got Hugo, though.”

“Yeah, but we had to play nice with the French given the mess we made in Monaco. We turned Hugo over to them, and he’s in Paris now being questioned by a half dozen three-letter agencies from all over the world.” Luke scratched his jaw, his eyes contemplative. “I’m sorry I had Asher lock you in a choke hold, and for having knocked you out.”

I shrugged. “You did what you felt was best for the team. I get it. It’s not easy being Bravo One.”

“You saved our asses, though.” He paused. “And you risked your life for Owen, and I—”

“None of you should have been in danger in the first place.” *Fucking Anthony*.

“Yeah, well, we took down one of Interpol’s most wanted, and we didn’t lose anyone. I’ll call that a win.” Luke leaned back in his seat. “I still don’t get how your brother pissed off Hugo, but I’ll let him tell you that story, I suppose.”

“Not sure if I even want to know,” I bitterly remarked.

“Listen.” Luke patted his jeaned legs. He’d never been so great with his emotions, but I knew he was trying. An A for effort, for sure. “I’ve missed you, man. We should stay in better touch.” He swiped a hand over the fresh cut on his cheek. “If you ever need anything, you say the word. Okay?”

“Same, man. Same.” I nodded, and he leaned over and set a hand to my shoulder, then stood and started for the door. “Actually,” I said when a memory struck me, “there is a favor I might need. An easy one. Only involves a phone call. I’ll reach out when I’m out of here, and you’re done with whatever you’re doing next,” I added with a light laugh, then began coughing, forgetting my lungs were still in shit shape.

At least I hadn’t needed heart or brain surgery, that was something.

“Roger that.” Luke smiled and tipped his head goodbye, but he paused in the doorway at the sight of my brother. He swiveled back to look at me, looking for a sign that I wanted him to get rid of Anthony.

“He can come in.” I grabbed the cup of ice chips and crunched on a few, needing to cool off with Anthony in my line of sight.

I was still trying to grapple with everything that’d happened, including the fact Natalia, my mother, uncle, and brother were all there at the hospital. Natalia was with my mom in the cafeteria, so Anthony would be short on time if he wanted to talk in private.

“Hey.” Anthony shut the door once Luke was gone. Standing just inside my room, likely judging my mood, he slowly came to the edge of my bed and studied me. “I’m not sure how to thank you, or how to apologize.”

“Never been good at either of those,” I reminded him. “Why start now?” I swallowed and looked toward the window. It was dark out. Hard to believe at that time yesterday I’d been at dinner with my uncle and Natalia in Italy. A lot had happened in twenty-four hours.

“Fair enough,” Anthony responded in a low voice.

“Why’d you lie to me, though? Why the charade? If you’d told me the truth about Hugo from day one, I could have handled things differently. And my friends could have escaped their latest near-death experiences.” *I also may not be with Natalia, though.*

“I didn’t think you’d help if you knew the truth.” He paused. “Maybe that’s another lie. I didn’t actually need nine fifty. I thought I could get some extra cash out of the problem—turn lemons into lemonade—and then I’d be set for a while.”

My gaze shot back to him, and I painted an invisible bullseye on his chest before shaking my head in disbelief. That was low, even for Anthony.

“I borrowed some of my girlfriend’s jewelry and sold it with the intent to buy it back. But then I lost the money in one night.” He shrugged, like it was just another blip in his life’s story and could’ve happened to anyone. *Unbelievable*. “Bianca figured out what I’d done. She told me her ex gave the jewelry to her, and if I didn’t get it back, she’d tell him.”

“Hugo,” I murmured, and he nodded.

“I had no clue how dangerous the dude was, but she said he was the kind of guy who’d cut my balls off and stuff them down my throat. Literally.” He stroked his beard. “I tried to get the jewelry back, but the guy wanted almost double what he paid me. So, I asked Bianca for a few weeks to come up with the cash, and the guy who had the jewelry agreed to hang on to everything in the meantime.”

“How’d the Canadian come into play?” I asked, my anger growing by the second. I hadn’t thought I could get any more pissed at the man. Yeah, I was wrong.

“We’d run into each other on occasion over the years at casinos. He was a fan. I happened to bump into him in Monaco, and I asked him for help. He wouldn’t give me the money, but I said I knew a way to get it myself, and I’d pay him a hundred K if he could help me out.”

“Fucking A, Anthony.” I cursed again. The harsh breaths as I tried to tame my temper hurt my lungs, reminding me yet again of all the damage Anthony had caused. I clutched my chest, but this time I knew the pain there was emotional, not physical. “You fake abducted yourself and used me to get you the cash. And what, you thought an even million didn’t sound believable, so you went with nine fifty?”

He was lucky I was bedridden when he shrugged, because so help me ...

“I figured you’d find a way to help me if you were motivated enough.”

I trained my attention on the ceiling, unable to look at him anymore.

“But then Hugo showed up in Monaco looking for another fling with Bianca. Apparently, he still had feelings for her. Talk about shit timing. When he asked about her jewelry, she confessed what I’d done.”

“And he found you.” I thought my luck was bad. My brother’s was top-shelf variety.

“You got there just in time.”

“You never anticipated your plan would fail?”

“Not with you at the helm,” he bluntly admitted. “I mean, that’s what you do. You save people, right?”

“I failed you.” My stomach twisted as I looked toward the window again. The memories that sprang to my mind were as dark as the night beyond it. The long deployments and infrequent calls when I was younger. “Time and time again from the looks of it.”

Anthony rounded the bed and narrowed his gaze on me. “You have to stop with that shit. Dad died. It wasn’t your fault, and it wasn’t your responsibility to take over for him.” He stabbed a finger at his chest. “My decisions, my fuckups, are on me. Not you.” He sighed heavily. “When I saw that friend of yours take off for the burning building, and I thought you were going to die ...” He swiped a hand over his face. “I knew it was time I step up. Save you the way you always saved me.” Tears slipped down his cheeks. “And you were always there for me. Whether you believe that or not, it’s true.”

Mom had made a similar apology an hour earlier—for the pressure to “take care” of everyone all the time, especially looking out for Anthony. She said she’d been terrified when I almost died the way Dad had, and then she broke down and sobbed.

I couldn’t handle seeing her sad like that. And I didn’t blame her for anything.

But Anthony? He just pissed me off.

I was too angry to deal with his apology. My friends could’ve died. I could have left Natalia before we’d had a chance to even be together.

I hated him right now. I knew I'd find a way to forgive him eventually, because that was who I was, but today wasn't the day.

"I need you to leave." I was struggling to put a cap on my emotions.

"About Natalia—"

"I know what you did. The fake engagement," I snapped, my anger only further fueled by that memory. "*That* will definitely take me time to forgive."

"I'll talk to her. Grovel if I have to, to make things right." His gaze shot to the monitors at my side, and I realized my heart rate had shot up when he mentioned Natalia. "What's wrong?"

"The idea of you on your knees for her just pisses me off, I guess." Because they'd once dated and ... yeah, that thought had me wanting to puke.

"Wow. You really like her, don't you? It's not fake." His brows snapped together. "I'm, um, happy for you, then." Anthony nodded. "I'll change." He turned toward the door. "For you. For Dad. I promise I'll change."

* * *

"YOU AND THAT HARD HEAD OF YOURS." SAMANTHA simultaneously kissed my cheek and squeezed my hand. "Thank you for protecting my guy, though." When she pulled back, there were tears in her eyes. It was the following morning, and Owen's wife's flight had arrived an hour ago.

"We'll always have each other's backs, you know that." I looked over at Natalia on the other side of the bed, grateful she was there, too.

As for my brother, I'd asked Enzo to fly him and my mom to Charlotte a few hours ago. I'd convinced my mother having Anthony around wasn't great for my heart, and she'd reluctantly left with him. Enzo promised not to toss him off the jet mid-flight since I'd worked so hard to save him.

I'd also forced Noah to go home to his family as well. He didn't need to hang around. His part of the mission was complete, and I had no plans to code again, or whatever the hell happened to me that'd terrified Natalia. I would be forever grateful to him for being there when everything went to hell, but his family needed him more than I did.

"I wanted to meet your friends," Natalia spoke up, pulling me from my thoughts, "just not like this." She peered over at Owen hanging back by the door.

"Well, I have a feeling we'll all see each other again for another reason." Owen winked at Natalia, and I knew what he was implying. A wedding. God, I could only hope.

"Your uncle doesn't mind flying us all back to the States on his jet?" Samantha asked.

"He insisted." Another weird turn of events throughout all of this was Maurizio, and the fact he wanted to be part of our lives. "The second we're cleared to go, I'm ready, believe me."

"Copy that." Owen tipped his head to the door, and Samantha joined him. "We'll give you some privacy. Maybe get some rest, too."

His smirk had me smiling as I waved goodbye. Once the door was shut, I reached for Natalia's hand.

"How are you?"

"Same as I was when you asked me last time," I joked.

The truth? I was feeling a hell of a lot better now that my brother was gone. I'd needed some breathing room, and I couldn't seem to get a decent breath while he'd been there.

Yeah, forgiveness would take some time.

"Anthony fumbled his way through an apology on his way out of here," she shared, which was news to me.

"No groveling on his knees, right?" My attention cut straight to the monitors, hoping the damn thing didn't give away the rise in my heartbeat at that idea.

When I returned my attention her way, her brow was raised, and she had an amused expression on her face. “Really?”

“What?” I tried to shrug, but the movement hurt and I winced instead. Part of a barn had fallen on top of me not even thirty-something hours ago. I had an excuse, I supposed.

“I need time to forgive him for this,” she said while scanning me from head to toe in the bed. “And so we’re clear, the only one who will ever be on his knees before me ... will be you.”

“Damn right,” I said without hesitation. “And I’m anxious to do it again.”

“Mmm. You heard the doctor.”

“No clue what you’re talking about.” I shot her a cocky grin.

“Anyways, we both have to find a way to forgive him so all of this is behind us. I’m not saying we invite him to the wedding, but—”

“Who’s getting married?” I teased, unable to stop myself, and she rolled her eyes.

“Seeing as how you got down on one knee for me already, I’m hoping you’ll do it again for real down the road,” she responded in a soft tone.

I tugged her hand, drawing her closer to the bed. Our eyes met, and I smiled. “The guys were wrong.”

“About?”

I reached for her chin with my free hand. “That I’ll wait two weeks to be with you,” I said before setting my mouth to hers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



NATALIA

THIRTEEN DAYS LATER

“HOW’D YOU KNOW I NEEDED NINE K TO SQUARE UP MY overdue bills?” I glared at Enzo as I rounded my desk and smashed a check against his chest.

Enzo plucked it from my hand and set it back on my desk. “I may have gone through your mail while you were still in Monaco. Did a little math.”

“Opening someone’s mail is a federal offense.”

“Yeah, least of my offenses, don’t you think?” He winked. “Take the money, Nat.”

“I wouldn’t take it from Ryan. And I won’t take it from you.” I circled my desk and dropped down into my chair.

“That’s not my family’s money. It’s mine.” He lifted his chin, urging me to take it.

“How’d you get it?” I arched a challenging brow.

“Sold the Porsche. Consider me a one percent owner in the restaurant if that makes you feel better. An investor. But take the money.”

“What the hell, Enzo? Why would you do that?”

“Because I can.” He smiled. “And you’re like family.” His brows slanted. “I want this place to work as much as you do. I *need* to be here.” The sudden strain in his voice took me by surprise. “I don’t want to go back to New York. It, um, wouldn’t be good for me. And you know that. So, taking that money is actually a favor.”

Oh shit. “All the stuff that’s happened in the last few weeks ... did that, um, trigger you?”

He turned to the side, breaking eye contact with me and turning his gaze to the ceiling. “I’ll be fine. I think I’m just stressed out right now about Maria’s situation.”

“Thomas didn’t exactly take her divorce request well last week.”

Maria had been strong and held her ground, though. Plus, she had an army of people who loved her and supported her in her decision to move on.

Enzo faced me again, the muscle in his jaw visibly tensing. I knew there was a lot he wanted to say about Thomas, but he was trying to keep his anger under wraps.

“Thomas is shocked he was caught cheating and that she already left him. He’ll get over it.”

“He asked her to forgive him. To try and work things out before any paperwork is signed,” he reminded me.

“You really think Maria would stay with a man who cheated on her?” I had a feeling that wasn’t the only problem in their relationship. “She won’t,” I answered for him. “Besides, you moved her into the apartment next door to you two days ago. She won’t go back to him.”

“There happened to be an available unit next to mine,” he casually said. “And she didn’t want to be a burden on your parents.”

“Sure.” A sly, knowing smile met my lips. “The guy suddenly needed to move out, and he had his shit packed and ready to go, huh? Talk about timing.”

“What can I say? It was meant to be, I suppose.”

“Mmmhmm. You want to keep an eye on her.”

“Do you blame me?” He arched a brow, working his sleeves to the elbows.

“No. It makes me feel better that she’s next door. And I’m moving out of Mom and Dad’s next week, thank God, so they’ll finally have a peaceful house again.”

Enzo’s lips twitched into an unexpected smile. “You must be excited to move in with Ryan. You guys rented a place across from your gym in the Ballantyne area, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, a two bedroom for now. I can walk to my yoga classes, which is great. But we’ll get a house one of these days.”

“I have no doubt.” He smiled.

“Of course, us still living at home right now ensures Ryan behaves. Once we’re alone in our own place, it’s going to be impossible.”

“How much longer until you two can have sex?” he asked, not beating around the bush.

“Doc says to wait four to six weeks not just because of his heart, because of the other injuries. He was ordered to abstain from *anything* physical. Anything that might spike his heart rate, which, apparently, happens just being around me sometimes.”

“Four to six weeks?” He laughed. “He won’t last that long.”

“Well, next week is week three, so I’m hoping to at least make it until then. We’ve barely kissed or touched since the hospital. My decision.” I wrung my hands together and set my linked palms on my desk. “I’m terrified he’ll crash again on me mid-kiss. I can’t shake that memory from my mind. And it’d be my fault. So, if it keeps him safe, then I’ll behave.”

“Until week three.” Enzo smiled.

“Exactly.” I winked.

I also promised Ryan I’d be good and not touch myself since he wasn’t supposed to jerk off. But Enzo didn’t need to hear that. TMI.

“No foreplay, either?” Enzo closed one eye as if that question made him uncomfortable since I was like family.

“Unfortunately, no. We can’t risk getting his heart rate too high.” I’d even turned down his request for naughty photos, worried he’d be tempted to stroke his cock if he had them. Ryan and I were starting to feel like we were in first-date territory again since we were spending our time only holding hands while hanging out.

“Well, at least Ryan’s mobile and driving again,” Enzo pointed out. “That’s progress.”

“Yeah, and since he can operate ‘heavy machinery’—his words—he thinks that means he’s capable of a lot more,” I added, my cheeks heating a little at a memory from the morning.

“Fingering me will send the blood south to your dick and kick up your heart rate, so no, you can’t do that, either,” I’d reminded him after he’d breached my house before my parents were awake and snuck into my room.

After I’d turned him down, he’d slipped under the covers and cradled me in his arms before falling back asleep. My mom had found us in bed together, and we’d felt like teens trying to convince her we hadn’t had sex.

“Clearly, I chose the wrong Rossi for you,” she’d told me before I went to work today, then shook her head as if angry at herself for being so wrong about Anthony.

“It also gives Ryan a good excuse to steer clear of Anthony as much as possible. Strangely enough, Calista, of all people, offered to let Anthony sleep in her spare bedroom so he didn’t have to live back home while Ryan was there. She says they’re only friends, not that I care.”

Enzo circled my desk, his hands slipping into his pockets. “I can’t believe Calista was planning to use Ryan to try and make me jealous. That’s absurd.”

I’d nearly forgotten about that. That bit of news had been lost in the shuffle with everything that’d happened since Italy. “She’s not your type.”

“Not even close.” Enzo’s eyes moved to a frame on my desk, a photo he’d taken of Maria and me the night the restaurant opened its doors for the first time. “Anyways.” He pointed to the check on the desk. “Just take the money, okay? Another problem solved.”

“If you want to be a partial owner, I’d love that. But you don’t need to—”

“I do. And I will pay a percent for ownership. I’ll happily offer more than what’s on that check for that privilege,” he went on as someone knocked.

“It’s me,” Ryan called out before opening the door. “Am I interrupting?”

“Just tell her to take the money,” Enzo said, striding his way. He patted Ryan on the shoulder and I could’ve sworn a look passed between them that made me think Ryan knew about Enzo’s plan.

They had become closer since Monaco, and I was grateful Ryan was finally able to set his concerns about Enzo’s past aside and accepted him as part of my life. And he was making an effort to get to know him as well.

“I suppose Batman and Superman can be friends,” Ryan had teased a few nights back.

I stood as my man moved closer to my desk, and Enzo left us alone, closing the door behind him.

Ryan slowly strode across the room in his faded denim jeans and a long-sleeve black cotton shirt. His backward black ball cap was working hard to contain his unruly hair that he’d yet to have cut because of his condition. And I wasn’t sure I wanted it trimmed.

I’d helped him shave his face last week, though, which had been entirely too intimate. Especially because he kept gripping my ass, urging me to sit on his lap. I’d nearly nicked his skin when I’d felt his cock twitch against my body.

“You look good,” I said as he hugged me, then I inhaled a whiff of his new cologne. “Mmm. And smell good, too.” *Woodsy. Spicy. Hints of vanilla, too.* “What’s it called again?”

“It’s Tom Ford. Wood something, I think?” He shrugged. “Since I’ve been sporting a lot of wood lately without relief, it felt appropriate.”

Touché. “Mmhm. I also know how you are about scents,” I said as he shifted my hair to my back. Leaning in, he teasingly skated his lips along the column of my throat, probably breathing in the perfume he’d surprised me with a few nights ago after work. “You like how it smells on me, hmm?” I asked as he continued to trail his lips over where I’d placed the

Baccarat Rouge 540. A fancy name for not-such-a-fancy-girl, but I loved it.

“Yeah, a little too much. I should have waited to give it to you,” he murmured before drawing his mouth to mine, lightly kissing me.

How in the hell would I even wait one more week? And based on what I felt in his pants right now, he really was “sporting wood” quite a lot.

“I wasn’t expecting you here this early,” I said against his mouth, practically a puddle in his arms now.

“Anthony’s at my mom’s right now.”

“Oh, enough said. Any idea how his therapy is going?” Anthony had promised to change, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. Ryan eased back to look at me and frowned. “That bad, huh?”

“Let’s just say I need to find him a new therapist. One who’s older. Less blonde. And not a woman.”

“Oh, he didn’t ...” *Ugh. Anthony. Really?* Why was I surprised?

“Anyways, I’m here for another reason. A few reasons actually.”

When he went over to the door and locked it, my shoulders fell. I knew I was going to have a hell of a time saying no to this man. “Ryan. We can’t.” My protest sounded weak even to my own ears. Because in truth, my panties were soaked just from that soft kiss.

He faced me while removing something from his pocket.

“Is that my Daily Planet badge from the Halloween costume?” I chuckled. “Why do you have that?”

His gaze fell to my pencil skirt as if that were supposed to be an answer, but then he shared, “I saw you get into your Jeep for work in that. And this,” he said while dangling it in the air, “somehow got mixed up in my things after our trip to Italy. I stumbled upon it today, and since you’re wearing that Lois Lane skirt, I thought it was fate.”

“Fate, huh?” I closed one eye, giving him my best fake angry look.

“The next time we’re together, I want to make love. That was the plan back at my uncle’s place, and that’s still my plan now.” He approached me and slipped the lanyard around my neck. “So no, I’m not going to bend you over your desk and have sex with you like I’ve been wanting to since that night I saw you dressed up at the hotel.”

“No?” I surrendered my arms up over his shoulders, and he drew me closer.

“But I would love to leave here today with the mental image of you bent over your desk with that skirt at your ankles, your ass cheeks spread, and your pussy puckered, pink and ready for me. That’d make me feel a lot better.” He lifted a hand between us and held his heart. “It’d probably speed up my recovery time.”

The man missed his calling as an erotic writer. He always had me hot and bothered when he described the things he wanted to do to me, especially during our text exchanges the last week or so while I’d been at work.

I’d about dropped my phone when one of his dirty but sexy messages came in while a customer had been trying to talk to me at the bar. He’d had a lot of time on his hands lately, and he’d been torturing me with all of his fantasies and promises of what was to come.

“If I bend over for you, your control will snap.” I shook my head. “No deal.”

Ryan shot me a fake angry look right back, but his was much more comical than mine. *And are you pouting?* “Please?”

“Mm. No. I’m trying to protect you.”

“And you have no sympathy for the pain in my dick, huh?”

I leaned forward and lightly sucked his bottom lip. “Oh,” I began, “I have a lot of *empathy*, because my pussy is sore and aching for you. Every part of me hurts to be with you, in fact.”

Ryan groaned against my mouth and let go of a frustrated sigh as he set his forehead to mine.

“So, you said there was another reason you came here, not just to torture us both?” I prompted, needing to dial down my body temperature before I gave in to desire.

“There is.” He stepped back ever so slightly, and I lowered my arms from his shoulders. “But damn do you love to give me a hard time. I’m thinking that’ll never change,” he teased.

“Like you’d want it to?” I challenged, knowing him all too well. I slipped my hand between us to race my fingers over the fabric of his crotch.

He snatched my wrist and cocked his head. “Playing with fire,” he warned.

“Going to tell me to get down on my knees?” I went on, fully aware I was provoking the hot, sexy beast inside him to come out to play. It was the exact opposite of what I should have been doing, but oh, how I loved that bit of wild inside him.

He rolled his tongue along the seam of his lips while studying me. “You really want me to fuck you, don’t you?” With his free hand, he dragged his knuckles over my cheek, and I nearly bent to his will. “Not go slow. No Hallmark lovemaking?” His voice had dropped a few levels. Our control was hanging by a thin thread.

“You and I will never have the kind of sex Hallmark would allow on TV,” I said while drawing my mouth closer to his. I brushed my lips over his jawline before gently biting his earlobe.

“My heart’s racing, Talia. If you don’t want it to beat a hell of a lot faster, and you truly want to behave, I can’t be alone with you right now. Because I am dangerously close to taking you on your desk, so hard your customers will hear you cry out my name over the music playing out there.”

If I wasn’t already soaked ...

I slowly shifted to face him and set my hand over his heart. Damn it, he was right. It was beating hard, fast, and nearly

erratic.

“I’m two seconds from losing control. We can save the lovemaking for next time.” His eyes darkened as he studied me. “Say the word, Talia.”

I swallowed, tempted to say yes, but I was too worried about his injuries and recent heart attack. That fear was impossible to ignore. “One more week,” I whispered, defeat in my tone. Defeated by logic when every part of me wanted to be reckless. *Not when it comes to your life, though.* “We have to at least survive one more week.”

He released a deep lungful of air, then linked our hands. “Then we need to leave this room, and I need to get the blood to move back to my brain before we go have dinner with our special guests. The *other* reason I’m here.”

My attention snapped to his face. “What guests?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.” He dropped his focus to his tented jeans and began murmuring a few phrases, ones that included his brother’s name. Ah, he was trying to make his dick limp by thinking about his brother. Not a bad idea. Thinking of Anthony was a surefire way to kill the mood. For both of us.

“Ready?” I smirked when we’d yet to move, and he was still closing his eyes and mumbling. He must’ve been as hard as I was wet since it was taking a lot of effort to switch gears.

“I’ll try to be,” he said a moment later, his gaze shifting over my shoulder to the desk. “At some point, we’re christening your office.”

“Yes, please.” I chewed on my lip, then realized that would only encourage his cock to stand back at attention, so I quickly freed the dirty thoughts and my lip.

“You,” he hissed, then readjusted his jeans before tipping his head toward the door, and we went into the restaurant.

My heart about stopped when I saw the “guests” sitting at a booth by the bar talking to Enzo. Shocked, I abruptly spun around to face Ryan, my hands flying to his chest. “What? How?”

He grinned. “The guys I worked with in Monte Carlo happen to know Michael and Kate Maddox. Actually, Kate threw a party a few years back and Owen proposed to Samantha there.”

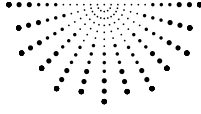
My mouth hung open. I was speechless. It really was a small world. “And you, what?” I asked once my voice worked again. “Called in a favor?”

“You wanted to meet them, right? Discuss the potential for catering gigs with Kate’s company?” He opened his free palm, directing me their way. “So, here they are. Now it’s up to you to land the deal.”

I peeked back over at the gorgeous powerhouse couple in *my* restaurant. From the looks of it, our bartender was opening a bottle of the Rossi label Chianti, too. *Is this happening?* “You really have me wanting to go back into that office and thank you in a much better way than with my words.”

He arched a brow, then held my chin and directed my eyes to meet his. “I owe you. Not the other way around. You gave me my life back, Talia,” he rasped. “A life I thought was over after I left the Teams.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



RYAN

ONE WEEK LATER

“IT’S PERFECT. I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. THANK YOU.” I swiped through the images on my iPad that Noah had sent me.

“I was more than happy to do it,” Noah responded over the phone. I could hear his twins in the background, and I didn’t want to keep him when he was home with his family.

“Tell Grace and the kids hi for me.”

“Same for Natalia. Be in touch soon.”

I ended the call and tossed my phone into the open window of my truck, then looked over the blueprints once again.

At the sound of gravel crunching beneath tires, I turned to see my brother’s classic Mustang on approach. I was grateful he’d never sold it since Dad had just wrapped up restoring it before he’d passed. It was meant to be a gift for when Anthony turned sixteen, so it’d sat in the garage for a few years until he’d been old enough to drive it.

“You summoned me?” Anthony asked after closing the door. He’d left the engine running, and the radio on loud enough I could hear the familiar lyrics from an Old Dominion song through the closed windows.

I turned and pointed to the wide-open space. “I bought this plot of land. I would’ve loved to get the same location where Dad’s place had been, but it’s a parking lot for a grocery store now.”

“You’re really doing it, huh?” He came alongside me and folded his arms, studying the empty plot of dirt about five minutes away from Mom’s house. “Bringing back Rossi’s Auto Body.” He looked at me and smiled. “Dad would be proud.”

I swallowed the lump of emotion, not expecting his comment to hit me so hard. “I’ve had a lot of free time in the last few weeks, and I decided it was time to make it happen.” I handed him the iPad open to the plans Noah designed for me.

Knowing someone who ran an architectural firm up in New York—well, when he wasn't assisting Owen and his guys in ridding the world of evil—definitely came in handy.

“Mom still has a lot of Dad's stuff in storage from the old shop. You thinking about displaying it?” He handed back the iPad.

“Yeah, for sure.” I swiped to another image, one of a vintage Porsche 911 that could use some love. “I was thinking about getting my hands on this, and maybe we could restore it together? What do you say?”

“This your olive branch?” Anthony arched a brow. “You finally ready to forgive me?”

I walked around him and put the iPad into the truck before facing him again, needing a minute to find the right words since I hadn't really rehearsed this moment. “Car or not, I'm going to *try* and forgive you. It's what Dad would've wanted.”

“But is it what you want?” His shoulders fell. “I don't want you always doing what you think Dad or Mom wants. You have to look out for yourself, too. Do what's right for you.”

That had to be the therapist talking. His new *male* therapist. “You're my brother. You fucked up,” I bluntly said. “But you accidentally helped rid the world of a bad guy, and you also brought Natalia back into my life. Forgiving you is possible, and to answer your question, yes, it's something I also want. *Plus*, Natalia wants it. And she's stubborn. You're just lucky that woman has a heart of gold.”

Anthony lightly chuckled, then rubbed his chest as if he might have his own heart attack. *Yeah, uh no, please don't do that.* “All those years you pretended to hate her?”

“Was my attempt not to step on your toes and violate the brother-code, I guess.”

He shook his head. “All the sacrifices you made for me.” He cursed, his eyes falling to the dirt ground, and he kicked the toe of his boot against a rock there. “You're going to propose, right? For real, I mean?”

I wasn't sure if I was prepared to talk about Natalia with him quite yet, but I admitted, "Yeah, when the time is right."

"Maurizio said you can have the inheritance. All ten million. Well, that's what Mom said. Even if you don't marry anyone." Anthony slowly worked his eyes up. "And yet, you said no. Why?"

"Don't tell me you're asking for it." I tipped my head to the side, definitely not prepared for *that* conversation.

"No, no. I'm done trying to get money from other people."

I wanted to feel relief at that, but change took time. It was still early for him. "I don't want the money, no. But I like having Maurizio in our lives. Mom appreciates it, too. He reminds me of Dad, and that hurts at times, but it's also kind of nice."

"I know what you mean." Anthony's eyes were tearing up. Another surprise.

When Maurizio had flown us back from Monaco, he'd rented a house in Charlotte and was working remote to run the Rossi family business from here. He wanted to make up for lost time, and he was willing to be proactive. To stay in town. I had to admire his determination.

"So, what do you say? Want to work together?"

"You're offering me a job at the shop?" Anthony's brows lifted in surprise.

"I guess so, yeah." Was I crazy? Probably. But I couldn't help but remember the last photo we took with Dad before I left for the Navy. The three of us in that picture together. And maybe I was trying to go back in time a little, to bring Dad back the only way I knew how, but ...

"I can't." Anthony frowned. "I barely remember the difference in wrenches. I'd be useless in a shop." He stroked his jaw. "But I got an offer for an assistant coach position up in Toronto. Not the majors. Not even the minors." He smiled. "Kids, actually. Like that guy in *Mighty Ducks*. Remember that movie?" He waved a hand. "Anyways, I think I could help these kids out with hockey. Make some kind of difference in

their lives. Help teach them what not to do. You know, as in not make the mistakes I did.”

I let go of a deep sigh. Relief mixed with a sense of pride striking me hard. “That’s amazing, Anthony.” I was the one gripping my chest now. “Dad would be proud of *that*.”

The tears he’d been trying to keep at bay finally escaped. And fuck if I couldn’t not respond to that.

When he dropped his face against his palm, trying to conceal his emotions, I pulled my kid brother in for a hug and let go of some unexpected tears myself. “I miss him,” he whispered.

I patted his back as I hugged him, trying to find my composure, but instead found myself forgiving him. And also, *finally*, forgiving myself for whatever guilt I’d kept buried inside.

“But I’ve missed you, too. I—I don’t want to lose you, brother. And I thought I almost did back in Monaco.”

“I missed you, too,” I hoarsely admitted. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

* * *

“A BLINDFOLD, REALLY?”

“I want it to be a surprise.” I held Natalia’s hand as I walked her into our new condo. It was her first time there since I’d been given the key.

“I do love a good surprise.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” With Maria’s and Mom’s help, I’d ordered a king-sized bed and bedding last week so we’d have at least one piece of furniture already there for our first night together.

While Natalia had been at work, Maria had helped me set everything up. Rose petals. Candles. All the stuff Maria said would be “romantic.” I had a feeling Natalia wouldn’t care as long as we were finally alone together.

I also saw the cardiologist today and was given the best news I'd had in weeks. Permission granted to resume normal activity, which included having sex with the woman I loved. And she wouldn't need to feel guilty about it, which was the last thing I wanted for us. No more guilt.

I'd had to call in a few dozen favors to see the doctor ahead of schedule, which had been almost more difficult to pull off than taking down a high-value-target in a war zone. But determination will get you everywhere.

I walked Natalia down the hall to our new bedroom and let go of her hand. I'd had her wait in the Jeep so I could light all the candles once she'd pulled into the parking lot, so I was all set. "You wore that on purpose, huh?" I eyed the gray pencil skirt she'd paired with black heels and a black silk top.

"Maybe."

"I saw the doctor today," I finally shared the news I'd been anxiously sitting on all day. "He gave us the go-ahead."

Natalia's mouth opened in surprise, and she went for the blindfold, but I snatched her wrist on instinct, stopping her. "We can make love, really? No waiting?"

"I didn't plan to wait anyway," I admitted and let go of her wrist so I could begin working at the buttons of her blouse. "But I thought since you're such a good girl, you'd want permission first."

"Mmm." She wet her lips. "I feel like I've been nothing but naughty lately. Kind of the opposite of good."

My cock twitched at her words. She was for sure my naughty girl. "Three weeks," I said near her mouth before kissing her. "We waited three long weeks for this. I'd say we've earned the right to do whatever we please tonight."

She arched into me, sliding her tongue between my lips for one hot moment before pulling back. "And how do you want me?" That sexy rasp was going to be my undoing.

"Good. Bad. Maybe both. I just want you, Talia." I stepped back to slide her blouse over her shoulders and down her arms, gliding my hands against her soft skin, then tossed it to the

floor, careful not to throw it onto an open flame. No more fires. Thankfully, my burns hadn't been too bad, but my skin was still in recovery mode. My mind probably a bit, too.

I eyed her lush tits next, the swell of her flesh peeking from the cups of her bra that barely contained her breasts. She'd worn that bra knowing I'd be seeing it tonight. Seems my girl had no plans to wait, either.

I reached around and unhooked it, then tossed it on top of her blouse.

"Are we making love on the floor?" she asked as I cupped her breasts, feeling the heavy weight of them in my palms, and my dick strained against the fabric of my jeans.

"I may have gone behind your back and got us a bed already. If you don't like it or the comforter, blame your sister," I teased, then released her so I could spin her around.

She gasped at the quick movement, and I dragged my knuckles down her spine before reaching for the zipper of her skirt. "No heels tonight. I don't want to accidentally dig them into your body. You're still healing," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." I lowered the skirt a moment later, and she stepped free from it, kicking off her heels in the process, revealing her black thong. Yeah, she definitely had no intentions of waiting any longer.

I set my hands to her sides and pulled her back flush to my body so she could feel how hard she made me. Not that she had doubts. I'd been rock solid for the last few weeks. Forget Rabbit Beach blue. I was SEAL Team blue. A dark-dark-navy blue. And I needed relief.

"One more request," she whispered as I slowly turned her back around, and began unbuttoning my black dress shirt.

"Anything."

"No condom. I want to feel you inside me."

My hands went still at the last button. "You're not on the pill, Talia."

“I know. And that’s a chance I’m willing to take if you are?”

I removed her blindfold at her words. I needed to look her in the eyes. Her gaze darted to the bed covered in a white comforter and rose petals. Her eyes widened just a touch as she took in the flickering candles all around the room. “Wow,” she whispered.

“Talia?” I drew her focus back my way, and she set her hands on my chest. “Are you sure?”

She slid her palms down my chest to my belt buckle. “Absolutely,” she said as her brows went inward.

I set my mouth over hers and kissed her as gently as possible when all I wanted to do was devour this woman. I promised myself I’d go slow. But three weeks of navy-blue balls, and well, that was going to be hard. Almost as hard as my cock right now.

“I don’t think I can go slow and sweet,” she said once breaking our kiss, reading my thoughts, and she unzipped my jeans. “Maybe we try our not-so-Hallmark lovemaking after we go hard and dirty?”

“Hard and dirty, hmm?” I fisted her hair on impulse.

She dragged her lower lip along the line of her teeth. “As long as we’re together, how we do it doesn’t matter, right?” She taunted me with another brush of her lips over mine. “I just want you. All the time. Every angle and way and—”

My mouth swooped over hers, cutting her off, and I grabbed her ass cheek. She moaned and arched her pussy against the bulky fabric of my jeans.

“Make love to me,” she cried between kisses. “But our way.”

Our way. Dirty and hard? Fuck, yes.

I released her and rid myself of the rest of my clothes while she slowly removed her thong, wiggling her hips a little more than necessary in the process.

Lovemaking meant foreplay. I knew the both of us would die if we prolonged it. I needed to feel myself inside her.

Right. Damn. Now.

I scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed. Climbing over her, I took a second to stroke my tongue along her clit. She was so wet, and when I slipped a finger inside her, her pussy tightened around me.

“I want you on top,” I decided, then shifted to my back. “You get to take control *this* time. Ride me the way you’ve been telling me you want to in our text messages.”

“It’s been a few weeks, it’s going to be hard for you to hold back,” she warned but climbed on top of me anyway, situating her ass on top of my cock with another shameless wiggle. If she wasn’t careful, I’d be filling *that* hole in a minute.

I lifted my hips, anxious to be inside her before I embarrassed myself by losing all control. “Any position’s going to be hard for me, darlin’. I *am* hard.”

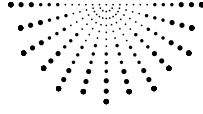
“Mm. Yes, you are.” She shimmied and moved her ass, torturing me while she set her hands on my chest.

“Ugh, I hate you,” I growled out while reaching for her nipples and rolling them between my thumbs and forefingers.

She shifted and moved the crown of my cock to her entrance, then leaned forward and whispered, “No you don’t,” as she sank down onto my hard length, taking every inch of me. Then she went still and added, “But you do love me.”

“Damn right I do,” I hissed while holding onto her hips. “So fucking much.”

EPILOGUE



NATALIA

TWO DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

“I CAN’T BELIEVE HOW MUCH THIS PLACE HAS COME ALONG.” Ryan and I were sitting in the bed of his truck. The restaurant was closed for a week for the holidays, and he surprised me with a picnic dinner next to the construction site where Rossi’s Auto Body was being built. It was both perfect and private. “I’m so proud of you.”

He had his arm wrapped around me beneath the blanket, and our legs were stretched out. It was pretty warm out for December, only fifty, but it was perfect for our romantic night.

“Everything’s coming together at the restaurant with our new catering business, and now you’ll have this place,” I went on while he remained silent. When I slipped a hand to his chest, I found his heart pounding pretty intensely given his quiet state. “Are you okay?” I tipped my head to the side and peered up at him.

He dropped his chin to look at me. “Why wouldn’t I be?” He smoothed his hand in circles at the small of my back.

“Your heart is racing. And you barely said a word over the amazing meal you packed tonight.”

He smiled and leaned in to press his mouth to mine. “I’m fine, I promise,” he said once he pulled his lips away to find my eyes again.

“Like ‘fine’ as when a woman says she’s fine, which is the total opposite of fine?”

His husky laugh had me relaxing a touch. “Fair enough.” He pressed another quick kiss to my lips. “I’m solid. Good. A rock.” He winked. “Happy.”

“Promise?”

“Not going to make me pinky swear, are ya?” he teased, and I elbowed him in the side.

“Not regretting the deal you made with Michael Maddox, right? I know you didn’t expect for our meeting last month to

turn into something for the both of us, but—”

“No regrets.” He smiled and pulled me tighter to his frame, hugging me to his side. “I promise.”

“You wouldn’t take the money from your uncle, so you accepting the loan Maddox offered was a bit of a shock, if I’m being honest.”

“When are you not honest?”

I rolled my eyes, unsure if he witnessed my dramatics all that clearly given we only had a little light to work with now that the sun had set.

“Supporting veteran businesses, that’s what Maddox does. It’s his thing.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t do all of this,” he said while motioning toward the partial structure in the distance, “without more funds. And Maddox’s only request was an easy ask. Hire vets. Planned to do that anyway, so a loan from him instead of a bank made sense. And I’ll pay him back. My uncle? That’d be just taking money to take it.”

Stubborn man. And I admired him for that.

Last week had also been my first catering job for the Maddox family. They bounced between their homes in Boston, New York, and Charlotte, and it just so happened they were hosting a holiday party in Charlotte this year. They’d hired my restaurant to cater it, and my phone began ringing off the hook the second word got out about it. The restaurant would survive many, many more years now.

“Unless you want that money?” Ryan abruptly asked. Was he serious? “I’d do that for you. If it made you feel better that we had a safety net, I, um—”

“I don’t need a ten-million-dollar safety net.” I turned and fisted his flannel button-down. “You’re my safety net. My hero. All I’ll ever need.”

His shoulders relaxed. “Ditto, darlin’.” He kissed me again, and when I released his shirt, and my palm flattened against his chest, I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on with him.

“You saw the cardiologist last week. And he said you were great. So why is your heart pounding soooo fast?” I swallowed and shifted the blanket from my lap, easing myself from his embrace. I went to my knees and sat back on my heels to get a better look at him. “Did something change since then, and you’re scared to break our bliss bubble?”

A smirk from him was a good sign, right?

“I love our ‘bliss bubble,’ but I’d love it a bit more if we made one small tweak.” He reached for my hand. “I’d rather you be standing if you don’t mind?” Without waiting for me to respond, he helped me off the bed of the truck.

“Eleven years ago to this exact day,” he said while pointing at the ground, “I came home on leave for the holidays and saw you at the dinner table.”

Shit, he was right. Just before Christmas, and the night Anthony and I announced we were dating. It’d also been the first time I’d seen Ryan in years. I was finally of “drinking age” at that point, too.

“I told you back in October during all the craziness that one word came to my mind when I saw you that night. *Mine.*” His tone was steady, but I could tell he was fighting a swell of emotions.

I held the sides of my arms, chills flying over my skin beneath my sweater.

“That was the day I knew you’d be the only woman I’d ever love. That my soul could ever love. I know it took eleven years to get here to this moment,” he said while slipping a hand in his pocket and lowering to his knee, “but I want to be there every day of your life to love and cherish you.”

I stared at Ryan on one knee. Not fake this time. *Oh my God.*

Ryan pulled a small box from his pocket, popped it open, and peered up at me. “Be mine forever, Talia. Will you marry me?”

“Rabbit Beach blue,” I whispered, eyeing the two small blue stones surrounding a princess-cut diamond set in a white

gold band.

“Tanzanite, but yeah,” he added with a smile.

I fell to my knees and threw my arms over his shoulders, and he nearly dropped the box as I hugged him.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Yes, please,” I confirmed before his lips slanted over mine. “I’m just so glad your heart was beating so fast because you were nervous and not for any other reason,” I said once composing myself and wiping away my happy tears.

He slid the beautiful ring on my finger, quite an upgrade from the hoop earring back in Italy.

“You always have my heart racing,” he returned with a smile. “And you always will.”

* * *

TWO WEEKS LATER

“Is it weird they’ve become best friends?”

I peeked at Ryan across the bar at my restaurant as he laughed his ass off at something I assumed Enzo had just said to him. “Not weird. Amazing.” I accepted a martini from my bartender, Christian, and clinked my glass with my sister’s. “I guess they bonded over their time in the military and ... the other thing.”

Maria took a sip of her drink. “They both lost loved ones while serving,” she interpreted, then took another drink. She still didn’t know Enzo’s whole story, and he didn’t ever want her to, but Ryan now knew because Enzo felt comfortable enough with him to share. That meant the world to me. I really did love how close they’d grown in such a short period of time. And I’d been right. They were very much alike, and Ryan knew that now, too.

“Well then.” She clinked our glasses one more time, nearly spilling her drink on my dress. “Cheers to your happiness. Married to one hunk of a man.”

Married? It took me a second to process that word before I sipped my drink. *I’m Ryan’s wife. He’s my husband.*

“I’m just grateful you two included a few of us when you dropped the eloping plans on us Christmas Day,” Maria said, her voice wistful sounding. “And also, smart man to ask both Mom and Dad for your hand in marriage before he proposed.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I think he knows the power Mom wields in our house.”

As soon as I’d begged him to elope, Ryan had reached out to everyone to set up a wedding reception at the restaurant following our nuptials. Well, he’d reached out to everyone but me. After we eloped yesterday with only our parents, Maria, his uncle, and Enzo as our witnesses, Ryan let me in on the little secret about the surprise party he’d planned. The place was brimming with people tonight. With my staff’s assistance,

Maria had helped him set up everything. And, of course, with our mothers at the helm as well, everyone worked to keep me completely in the dark.

Almost every Teamguy Ryan had worked with as part of Alpha Platoon had made it, and I knew that meant a lot to see them all.

And, of course, Luke, Owen, Noah and their wives had shown up. I'd also been right back in Monaco—the President's son had been there on the mission. Ryan had told me they were in the same BUD/S class together. Knox had been unable to make the party tonight, but he'd sent several congratulatory bottles of expensive champagne.

About twenty other sailors were also there, and I wish he'd given me a cheat sheet with everyone's names on it before the party had started.

But someone who most definitely stood out tonight was my new brother-in-law, and mostly because of the date he'd brought—a single mom to one of the kids he coached up in Toronto. Based on the time I spent with her, I was rooting for their relationship to work and for Anthony not to muck it up. I adored her, and I could only hope the “new leaf” he'd turned, according to Ryan, was legitimate and long lasting. *Like forever lasting.*

“I'm a little worried,” Maria began a minute later, “you refrained from a big wedding because of me. Worried it'd be hard on me because of what's going on with Thomas.”

The thought had crossed my mind, but it wasn't why we'd eloped. “I waited eleven years to be with that man. I was impatient. Just wanted to be his wife, and I didn't need anything fancy to make it happen,” I promised and squeezed her hand. “And you'll get your second chance when the time is right.”

At that, Maria looked over at Christian who was hanging nearby behind the bar. He hadn't taken his eyes off Maria all night in her black dress that showcased her gorgeous figure.

Maria was single now, I supposed. Not officially, but the separation paperwork had been signed and agreements were made in writing that they could see other people before the divorce was finalized. Thomas was still begging her to reconsider working things out, but Maria had made up her mind, and there was no turning back.

I highly doubted she was ready for rebound sex, though, especially not with someone she knew, like Christian. But I had to wonder how she would live next door to Enzo without jumping into his arms at some point. They had chemistry, that was for sure.

“She’s off-limits, Nat,” Enzo had said to me a few weeks ago when we’d all been out in the city while Thomas had Chiara for his weekend. *“I won’t make a move on her. I’m not good for her. But that doesn’t mean I won’t protect her until my dying breath.”*

I shivered at the memory of his words, unsure why he’d decided to share them. It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself to keep his hands off my sister since I’d never given him such marching orders.

“Looks like someone wants his wife’s attention.” Maria lifted her glass, and I followed her focus to see Ryan, hands in his black dress pants pockets, the matching jacket open to a casual white shirt under it, his head angled toward the hall leading to my office.

“Mmm. Office sex, huh?” Maria teased. “You know that’s what he wants. He can never keep his hands off you.”

“We’ve yet to christen my office, so it might be time.”

“The fact I now manage your catering business and spend a ton of time in that office, well ... I *still* fully support that idea.” She chuckled, then gripped my shoulder and lightly squeezed. “So happy for you, sis.”

“Thank you.” I quickly left the bar to follow my husband who had already disappeared down the hall, too anxious to wait.

The second I entered my office, he had the door closed and locked, and my back to the wall.

“Hi, beautiful,” he murmured into my ear, his palms planted alongside my body. “I’ve been dying to get you alone all night.”

“Oh have you?” My nipples pebbled at the feel of his breath at the shell of my ear. “What do you plan to do with me?”

“I have a few ideas.” He peered over his shoulder toward the desk. “Get over there,” he roughly commanded, and my legs went weak at that gruff tone.

“Yes, sir,” I rasped. He brought his mouth to mine and sucked my bottom lip, teasing it between his teeth before letting it go. “But you’ll need to move out of my way for me to follow orders.”

A handsome grin played across his lips, and he finally pushed away from the wall. “Roger that.”

I swallowed as I watched his large hand begin to unbuckle his belt. I’d never forget some of the hot, naughty moments we’d spent in our bedroom the past several weeks, many involving his sailor skills. He was great with knots, that was for sure. And even better at making me come over and over and over again.

I forced myself to move and stood in front of the desk, unsure how he wanted me, so I would wait. I loved when my man told me just what he wanted in the bedroom, and he never failed to deliver, giving me exactly what I needed. And then some.

He slowly stalked my way, his belt hanging loose from his pants now like a promise of what was to come.

His gaze raked over my outfit in appreciation. I’d worn a white satin dress tonight that had a sweetheart neckline and went to my thighs. It was a slightly downplayed version of what I’d worn when we’d said “I do” yesterday. I had on the same white heels, though.

“I want you only in your lingerie with those heels.” He peeled his jacket off, revealing his muscular arms, and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

“Mm. As you wish.” I slid down the side zipper, then slowly peeled the fabric free from my skin, revealing my sheer white bra and panty set. He set a hand to his crotch and murmured a few curses. I’d never get enough of this, of watching him admire me as if seeing me for the first time all over again.

“Sit on the desk. Cross those sexy legs of yours.” He adjusted himself as he waited for me to be exactly where he wanted, then closed the space between us and dragged a finger along my thigh before both hands went to my face. “I have another surprise for you. A wedding gift.”

“Oh, will you need to wrap something around my mouth to give it to me?” I smirked. “You know, so no one hears my screams and thinks I’m being hurt and comes rushing in?”

His eyes narrowed, lowering to my nipples, peaked and visible through the sheer bra. “That gift will be for me,” he rasped. “I have something else for you.”

“Mmm. Well, I’m intrigued. What else could I want from you? I have everything.”

His hands went to my hips, and he scooted me closer to the edge, drawing his eyes back to my face. “Our honeymoon. My uncle’s lending us his jet, and we leave at midnight. We’re taking it to Sicily. The ride is a wedding gift from him. But the rest of the trip is my present to you.”

My chest tightened at his words. “*Spiaggia dei Conigli?*” I whispered. “Rabbit Beach?”

He nodded, then brought his mouth to mine. “What better place to take my wife to make love in hopes she’ll get pregnant with our child?” When he kissed me, deeper and more passionately than ever, I arched into him, nearly sliding off the desk. He scooped a hand to my back and caught me.

“I guess you’re right. I don’t have everything quite yet,” I admitted once our lips broke. “But if you could give me a son

named Dante, well then, you'll have given me the world."

"You're *my* world, Talia." His eyes unexpectedly glistened, and he reached for my cheek. "And I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

I released a small gasp when his hands wandered to my ass and he drew my pussy closer to his cock, pressing his hard length into me.

"Since we both have the world," he huskily began, then teasingly licked the seam of my lips, "I think it's time you see some stars."

CROSSOVER INFORMATION

Although Natalia and Ryan are new characters, so you've never seen them in any of my previous books - I did include several "friends" from other novels I've written. In my head, all characters live within the same world, so I love when their worlds merge.

Where else have you seen some of the secondary characters?

Noah Dalton - single dad/ Navy SEAL from the book *Someone Like You*

Michael & Kate Maddox - from the very first book I ever wrote, *The Safe Bet*.

Bravo Team (Stealth Ops Series)

Bravo One - Luke from *Finding His Mark*

Bravo Two - Owen from *Finding Justice*

Bravo Three - Asher from *Finding the Fight*

Bravo Four - Liam (the best sniper/Australian accent) - from *Finding Her Chance*

Bravo Five - Knox (Charlie "Knox" Bennett) - President's son* - *from Finding the Way Back*

* * *

**The mention of "The League" - from the Dublin Nights Series. The League is introduced in the book, *The Real Deal*.

* * *

Publication order for all books

Books by Series

MUSIC PLAYLIST

Here With Me - Marshmello, CHVRCHES

Starving - Hailee Steinfeld, Grey, Zedd

Better Than This - Justin Lee

Unbreakable - BUNT, Clarence Coffee Jr.

Numb - Marshmello, Khalid

Bad Decisions - Benny Blanco, BTS, Snoop Dogg

Bumpy Ride - Soca Remix - Mohombi, Pitbull

Hooked - Dylan Scott

You Proof - Morgan Wallen

Nobody Compares to You - Griffin, Katie Pearlman

Anything Could Happen - Ellie Goulding

Make it Sweet - Old Dominion

Til You Can't - Cody Johnson

[Spotify](#)

*Note: Spotify adds “suggested” songs to the end of my list, so you may see other songs there.

ALSO BY BRITTNEY SAHIN

Find the latest news from my newsletter/[website](#) and/or Facebook: [Brittney's Book Babes](#) / the [Stealth Ops Spoiler Room](#) / [Dublin Nights Spoiler Room](#).

[Publication order](#) for all books

[Books by Series](#)

[BONUS CONTENT](#)

[Pinterest Muse/Inspiration Board](#)

* * *

Falcon Falls Security

[The Hunted One](#) - book 1 - Griffin & Savanna

[The Broken One](#) - book 2 - Jesse & Ella

[The Guarded One](#) - book 3 - Sydney & Beckett

Stealth Ops Series: Bravo Team

[Finding His Mark](#) - Book 1 - Luke & Eva

[Finding Justice](#) - Book 2 - Owen & Samantha

[Finding the Fight](#) - Book 3 - Asher & Jessica

[Finding Her Chance](#) - Book 4 - Liam & Emily

[Finding the Way Back](#) - Book 5 - Knox & Adriana

Stealth Ops Series: Echo Team

Chasing the Knight - Book 6 -Wyatt & Natasha

Chasing Daylight - Book 7 - A.J. & Ana

Chasing Fortune - Book 8 - Chris & Rory

Chasing Shadows - Book 9 -Harper & Roman

Chasing the Storm - Book 10 - Finn & Julia

Becoming Us: *connection to the Stealth Ops Series (books take place between the prologue and chapter 1 of Finding His Mark)*

Someone Like You - A former Navy SEAL. A father. And off-limits. (Noah Dalton)

My Every Breath - A sizzling and suspenseful romance. Businessman Cade King has fallen for the wrong woman. She's the daughter of a hitman - and he's the target.

Dublin Nights

On the Edge - Adam & Anna

On the Line - follow-up wedding novella (Adam & Anna)

The Real Deal - Sebastian & Holly

The Inside Man - Cole & Alessia

The Final Hour - Sean and Emilia

Stand-alone (with a connection to *On the Edge*):

The Story of Us– Sports columnist Maggie Lane has 1 rule: never fall for a player. One mistaken kiss with Italian soccer star Marco Valenti changes everything...

Hidden Truths

The Safe Bet – Begin the series with the Man-of-Steel lookalike Michael Maddox.

Beyond the Chase - Fall for the sexy Irishman, Aiden O'Connor, in this romantic suspense.

The Hard Truth – Read Connor Matthews' story in this second-chance romantic suspense novel.

Surviving the Fall – Jake Summers loses the last 12 years of his life in this action-packed romantic thriller.

The Final Goodbye - Friends-to-lovers romantic mystery

WHERE ELSE CAN YOU FIND ME?

I love, love, love interacting with readers in my Facebook groups as well as on my Instagram page. Join me over there as we talk characters, books, and more! ;)

FB Reader Groups:

[Brittney's Book Babes](#)

[Stealth Ops Spoiler Room](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[TikTok](#)

www.brittneysahin.com

brittneysahin@emkocomedia.net

[BONUS CONTENT](#)

[Pinterest Muse/Inspiration Board](#)