

LEXI HART



CLOSE
QUARTERS

Close Quarters

#2 Blueskin Bay Romances

© Lexi Hart 2022

ISBN 978-1-9911937-0-4

All Rights Reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission in writing from the author, except brief quotations in critical articles, news articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

CONTENTS

[Welcome to Blueskin Bay.](#)

[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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Coming soon!](#)

About the Author

WELCOME TO BLUESKIN BAY



Welcome to Blueskin Bay where the water is cool and the men
are hot!

If you love small-town family romances with a little steam, a
whole lot of tension and a touch of mystery then this is the
series for you!

From broody marines to flirty firefighters there are plenty of
Reid hotties looking for love on Maine's rugged coastline.

Start the series with Loose Cannon and fall in love with
Blueskin Bay and the Reid boys...

CHAPTER ONE

ALESSANDRA

I take a swig of stale coffee I got from a gas station in Carey's Creek and squint out my dusty windshield.

Objectively, it's a pleasant view even to my blurry eyes.

Dew is covering the road ahead in a fine layer of mist and the early morning light is casting everything in a warm yellow washing out the beach in golden hues.

Out past the breakers miles of blue reach toward the horizon, contrasted by the green of the mountains running parallel to the highway.

Dozens of traditional New England-style houses with steeply pitched roofs dot the hills.

But the beauty of the Bay is lost on me, I'm too preoccupied with the mess I left in Boston and what the consequences will be when I return.

I glance in my rearview and grimace at the gaunt-looking brunette staring back at me.

Dark circles rim my eyes, my skin has taken on an unhealthy pallor, and I look about as terrible as a person can

do.

Having one of the most coveted jobs in law enforcement in the largest division of the FBI sounds great on paper.

But as I consider what's happened in the past week I'm beginning to wonder if I'm out of my depth.

My Section Chief has zero confidence in me, my colleagues seem to resent my promotion, and I've lost more friends than gained since accepting my post in Boston a year ago.

Being on call twenty-four-seven and always working ten-hour days means my life is consumed by work.

Aside from watching my friends from college get married and start families, I haven't seen my mom in over six months.

I was ecstatic when I was accepted into Quantico, even more so when I was hand-picked out of the graduates to work with the Criminal Investigations Division.

But when push came to shove, no one had my back in the Bureau and I'm beginning to think I've been given this job, not on merit, but because they had a quota to fill.

Caught in my thoughts, I round the bend too fast and have to take evasive action to avoid an object in the middle of the road.

I come to a halt a millisecond before I wind up in a ditch running the ocean side of the highway.

I take a few seconds to catch my breath, cursing and muttering as discomfort burns through my tender abdomen.

I can't tell if I'm bleeding again, so I ease out of the car, my eyes on the massive oily creature smack bang in the middle of the road.

When I'm sure there's no traffic in sight, I tug up my shirt and take a look.

Thankfully, blood hasn't seeped through the bandage, but when I look up, stars prick at my eyes, and a wave of dizziness washes over me.

I groan and clutch the doorframe and wait for the spinning to subside.

I'm so distracted I don't recognize someone is there until I see the shadow fall over me.

I snap my neck up, hand going for my weapon as I shield my eyes.

"No need to shoot me. Just thought you looked like you could use some assistance," a masculine voice says.

His face comes into view, and I drop my hand as I'm met with nearly six feet of dripping wet manhood encased only in swimming shorts.

I squint at his face. A very handsome face. The kind of face that makes women forget why they don't date.

"You're hardly dressed to give any."

He smiles and I hate how my stomach does a small back flip. "My gear is on the beach but I'm happy to change your tire for you."

I follow his gaze and mutter under my breath that I've got a puncture. "I don't need help. I can change my own tires."

His eyebrow cocks. "I'm sure you can, Mrs.?"

"Ms. Eason. Alessandra Eason, Department of Agriculture Conservation and Forestry," I say.

He chuckles. "Not likely."

I pause. Sure I misheard him. "I beg your pardon?"

"If DACF were sending out a new field worker, I'd have heard about it," he says.

My spine stiffens. Shit. Just my luck. "You're with the local police?"

He nods. "Deputy Chief Garrett Reid. Since you know who I am, I'd appreciate you telling me why the FBI is sending someone out here with a lousy cover?"

Inwardly I cringe he's already picked me as a federal agent. So much for incognito. "Covering is a habit. I'm on vacation," I grumble.

He leans against my car, dripping water on the paintwork. "Does anyone in your office know you're vacationing here?"

I stay silent. The less I say the easier it'll be for him to deny later.

"It was a last-minute thing."

His eyes shift to my untucked shirt and then back to my face. "Anything I need to know about why you're driving erratically?"

“I wasn’t. So, no.”

His chin drops a fraction. “You were. So, yes, you do.”

If I could manage it, I’d throw my hands in the air. “Don’t you have anything better to do with your time than harass tourists?”

His eyes travel to my side, and back to my face. “Where are you staying?”

“Fisherman’s Cottage,” I answer swiftly.

His lips twitch into a barely concealed smirk. “Interesting choice.”

I don’t even want to think about what that’s supposed to mean. “Is that all? I’m tired and I need to get settled.”

When he scratches his nose, I’m sure he’s doing it to conceal a smile. “My truck is right down there. Why don’t I drive you?”

My side has started to throb, but I’m not about to accept his help. “I have the directions.”

It’s slightly disconcerting standing on the side of the road having a conversation with a semi-naked man, even more so that he’s rattling me.

He lingers for a few seconds before he nods. “Keep both eyes on the road and drive slowly, *Agent Eason*. The FBI isn’t the one cleaning up after careless drivers. I am.”

With that, he turns and ambles across the road, giving the animal lounging inconveniently in the morning sun a wide berth.

I slump against my rental, energy draining as I will myself to hold it together until I'm sure he's gone.

It's only when I'm sure he's slipped back down the bank to the beachfront, I notice the two white crosses marking road fatalities at the side of the road.



GARRETT

I sling a towel over my shoulder and watch as Alessandra struggles with a tire iron.

I really should call MFS, the Marine Fisheries Services, but by the time they get here, Slouchy Sid the sealion currently blocking the road will be long gone.

Unfortunately, Alessandra won't be.

Since I'm supposed to be taking this week off, I pull out my cell and call Zane, our younger brother, and the reason I'm not at the office right now. "Thought you should know, there's an FBI agent in town," I say.

"Why?" Zane grunts.

I scratch my chin as I watch her kick at the tire in frustration. "She declined to share that information," I say.

He's quiet for a moment. "You think it's about the burglaries last winter?"

Of course, he's thinking about that. He and his fiancé, Felicity wouldn't have met unless she'd been living in our family home and had been targeted.

“Whatever she’s doing, it’s not with the Bureau’s knowledge.”

He curses. “What do you want me to do about it? Track her movements? Follow her?”

I cover a laugh. I doubt Felicity would approve of any of that.

“I’ll find a way to keep tabs on her. Long as you can keep up your end of our deal and cover my shifts this week,” I say.

“I will. Don’t forget the photoshoot is on Friday,” he says.

I groan. “Thanks for reminding me.”

He chuckles. And as good as it is to hear my brother laugh again, it comes at my expense.

Agreeing to appear in a charity calendar wasn’t the best call I ever made.

“Let me know if you need me to track...what you say her name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s Eason. Agent Alessandra Eason.”

“Right. Let me know if you want my help, and I’ll dig up a drone I have. I need to go. Felicity dropped by with cookies.”

When I hear a breathy giggle in the background, my mouth tugs to one side.

“If you’re in my office, I *don’t* want to hear the details.”

Thankfully, Zane’s not the type to share them. If it had been my younger brother Levi who’d snagged Felicity, he

would have given me a blow-by-blow account of how many times and where by now.

“We *share* the office. And I’m not giving you any,” he says.

The line goes dead, so I toss my phone on my clothes and double-check Alessandra hasn’t passed out on the side of the road.

She’s a deathly shade of pale, obviously in a great deal of pain, but too stubborn to accept my help.

I dry off, tie my towel around my waist, slip my trunks off, and get dressed for the day.

When Alessandra managed to change the tire and is on the road again, I’m already waiting behind the wheel.

I follow at a distance, close enough to be of assistance if she runs off the road again, but far enough back for her to not see me in her rearview.

Alessandra Eason may not want or think she needs my help.

But she’s going to get it.

CHAPTER TWO

ALESSANDRA

I check and recheck the instructions, and when I make it to the top of a driveway, I'm dismayed to see that ramshackle does *not* do the Fisherman's Cottage justice.

Nor does the word dump.

The roof looks like it's caving in on one side, the chimney is secured by a rope, and there is a crack in the front window.

I don't even want to think about what it's going to look like inside.

I'm so exhausted and so ready to drop, that I nearly cry when I open the front door.

But FBI agents do *not* cry.

Not even if they were dumb enough to pay in advance for a cottage that should have been demolished a decade ago.

I gingerly poke around the tiny cottage as my despair only seems to intensify.

The bedroom looks like something out of a horror movie, there are stains on the floors and walls that make me shudder,

and the bathroom is missing both a shower curtain *and* a toilet seat.

If I wasn't so utterly shattered, I'd get back in my car, go find the owner and threaten to sue them for false advertising.

But even if I did have the energy to find the cretin who rented me this place, that won't solve my accommodation problem.

With a sigh, I perch on the edge of a chair and haul out my pain meds and a water bottle.

I pop two in my mouth, take a swig and find some cheese and crackers to munch on while I try to think.

As far as I can tell, unless I want to catch some hideous disease, my best option is to sleep in my car tonight and go look for somewhere else tomorrow.

I'm crunching my way through my food when movement on the floor makes me jump to my feet.

I have no idea what it is, but I'm not about to stick around and find out. I grab my bag and am out the front door in two seconds flat.

I almost wish I'd drawn my weapon when I find Garrett Reid leaning on my car looking smug.

"Did you follow me all the way here?"

He nods. "Figured you might not be so keen to stay once you saw the place."

I hate that he's so cocky. And I hate it even more than I should have accepted his help earlier.

“I couldn’t find anywhere else,” I snap.

He crosses his arms across his chest. “Plenty of places to rent in the Bay. If you’d contacted the station, I could have arranged it,” he says.

I gape at him. “I told you; it was a spur of the moment thing.”

His gaze is unrelenting. “Ayuh. You did,” he says.

I have no idea what ‘Ayuh’ means, and I’m too tired to care. “*Can* you find me somewhere else to stay?”

“Sure.”

When he doesn’t move, I spread my hands in a ‘well’ gesture.

He slowly unfolds his arms and turns to get back in his truck. “You can stay at my place.”

My mouth slackens. “What? Absolutely not.”

I did not come here to stay with local law enforcement. It’s bad enough I bumped into him.

He shrugs and opens his door. “Suit yourself. But we’re at peak season, everywhere that’s halfway decent has been booked for months. It’s my place or here. The choice is yours.”

“Are you *kidding* me? Those are my only options?”

He nods slowly. “Either way, I will have to confiscate your keys. I’m not sure you should be driving.”

My eyes pop. “What the *hell*?”

He hooks his thumb through his belt and gives me a smile that makes me want to punch him. “So, which is it?”

I’m so miserable, so exhausted, all the fight is draining from me. “Fine. But I’ll need my vehicle later.”

His lip curls as he extends his hand, palm down. “I’ll keep them safe.”

I glance at the shack I was supposed to be staying in, think of the horrors lurking in the shadows and curse as my feet seem to move of their own will.

I dump the keys into his hands and glower at him.

He doesn’t seem concerned he’s messing with an FBI agent, just grabs my bag and tosses it inside his truck.



GARRETT

As I drive back along the coast, I sneak glances at her as she slumps against the window.

Even if she’s pissed, it was the right call. She’s so stubborn she would have gotten back on the road and driven into town looking for accommodation when there isn’t any.

After my last experience with the Feebs, I’m not sure they’d appreciate me calling to say I’d found one of their agents in a ditch somewhere.

Every so often, I feel her looking at me, and I can almost feel her irritation burning my skin.

Sure enough, she growls at me. “Can’t you drive any faster?”

I glance at her. “Nope.”

She huffs out a breath. “Fantastic. I’ll never get...”

Her voice trails off. Either she’s run out of steam or she’s unwilling to talk to me about why she’s really here.

I scratch my chin and ease my foot off the accelerator just to delay getting back to town.

“This impromptu vacation you’re on...” I say.

“What about it?”

I have to work to hide my smirk from her. “Bit of a coincidence how you managed to injure yourself just before you took one.”

She grumbles under her breath. “Do all cops here drive like old ladies? Or is it just you?”

When I don’t speak, she taps her finger on her leg impatiently. “Well?”

I glance sidelong. “I thought you were asking a rhetorical question.”

She snorts. “Forget it. I’m too tired for this.”

My nostrils flare as I keep my amusement to myself. “So, tell me something, Agent Eason, since you’re going to be in my Bay for a while, how are you planning on spending your time here?”

She picks at her jeans. “Oh, you know. I’ll be doing the things tourists usually do.”

There’s such an element of uncertainty in her voice, I have to wonder if she even knows what people do on vacation.

I’m also beginning to wonder how long she’s been an agent.

She can’t be more than twenty-five, maybe twenty-seven. Not a lot of time to get experience in the field.

“That’s a little vague.”

She huffs a breath as we turn off into the main street of Blueskin Bay. “I didn’t realize I needed a schedule,” she says.

I flick my turn signal and wait for a car to move before answering. “You don’t. But considering you showed up with no warning, you’ll be hard-pressed to get bookings for most of the *usual* things tourists want.”

“I’ll manage.”

“Like you managed to book the worst accommodation in the entire Bay?”

She’s silent, but as I turn past Ocean Grove, and drive onto Seaview where my cottage sits overlooking the Bay, her fingers are twitching on her leg.

She’s growing noticeably more agitated, and for the first time, I consider I may have made an error in offering to help.

I haven’t seen any ID, and since she made no attempt to contact me, I’m taking her at her word she’s an agent.

I pull up outside my place and find her gazing out the windshield, mouth slightly open, and surprise etched on her face.

She catches me watching her and tries to look nonchalant. “It’s not *that* much better than the Fisherman’s Cottage,” she says.



ALESSANDRA

As discretely as I can I take in the cottage on the top of the cliff with a wrap-around deck, and views spanning right out to sea.

A real estate broker would probably call it a ‘charming beach house.’

With the exterior painted blue with green trim that seems to magnify the beauty of the Atlantic Ocean behind it, it really is.

When I follow him inside via the back door or what he calls the ‘mud room’, it only gets better. Garrett has excellent taste and has chosen soft furnishings, subtle paint, lighting, and curtains.

There’s a huge stone fireplace, an open-plan kitchen with a breakfast island, old-fashioned cabinets, bookcases filled to the brim with books and a TV taking up one space along the wall.

It looks so inviting I groan in pleasure as I sink into his sofa.

Rather than set me at ease, his eyes narrow slightly as he pushes his still wet hair out of his eyes. “Since you’re now in my home, you won’t mind if I ask for your badge so I can verify your identity.”

Oh dammit. Why’d he have to push this!?

“I didn’t bring it with me.”

His eyebrow raises. “Give me the number of your field office and I’ll call them.”

Shit, shit!

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

His arms fold across his chest. “Why not?”

I sigh loudly. “Do we have to do this now? I’ve been driving since four. I just want to get something to eat, take a shower and take a nap.”

He doesn’t even take a breath; his reply comes immediately as if he knew what I was going to say. “You can do those things *after* you tell me why you’re really in Blueskin Bay.”

His eyes never leave my face, and I get the impression Garrett Reid is not a man to be trifled with.

No matter how annoying I’m finding him, this is his town, and I have to accept I’m a fish out of water.

I run my fingers through my hair. “I’m here following a lead...in an unofficial capacity,” I say.

“What kind of lead?”

I swallow past my dry throat. “I think a fugitive may be on his way here.”

To his credit, he doesn't even blink. “Alright, Alessandra, for both our sakes, I think you better start from the beginning,” he says.

CHAPTER THREE

GARRETT

I eye her as she slouches on my sofa, looking like a washed-out rag, and wait for her to talk.

When she doesn't, and the silence stretches long, I try a different approach, one that's worked well for me in the past.

"You want some breakfast?"

When her back stiffens a little, and I can almost see her wilting, I take that as a yes, and walk into my kitchen.

I go with the universally acceptable bacon and eggs, something that'll smell good while cooking, but not take too long to prepare.

I can feel her watching my every move as I get out the chef-grade pan my cousin Jax gave me as a gift one Christmas.

"Scrambled or fried?"

She hauls herself off the sofa and perches at the island. "Scrambled but I like them dry. With hot sauce if you have any," she says.

My eyebrow hitches as I crack open an egg. “You want *dry* eggs?”

She gives me a look. “Do you have any coffee?”

I gesture to the machine on the counter. “Knock yourself out.”

This time she doesn’t even bother to reply or give me a ‘you’re an idiot’ look, just slides off the stool, covering a wince as she moves.

As I cook four strips of bacon and eggs, Alessandra manages to make herself a coffee without asking for any assistance.

Even if she needed it, I doubt she would ask. She’s probably the type of woman who thinks chivalry is outdated.

Since she’s still not talking, and I need some answers, I wait for the noise of the coffee machine to end before I speak.

I butter the toast, dish up the crispy bacon and leave her eggs in the pan as I spoon mine onto a plate.

“FYI, we have a doctor and a clinic in the Bay, but my cousin Jaxson is a trained paramedic and my go-to guy for fast and anonymous treatment,” I say.

Her coffee cup pauses a hair before it reaches her lips. “What makes you think I’ll need *any* treatment while I’m here?”

I hold her gaze as I bite into a piece of toast. “You look like trouble might follow you around.”

She snorts then takes a swallow of her coffee and seems to lose herself in the act of drinking it.

Either she's stalling or she's desperate for the caffeine infusion. Rather than push, I scoop out her eggs onto her plate and push them toward her.

I grab my own plate and settle in beside her, toying with my food as she starts to wolf hers down as though she's not eaten in days.

She eyes me as I chomp through my toast and asks the inevitable question. "Are you trying to try to catch me off guard?"

I hide a smile. "Did it work?"

She pushes her empty plate away. "Not really. The information I'm giving you, I'm giving *willingly*."

I wait a few beats as she takes another sip of coffee. "You're right. I did get injured. Technically I should be at my mother's place in Atlanta recuperating."

"Sounds like you've made it personal," I state.

She laughs. "Damn right I have. He stabbed me."

If I wasn't getting a feel for her by now, that might have surprised me. "Who are you tracking?"

She leans her elbows on the kitchen island and sighs. "A small fry in the scheme of things, an accountant to a crooked banker. I was watching him twenty four seven. He was going to flip on his boss and testify..."

As her voice trails off, I get the unspoken meaning. “But he saw a chance and ran instead?”

She sighs wearily. “My boss is convinced he’s in Mexico.”

“But you think he’s here?”

She nods. “He hasn’t seen his wife in a year, but I have a reliable source she and her mother will be vacationing here this summer.”

“Did you share the tip?”

She chews her lip. “Not exactly. It came from a CI of mine when I was in hospital. She’s a call girl who’s never steered me wrong.”

She toys with the fork on her plate as I process what she’s telling me. “You need to tell your boss ASAP.”

A dark look crosses her face. “My boss was already in Mexico when he called and told me to take a few weeks off.”

I’m not sure which is worse, knowing she’s been shafted or that her boss may be right.

Not all Criminal Informants can be trusted, and if her judgment was impaired, she may have made an error.

“What’s your plan here? Find his family, tail them, and hope he shows?”

She nods. “I’ve already ruled out Carey’s Creek and Turtle Bay. That just leaves here.”

I slowly shake my head. “There are a hundred places he could be hiding out. And even if his wife shows and he crawls out, you’re in no condition to arrest him.”

Her eyes narrow slightly. “Are you going to stop me?”

I frown at her, wondering if this level of obsession is usual behavior for her. “I was going to offer to help you.”

Her face relaxes, and her lips curve into a shallow smile. “You really have the nice guy act down pat, don’t you?”

That kind of statement would be laughable if it didn’t cut to the quick. “It’s not an act. I *am* a nice guy,” I say.

She barks a laugh. “Pity. Nice guys don’t survive in the real world.”

“And by the real world, you mean the FBI?”

Her smile slips from her face. “I mean outside of this cute little Bay you live in. Where nothing truly terrible happens, and you’re all nicely buffered from real crime.”

I’m not about to get into an argument with her about this, she has no idea of what terrible things go on in small towns like mine.

“I have this week off, if you tell me who I’m looking for I’ll start asking around this afternoon,” I say.

She shakes her head. “I appreciate the offer and the food, but this is something I’ll be doing alone,” she says.

I tap my finger on the plate as I assess her. She starts looking for a guy who’s desperate enough to assault an FBI officer, things could go badly.

Our population has swollen over the past few days and it’s only going to get busier over the coming weeks.

That means an increase in criminal activities ranging from drunk and disorderlies, to thefts, sexual assaults, and a host of other problems that come with summer.

“I’m not making myself clear. Either you accept my help, or you leave the Bay.”

She cocks her head. “You can’t be serious.”

I nod. “There are plenty of characters around the Bay who’d be willing to harbor a fugitive for the right price. You start poking your nose in, someone could wind up hurt.”

“I’m quite capable of—”

I sit back and make sure she knows I’m no longer playing around. “Do I need to put a call into your field office?”

Her fist curls slightly on the countertop. “Guess I was wrong about you being *nice*,” she grumbles.



ALESSANDRA

He leans on the counter, narrows his eyes and looks my face over.

“I have some yard work to do, but if you want to take a nap in my spare room it’s the last door on the right.”

I can’t decide if he’s being nice again to unbalance me, and I refuse to be antagonized, so accept his hospitality until I have my wits about me again.

Even if he's getting in my way a tad, I *do* need a nap, *and* a shower, so I grab my overnight bag, try to hide my wince from him, and wander in the direction of the bedroom.

The small bedroom fits with the décor of what I've seen of the rest of the house, simple, but functional, with a distinctly masculine touch.

I dump my bag on the queen size, rummage around for a fresh change of clothes and check my cell for any messages.

Thankfully, the cell signal is strong, and a couple of texts have come in.

I scroll through them, ignore the ones from my boss, a friend in the Bureau, and my mom and switch my phone off.

It's borderline irresponsible not to check in with anyone, but I can't exactly tell anyone what I'm doing.

Being interrogated nice guy style was bad enough.

I pull out my weapon, make sure it's loaded, and I have plenty of ammunition, and slide it under the bed.

After checking a few doors, I find the bathroom is directly opposite me, and right beside another bedroom, which is obviously Garrett's.

I can't hear him in the kitchen, so I take a quick peep, to get more of a measure of the man I had the misfortune to run into this morning.

The bed is neatly made, no clothes are lying on the floor, his dresser is minus a mirror, there are a few photos on the

walls, and if I squint, I can just make him out in a couple, looking officious in his uniform.

But it's the largest of the photos, framed and hung on the wall beside his dresser, that interests me the most.

It's a two-storied house, and there are four men of varying ages and heights, standing in front, laughing.

If I wasn't dog tired, I'd step inside and take a closer look at the photo that has pride of place in Garrett's bedroom.

But I don't have time to conduct a better search of the bedroom of the Bay's Deputy's Chief.

I don't even feel guilty about snooping. If the roles were reversed, I'm sure he'd be doing the same.

Rather than risk him kicking me out before I can get clean and steal some sleep, I duck into the bathroom and close the door locking it behind me.

I switch the shower on, and since medicine cabinets are a treasure trove of information, I open his.

When nothing alarming jumps out at me, just the usual expired scripts, and shaving cream, I do a search of the rest of his bathroom and come up with nothing more to report than he needs to change his toothbrush.

Even his toilet bowl is spotless.

There must be something seriously wrong with this guy. No one is this squeaky clean unless they are hiding something huge.

With a frown on my face, I strip off, stick the plaster protector on my wound that the hospital gave me, and ponder what kind of a man has such an orderly home.

I was in such a rush when I left, I forgot to pack shampoo and conditioner, and all Garrett has is shower gel, so I wet my hair, and make a note to visit the local grocery store.

By the time I'm done, I'm yawning, and ready to drop. As quickly as my aching body allows, I pull on fresh underwear, my jeans, and a t-shirt, then drop my used towel in Garrett's hamper.

I fumble with the lock, stumble out into the hallway, and find my way to the bedroom.

I don't even bother to draw the curtains, I close the door behind me, dive under the covers, and am asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER FOUR

GARRETT

My back and forearms are aching, and my stomach prodding me I need lunch when my phone rings.

I swipe my brow, leave the axe on the tree stump I use to split wood, and squint at the screen.

My stomach tightens when I see it's one of my reserves, Jim Kelly calling my private number.

Considering he was among the many voices calling for me to take this week off, and promising not to call me unless an emergency, this isn't going to be a social call.

“Jim? What's up?”

If I hadn't already suspected bad news, the stress in his voice would have confirmed it.

“Marg's in early labor, the doc says she's fine, but I'm not sure when I'll be back in the Bay.”

I wander towards my front door so I can hear the rest inside. “Not a problem. I can cover your shifts till you're able to come back,” I say.

“Well, that’s just it. Boss, I got a job offer from Carey’s Creek. It’s full-time,” he says.

Even though it’s not the first time my part-time reserves have been headhunted or left for higher-paying jobs, my stomach sinks.

“I just wanted to square it with you. I feel like shit doing this over the phone,” he says.

I can’t exactly chastise him. We just scrapped together the funds to pay for Zane to work part-time, there’s no way we can find more to keep him here.

“It’s better you stay in Carey’s Creek than leave us for Bangor,” I say.

He laughs his agreement. “Ayuh. I’ll stick around as long as I can.”

That’s something at least. If he’s nearby there’s a chance I might be able to poach him back down the track.

“Let me know when you get back and we’ll wet the baby’s head, you go look after Margo, and call us the minute you have the weight. I’ve got a lot of money riding on your daughter being seven pounds eight,” I say.

After he assures me he’ll call, I offer my best wishes, hang up and dial Zane.

He picks up immediately, sounding amused. “Two calls in one morning. Are you bored or trying to piss me off?”

I chuckle despite the reason for my call. “Jim Kelly just quit.”

“Shit. Too bad. Now I have to roster Dropkick *Dave* on.”

I shake my head. My younger brother has never been diplomatic, and he has zero time for my only full-time officer Dave Smith.

“Yeah well, you’re going to have to get over it, and I’m going to have to cut my leave short.”

Zane grunts. “No, you aren’t. I’ll find someone or I’ll get Levi or Jax to cover.”

Having two extra family members who both volunteer for search and rescue, and are skilled enough to help out is one of the reasons we’ve managed to operate as well as we do despite budget cuts.

I scratch my chin as I look at the pan I’ve left soaking in the sink as per Jax’s instructions.

“I looked at the staff roster yesterday, you haven’t had a week off work in five years, Garrett. That’s two years *before* you took over as Deputy Chief.”

I’d argue it, but with Zane, there’s no point. He knows The Chief does even less work than Levi does on any given day.

Now his health is packing in, and he wants to retire, the Chief, Pete Hodge barely steps foot inside the station.

I’m about to say I can assist in finding Jim’s replacement when I hear a familiar vehicle rolling up my driveway.

Sure enough, a rusted diesel truck with a shaggy blonde driver spills out from behind the wheel.

“I’ll talk to Levi. Let me know if you find someone, otherwise, expect me tomorrow morning.”

I end the call and open the door just as Levi tugs the shades off his face.

“Coffee,” he says by way of greeting.

I watch him hobble toward the machine, already knowing he’s going to ask for my help in about thirty seconds.

Levi’s a smart guy when he wants to be, but right now, it’s all he can do to stand up straight without barfing.

“Go take a shower. You reek,” I say.

He salutes, spins on his heel and as he tumbles out the hallway door, I make him a strong black coffee and put some toast in for him.

I might have been up for a few hours, but nine am for Levi is like five am for normal people.

With a Lobsterman for a father, it’s a wonder our youngest brother turned out the way he has.

Dad was up before four am every morning without fail. Even on the rare days he took off, I don’t think he knew how to sleep past four-thirty.

Levi would party all night and sleep all day if he could get away with it.

For a while, I thought mom and dad’s death might have helped him grow up, but all that seemed to do was amplify his need for distractions.

I have Levi's hangover remedy waiting when he saunters back in looking more like himself and less like the walking dead.

He helps himself to the toast and perches on the same stool Alessandra occupied earlier.

He sips his coffee and groans into it. "I borrowed your toothbrush," he says.

"I use that to clean the toilet."

He stops mid-chew and looks like he's about to throw up. "You do not."

There's enough hesitation in his voice to make mocking him worth it. "Ayuh. I do."

He swallows and looks so green I start to laugh. "Asshole," he mutters.

Since everyone else has been drinking my coffee this morning, and it looks like I might not have the week off after all, I go ahead and make myself one while he eats.

"I thought you were giving your liver a break?"

He grimaces. "I was. Then Nicki came into the Outrigger and offered to buy me a pint," he says.

I switch the machine off and take a seat beside him. "Let me guess, one beer led to five. Please tell me you weren't dumb enough to sleep with her?"

Despite his hangover, he grins. "There wasn't a lot of sleeping going on."

If I wasn't feeling generous, I would have punched him. Hard.

“Dammit Levi. This is Nicki we're talking about. Not some Flatlander you won't see again after summer.”

“I'm just messing with you. She knows me, she knows I don't want anything serious.”

I doubt that. I'm pretty sure Nicki's convinced she's the woman to make Levi settle down.

He pulls a face at me. “What crawled up your ass this morning?”

He's going to find out sooner or later, so I decide sooner works just as well.

“Jim Kelly just quit, and I have a houseguest until I find her accommodation. She's asleep.”

His eyebrows shoot for the ceiling, and he misses the first part of my sentence. “She?”

“That's not the issue. Jim's taking a job in Carey's Creek. Zane and I are going to have to find someone to cover his shifts,” I say.

But Levi's not interested in me losing one of my seasoned reserves. He's ambling towards the hallway door. “Who is she?”

I intercept him just before he makes it to the door. “*She's* none of your business. Jim quitting might be though,” I say.

He cocks his head and runs his fingers through hair that should have been cut two inches ago. “Is she a cop friend or

something?”

“Something.”

He folds his arms across his chest and leans against the wall. “Why’s she here?”

I’m not sure telling Levi all the details is necessary, if need be, I’ll clue him in, but until then, he’s probably better off not knowing.

“Vacation,” I say.

He gives me a vague nod. “Did Jim quit because Zane’s running the station this week?”

I shake my head and try not to sound bitter. I was the one who trained Jim, just like I’m the one who trains all the reserves in Blueskin Bay.

“They pay more in Carey’s Creek and can give him full-time work,” I say.

He snorts. “That’s not it. It’ll be Zane. You’d think having a sweet woman like Felicity would mellow him out. He’s still a dickhead.”

I stop short of flicking his forehead for being so thick. “Your version of mellow and Zane’s are different.”

He doesn’t look convinced, so I remind him Jim’s about to start a family and his priorities have changed since he first started working for me.

“Sometimes I wonder if all this drinking is damaging your brain cells. Jim’s wife is *pregnant*. She’s at Carey’s Creek hospital as we speak,” I say.

He blinks a couple times then gives me a lazy grin. “Ayuh, I forgot. Maybe I should lay off the grog for a while.”

Unfortunately, before I say another word about possibly needing his assistance this summer, Alessandra appears at the door, looking sleepy, tousled, and way too enticing given whose company she’s found herself in.

I don’t know where he gets it from, but whenever there’s an attractive woman nearby it’s like someone pushes a button on Levi, and ‘flirt mode’ gets activated.

All traces of his hangover disappear as he grins. “I’m Levi. Garrett’s better looking younger brother.”

She leans against the door frame and eyes him. “Better looking, huh?”

He just grins even wider. “If you’re looking for accommodation plenty of room at my place, darlin,” he says.

She laughs but it’s an indulgent laugh you’d give to a kid. “Alessandra Eason and I’ll keep that in mind, bruh,” she says.

She may as well have patted him on the head, but he doesn’t notice she’s brushing him off.

A smile tugs at my lips as Levi looks surprised. “Bruh?”

She looks him up and down. “Those streaks in your hair aren’t from a salon, you have sand under your nails, and you have wax from your board on your shirt. So yeah, I think I’ll call you *bruh*.”

I’ve rarely seen Levi rendered speechless, but this is one of them. “I was hoping you weren’t a cop,” he mutters.

She shakes her head and corrects him. “I’m *FBI*. There’s a difference.”

Levi recovers swiftly and cracks a smile. “Not from where I’m standing.”

She ignores him and turns her determined gaze in my direction. “I’m going to need a ride into town,” she says.

“I can drive you, was about to book it anyway,” Levi says.

I ignore Levi’s attempts to keep her attention and frown at him. “Go check in with Zane and see if he can put you to use until I find a replacement for Jim.”

Levi’s eyes slide sidelong, and I know what he’s going to say before he says it. “What about Alessandra, she’s *almost* a cop,” he says.

Alessandra nearly chokes trying to contain her laugh. “Absolutely not,” she says.

She looks so smug that something twitches inside me. “Really? Helping out should be a breeze for someone as skilled as yourself,” I say.

At the stunned expression on her face, Levi catches on fast and nods seriously. “Ayuh. Wicked hot FBI agent like you could probably run the place and still have time to take surfing lessons with me,” he says.

One corner of her mouth turns up as annoyance stamps across her face. “Could I have a word, in *private*,” she says.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALESSANDRA

The second his brother disappears to stack wood outside; I round on Garrett. “You can’t seriously expect me to work for you while I’m here?” I say.

There’s a look of amusement on his face that pisses me off. “Why? Is it beneath you?”

I am perilously close to losing it. He might have fed me and offered a bed for the night but that doesn’t mean I owe him anything.

“That’s not why. I can’t *moonlight* as a reserve. It’s bad enough I’m staying here, I’m trying to be inconspicuous.”

His eyebrow cocks. “Inconspicuous as in running off the road?”

I nearly growl the words at him. “That kind of mistake won’t happen again.”

He lowers his voice as if worried his brother will hear. “No, it won’t. Because you’ll be where I can keep an eye on you. We get Flatlander reserves in temporarily on occasion.”

I suck in a breath through my teeth, I don't know what Flatlander means, but I'm taking it as an insult. "I am *not* your subordinate. I won't take orders or play dress up with *you*."

He doesn't even acknowledge how irritated I am, just carries on. "I need to go talk to Zane. If you have any information on your guy and his family, bring it, and we can discuss it with him."

My eyes widen at the thought of another small-town cop interfering in the most important case of my career. "Absolutely not."

"If you want to find this guy, we'll need Zane's help. And since it's our busy season, possibly Jax's too. We need a team. That means you'll have to help out somewhere."

He's so infuriating, my head is starting to hurt. "And who are Zane and *Jax*?"

"Go put your shoes on and I'll introduce you."

I don't move an inch. "And if I refuse to help?"

He scratches his chin. "Your field office gets a call and I look for your fugitive on my own."

I can't believe he'd do that. "Making me look bad while stealing all the credit?"

A flash of annoyance appears making me wonder if I misspoke. "Zane will be taking his lunch break soon. I don't want this to take any more of his time than need be."

I huff out a breath of air. "I can be ready in two minutes."

I turn to go, but the floor seems to shift under my feet. The doctor warned me to take it easy, and to rest as much as possible but I was too hell-bent in getting here and too hopped up on pills to pay too much attention.

Garrett grabs a hold of my arm and steadies me before I can recover. “Are you feeling okay?”

His eyes lock on mine and for the silliest reason, my heart skitters.

“I’m fine,” I say.

He’s slow to remove his hand, his fingers drifting lazily down my skin making a shiver run down my spine.

When I find my eyes drifting to his lips, I step back and nearly hit the wall in my haste to put some space between us.

“I’m not sure you are. When were you released from the hospital?”

My mouth twists as I struggle to come up with a suitable reply. Unfortunately, he’s too damn quick. “They *did* release you?”

I try for a nonchalant shrug and wind up tugging the wrong place. “Almost,” I say between gritted teeth.

His forehead creases. “You discharged yourself?”

I scrunch my toes on his soft carpet and hope he doesn’t get all alpha on me. “The wound isn’t deep. I swear. I was lucky.”

If anything, that makes him even more annoyed. “Isn’t anyone in Boston worried about you?”

Of course, he had to say something like that. Everyone does. “By anyone you mean a *man*?”

He shakes his head. “I mean, anyone. A man, friends, parents. *Anyone*.”

I’m not prepared to have this conversation with him, my personal life, or lack of one is none of his business.

“Can we go now?”

I don’t wait for an answer, I walk back into his spare room, and try not to whimper as my stitches pull tight when I lace up my sneakers.

As I bend, all the blood rushes to my head and stars dart in front of my eyes. I groan and try to straighten, but instead, wind up sliding onto the carpet.

Pain tears through my stomach, and I have to clamp a hand over my mouth to keep from screaming.

I’m trying to figure out how to stand up when I hear Garrett enter the room.

He crouches down, assessing me as I try to focus on his face and not the pain. “Can you move?”

It hurts so bad I bite my lip to keep from crying in front of him. “I just need a minute,” I rasp.

He runs a hand over his head. “What you *need* is to be in hospital. Don’t move.”

I start to shake my head, but he grips my chin forcing me to look at him. “I mean it, Alessandra. Do. Not. Move.”

I'm in no position to move more than an inch anyway, so I just nod meekly.

I have no idea how long he's gone, just that when he gets back, Levi's with him and I'm feeling woozy.

At Garrett's instructions, he places a glass of water and pills beside the bed.

That they're making such a fuss is beyond embarrassing. "I'm not dying, I just aggravated something, that's all," I say.

Levi looks less sure of himself as his eyes shift to where I'm clutching my stomach.

He pales noticeably and backs up a step. "I'll wait outside," he says.

Garrett smiles as I send him a questioning look. "Can't stand the sight of blood. Better he's outside than fainting inside," he says.

I laugh just as Garrett kneels down so he can finish lacing my shoes. "Are you always this stubborn?"

"I have to be.."

He looks up at me, and I'm a little taken aback by the worry etched on his face. "We're not leaving this house until I'm sure you haven't torn your stitches."

While it's unnerving having a man I just met taking such an authoritative tone with me, for the time being, I'd be stupid to argue when I'm incapable of even getting my shoes on.

I tug my shirt up and gingerly move my hand from my bandage. "Well?"

His eyes shift to my wound and his face relaxes. “You’re not bleeding. But you need to be more careful. Whether you’re really one of my reserves or not, you are my responsibility.”

My throat tightens at the genuine concern in his voice, so I soften mine to match his. “It won’t happen again.”

He sighs and has the appearance of a man deeply troubled. “That’s the second time you’ve said that today and I didn’t believe you the first time.”

Despite the predicament I’m in, I smile at him. It is kinda nice to have a guy worried about my wellbeing.

Even if he is a giant pain in my ass.



GARRETT

At my request, Levi’s gone to apologize to Nicki, and to let her grandmother Viola know we’re still considering whether or not to rent her old place back to her.

Viola may be one of the oldest residents of Blueskin Bay and she was a reliable tenant but I’m not so sure Zane and Felicity are crazy about the idea of her living next door to them.

Well. *Zane* isn’t.

I wait for Alessandra to climb in the passenger side and to buckle her seat belt before starting the engine.

Being dedicated is one thing but coming after the man who stabbed you days after it happened, that’s bat shit crazy.

I glance sidelong and inwardly shake my head at how bad she looks.

“Tell me who we’re looking for,” I say.

“Bryce Wade. Six feet, pasty complexion, beer gut, beard, dark hair, and eyes. May have changed his appearance since I last saw him.”

“And his wife?”

“Courtney. Ditzzy blonde with sizable surgical enhancements. Her mother is thin, short grey hair, conservative and is seriously protective of her daughter.”

“Do they know your face?”

She shakes her head. “I can get close to them easy enough.”

Given the condition she’s in, that’s unlikely. “Unless they want to do anything other than lounge on the beach that’s probably not realistic.”

She scowls at me. “Let me guess, you’re going to suggest I sit this out?”

“No, I’m going to suggest what I’ve been from the start. You help me out, and I help you out.”

“Getting close to her is going to take—”

“A team,” I say.

She mutters under her breath. “Maybe.”

I don’t waste my time trying to convince her, she’ll figure it out soon enough, so I drive back towards the town center

and instead ask her about herself.

“You weren’t born in Boston?”

“Atlanta.”

That explains the mixed accent. “But you drove from the Boston field office?”

“Is that relevant?”

I frown across at her. “Everything is relevant.”

She leans against the window and looks out at the water. “I didn’t drive from the field office. I drove from my apartment in Boston.”

I store that information away and encourage her to continue. “What made you move from Atlanta to Boston?”

Her tone is flat, too clipped for there not to be another reason. “There weren’t any placements in Atlanta.”

I have no way to check on that, and while it’s not uncommon for any law enforcement to have to move, I’m wondering if it’s down to something else.

“I went to the Criminal Justice Academy on pre-service. The Chief sponsored me then swore me in when I’d finished my hours as a Peace Officer,” I say.

That seems to get her interest. “You wanted to stay here, or you felt obliged to because he paid for you?”

I gesture out the window to the ocean. “I wanted to serve my community. This is my home. It’s where my roots are.”

“And your family, obviously,” she says.

I smile. “That too.”

I’m sure there’s a tease to her voice. “But no wife and kids?”

I’m not sure if she’s poking fun at me, so I shrug. “Too busy.”

She laughs lightly. “That’s a lousy excuse.”

I cock an eyebrow. “It’s not an excuse. I *am* too busy for relationships.”

“Bullshit. It’s probably the excuse you’re using. There must be something intrinsically wrong with you,” she says.

I frown sidelong at her. “We met this morning, and you already formed such a low opinion of me?”

She snorts a laugh. “You’re getting in my way, of course I have a low opinion of you.”

Even though it shouldn’t, that stings. “I’ll have to find a way to change that.”

She’s quiet for a while, but when she speaks there’s an element of curiosity that makes me smile. “I didn’t think you’d care what my opinion of you was.”

“I do care.”

“Because I’m FBI?”

I have the answer in an instant. “Because you’re intriguing.”

I can almost hear her jaw slacken. If I wasn’t keeping both eyes on the road ahead, I would have glanced at her, just to see

the look on her face.

“Are you *flirting* with me?”

“Just calling it like I see it.”

More silence, then she shifts in her seat. “Why?” she says quietly.

“Why what?”

“Why do you find me *intriguing*?”

I smile as I pull into the main street, nodding my head as I see locals give me a wave. “Lots of reasons,” I say.

She huffs an irritated breath. “This isn’t how we do things at the Bureau.”

I pull into the parking spot reserved for me and pull the parking brake on.

I turn to look at her and am amused to find her brow furrowed and her posture rigid. “Hasn’t anyone ever paid you a compliment before?”

Her face relaxes a fraction, but her leg starts to jiggle. “There are rules about paying compliments to co-workers,” she says.

I twist in my seat, grab my baseball cap, and jam it on her head. “Just in case anyone recognizes you.”

As she adjusts the cap, I look her square in the eye. “We’re not co-workers, remember? I’m just a lowly small-town cop. I can compliment you any time I feel like it,” I say.

CHAPTER SIX

ALESSANDRA

So, that's how he's going to do it. He'll pay me compliments until he drives me into submission...or more likely, his bed.

Well, no amount of old-boy charm is going to do that. He might be handsome, and *slightly* sexy, but in no way shape or form am I going to let him derail me while I'm here.

Even if it did give me a little shudder of pleasure knowing he was flirting with me.

Now that the meds have kicked in again, the pain has subsided to a dull background throb, so getting out of the vehicle is a whole lot easier.

What's not easier is the protective glances Garrett keeps sending me as we walk toward the small police station.

"What?" I say.

"Zane's not the easiest person to know, just thought I should warn you in advance," he says.

I've met my share of tough guys in the past, so I brush off his remark.

That is until I step through the front door and come face to face with Zane Reid.

I don't know what I expected of Blueskin Bay's police force, but Garrett and Zane Reid aren't it.

Rather than the podgy smiling rural police unit, hard bodies abound.

Zane's around the same height and build as Garrett, but where his older brother is dark, and has a cropping of lush hair on his head, Zane's eyes are an icy blue, and there's a few months of regrowth from a buzz cut on his head.

Definitely ex-military. Probably Marines if I had to guess.

Zane doesn't extend his hand and neither do I. If I was the type of woman to be easily intimidated, I wouldn't have graduated top of my class at Quantico.

"This is Agent Alessandra Eason. She'll be in the Bay for a while," Garrett says.

Zane barely nods at me, just looks at his brother. "And this is 'bring an FBI agent to work' day?"

Garrett walks past him into the office. "It's 'bring a fellow law enforcement officer in when we're short-handed' day."

I keep my mouth shut and watch the dynamics between them as I follow them inside the office.

There's obviously a little sibling rivalry between the two, but there's also a healthy amount of mutual respect.

I can't imagine working alongside my sister. We'd drive each other crazy. Personality wise we're at opposite ends of

the spectrum.

While Garrett is looking on his desk for something, Zane's eyes never shift from my face.

“What does the FBI want in Blueskin Bay?”

“The FBI isn't here. I am. And I came for the stunning beaches and the friendly local police.”

He doesn't even flinch. “You're not on vacation.”

It's neither a question, nor a statement, so I decide Garrett can figure out how to answer.

“Agent Eason is tracking a fugitive. His wife is supposed to be here on vacation. He may already be hiding in the area.”

Zane's eyes snap to me. “Why weren't we notified of this?”

This time I save Garrett from answering. “I don't have time to go through the proper channels. I have intel I trust, if I wait to get consent, I'll miss my opportunity.”

He looks about as happy as Garrett did when I told him. “Then you don't have the authority to be here.”

I don't get a chance to reply but Garrett intercepts. “We'll worry about that later. I want to make sure I don't have a felon who's dumb enough to stab an FBI agent lurking somewhere in our Bay.”

Zane's eyes narrow as he assesses me. I'm sure he'll have plenty to say when I'm not standing beside him.

“Give me the description and I'll put the word out.”

Garrett pulls out a sheet of paper and scans it as he speaks. “This needs to be done off the books. I don’t want some reserve spooking him.”

Zane glares at me then folds his arms across his chest. “Didn’t think the FBI were too happy about that last time we did that.”

My eyebrow quirks. They’ve worked with the FBI before? Interesting.

“I’m not worried about keeping the FBI happy,” Garrett says.

When Zane doesn’t say anything, Garrett’s voice takes on the same dictatorial tone he used on me.

“Do you want me to come back to work full time? Because if I’m working Friday won’t happen,” he says.

Zane’s eyebrow hitches and a faint flickering of amusement appears on his otherwise stoic expression. “You can’t blackmail me. I’m already blackmailing *you*.”

Garrett frowns at him, folds the paper in half, and slides it into his pocket. “Call Jax and set up a meeting tonight.”

Zane’s eye twitches. “I had plans.”

As fascinating as this conversation is, I’ve wasted the entire morning either sleeping or trying to justify why I’m here.

“This isn’t a search party, and I didn’t want or ask for help. I’m perfectly capable of handling this by myself,” I say.

Both Reid brothers stop talking and take on the same bemused expression. Zane speaks first. “Do you know the area? Know the people?” he says.

I swallow as Garrett tries not to smile. “I don’t need to. I’m looking for one woman and she’ll lead me to who I’m chasing. I think I can handle that.”

Garrett shakes his head. “You can’t be in two places at once. It makes sense to let us search for him while you locate and tail his wife.”

Zane nods. “Quicker that way.”

I’m getting a little tired of being told what to do, but they do have a point. One I may have thought about earlier if I wasn’t in such a hurry to get here.

“Fine. But I want to be the one to arrest him.”

Garrett’s brow crinkles slightly, but he nods. “Long as you’re up to it, he’s all yours,” he says.

“If you two want to help, make a list of all the accommodations so I can check the guest registers,” I say.

Zane looks at Garrett and then back at me. “No point. No one will speak to a Flatlander.”

Sure he’s mocking me, I squint at him. “I think I can squeeze some information out of a few B&B owners.”

Garrett bobs his head in agreement. “Better let us handle that. Once Zane finds her, you and I can start surveillance.”

“And what do I do in the meantime?”

Zane answers. “Try to blend in with the other Flatlanders.”

I turn my nose up at the continued use of the word, but Garrett is already nodding in agreement. “You may get lucky and find her before we do.”

I doubt it, but I’m sick of having to answer to Garrett, and I want to get out from under his thumb for a bit.

We’re at a stalemate, so I feign acceptance. “Fine. Where’s good to eat?”

They answer in unison. “The Outrigger.”

Garrett pulls a card off the cork board behind his desk and hands it to me. “Jaxson Reid is our cousin. It’ll be jam-packed, but I’ll call and let him know you’re on your way. He’s one local who’ll give you any information you need.”

With the two of them pitted against me, I reluctantly accept the card from his hand.

“I’ll clear up a few things here and then meet you there,” Garrett says.

It’s apparent he’s dying to get rid of me, I’ve probably put a serious crimp in his plans for this week.

I grab a pen off the desk, scrawl my cell number on the card, and hand it back to him. “Since you’re already planning to, that’ll make it easier for you to track me,” I say.

I ignore the smirk, and step outside into the sunlight just as Levi appears looking better than the last time I saw him.

He slams the door on a battered red truck and starts walking beside me as I walk back toward the collection of stores on the main street.

“Do you always stack your brother’s wood for him?” I say to him.

He grins sidelong. “Garrett’s scared of heights; he doesn’t like going too close to the woodshed.”

I glance at him, wondering if he’s being serious. “Why does he live on top of a cliff if he hates heights?”

Levi keeps pace with me as I walk past quaint tourist traps I have no intention of stepping foot inside. “It was our grandparents’ place. He inherited it from them when they died.”

I nod, taking mental notes as I think of how I can get rid of Levi so I can explore alone. “I don’t need an escort. I can find my way around town on my own.”

He doesn’t seem phased I’m trying to shake him off, just gives me a smile I’m sure makes all the local girls weak at the knees.

“Just thought you might want a guided tour.”

“I don’t.”

He speeds up and starts walking backward so he’s ahead of me. “What about that surfing lesson?”

I sigh. I find this level of cockiness irritating at the best of times. When it’s apparent he’s not going to quit, I stop walking and slide my hand to the weapon I’ve concealed under my shirt.

“See you later, Levi,” I say as I tap it.

His eyes widen ever so slightly, but he keeps grinning at me as he slowly raises his hands.

“You bring handcuffs with you too?” he says.

When I growl, he laughs and drops his hands. “Just sayin, we could put them to good use.”

I roll my eyes, but he seems to realize I’m not interested and dips an invisible hat at me.

“See you later, Alessandra,” he says with a grin.



GARRETT

The second she’s out the door, Zane’s in my face.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

I perch on the edge of our shared desk and keep my posture relaxed. “Pretty much what I just told you.”

“It’s the ‘pretty much’ part that I can’t work out. This guy she’s looking for, did he assault her? She’s definitely injured.”

I should have guessed he’d work that out too. Zane’s background as a military investigator means he notices things most people don’t.

“Ayuh, so see what you can find on Bryce Wade and his wife Courtney Wade. I want to know everything about them.”

A smirk grows on his face. “And what about Agent Eason? You want to know *everything* about Agent Eason too?”

If we were outside of the office, I might have smacked the smug off his face. “Not everyone goes gaga when an attractive woman shows up. I’m just doing my job and helping her.”

Zane glowers at me. “I didn’t go gaga.”

I laugh at that. He may not have seen it, but Zane was in trouble the second our tenant Felicity had him making cookies.

“Is that so? You kept things strictly professional the entire time you were with Felicity then?”

His cheeks heat, and he rubs the back of his neck. “That’s different.”

I chuckle at how pissed he is I found him out. “Ayuh, it is. I can keep it in my pants.”

Since no one is in the station but us, he throws a stapler at me. I manage to snatch it a second before it hits me in the shoulder.

“I don’t want to be here anymore than you want me to be. But this way I can keep an eye on her and *maybe* salvage some of my time off.”

He lets out a half growl half grunt in annoyance. “That’s why you’re planning to work with her?”

I nod. “I need to convince her it’s a good idea, but ayuh, if I can get her to lay low with me for a few days, you can get outside and do the leg work.”

He glances at the pile of papers in the in-tray and smiles. “Suits me, but she’s not going to like it.”

I run my hand through my hair and get off the desk. “I know. But I can’t have an injured FBI officer running around looking for a felon. If she gets hurt again, it’s bound to fall back on me.”

Zane leans against the desk and waits as I text a description of the three people we’re looking for to Levi and Jax.

“Send it to Felicity too. Never know who might come into the library,” he says.

I nod, add her name to the group text, and a second after I’ve hit send, Levi steps through the office door.

He doesn’t bother to check his phone, just stalks to the water cooler. “Just saw Alessandra. She’s totally into me,” he says.

Zane and I both laugh and Levi just grins like the moron he is around women. “Aren’t you supposed to be on the beach?”

He groans and downs a cup of water in one gulp. “I can’t. Nicki’s there waiting for me. She says she wants to *talk*.”

I glance at Zane and fill him in. “He was drinking with her at the Outrigger last night,” I say.

Zane stops short of clipping Levi around the ear but worry lines have formed on his forehead.

“For fuck’s sake. Nicki is off limits,” he says.

Levi looks equally baffled and clueless as usual. “Since when?”

Zane groans while I explain. “Since Zane and Felicity got engaged. You’ll make Zane’s life hell if you mess with one of Felicity’s closest friends.”

Rather than look chastised, Levi sends Zane an evil grin. “You don’t say.”

Before my brothers start fighting in the police station, I hold up my hand. “Go back to the beach and check your phone. I need you to keep an eye out for a woman and her mother.”

Levi pulls his phone out of his pocket and as he reads a leery grin grows on his face. “Just how big are these surgical enhancements?”

Zane takes a step toward our younger brother and growls. “Get out before I throw you out,” he says.

Levi’s still grinning when he saunters back outside leaving me and Zane to work out the details.

After a few minutes, Zane looks out the window to the Bay. “He could be anywhere.”

I nod my agreement. “If he knows his wife is here, he’ll want to be close by.”

Zane doesn’t look convinced, but I’ve got bigger things on my mind. “I better go find Alessandra.”

He shifts off the desk, blocking me from leaving. “Are you sure she’s legit?”

I sigh. I thought we’d dealt with all of this after he was hell-bent on finding out what Felicity was hiding.

“You’re sounding paranoid again,” I say.

“And you’re too trusting. She could be playing you.”

“You think I’m that lousy a cop?”

He shakes his head. “I think you’ve forgotten the Feebs tried to take credit for the work we did before. No reason they haven’t sent a pretty agent to try again.”

Thankfully, I’m saved from any further insults to my intelligence when an overweight Flatlander bowls through the door demanding to see the Chief.

With a glare at Zane, I leave him to deal with a possible pick pocket and make my way toward the Outrigger.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALESSANDRA

I check my watch and walk past dozens of tourists all wandering around with the aimless shuffle people have while on vacation.

In my hurry to get out of Garrett's house, I left my sunglasses behind, so I'm grateful for the borrowed cap I'm wearing.

As expected, when I walk inside the grocery store, one look at the prices tells me this isn't the place to find a bargain.

I stroll around the store, getting a feel for the place, checking the people inside on the off chance I get lucky and find Courtney here.

When I don't find her, I grab a pair of overpriced sunglasses and wander up to the counter.

A ragged-looking woman with a terrible dye job tries her best to smile while keeping one eye on two kids.

Her name badge says 'May' and she looks like she's in desperate need of a vacation herself.

I push the glasses toward her. "Rough day?"

She sighs and glances sidelong at the kids. “No worse than most.”

I can’t exactly interrogate her, so I go another route. “Must be exhausting,”

She gives me a distracted nod, probably worried the two kids are planning on stealing something. “That’ll be nine ninety-nine,” she says.

I pull the money out of my purse and hand it to her. “My mom ran a store back in Concord. She was up before five am and didn’t close up until ten. People don’t realize how grueling it is.”

“Ayuh! Grueling is the word alright.”

I nod sympathetically and take a massive gamble. “She’s here taking her first vacation since dad died.”

May’s face falls. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

I sigh a little dramatically for effect. “I was supposed to be here yesterday, but I missed my flight. We’ve gotten our wires crossed and I’m having trouble locating her.”

I’m laying it on a little thick, but a customer is behind me and he’s getting impatient.

May hands me the glasses back in a plastic sheath and smiles. “That’s too bad,” she says.

Since she’s clearly not going to offer, I push a little harder. “I don’t suppose you’d help me out? If you see her, I mean. You could text me.”

The man behind me clears his throat, making May frown a little. “I’m not sure...”

I wave my hand in the air. “Oh, that’s okay. It’s the anniversary of dad’s death and I didn’t want her to be alone, but I’m sure I’ll find her.”

That gets her attention. She chews her lip for a moment before reaching for a pad beside the cash register.

She shoves it toward me and hands me a pen. “Write your number on there and if I see your mom, I’ll let you know. What does she look like?”

I make a ‘thank you’ gesture with my hands, and carefully write my number on the paper. “She’s around my height, very thin, pale, and can be a little snappy. She might be with a companion, a blonde with big boobs who helps her get around.”

Her eyebrows rise but she tucks the paper away in her pocket. “You’re a wonderful person, May. I’m Alessandra by the way.”

She chuckles and waves me away. “Have a nice day, Alessandra.”

With a quick look around the store again I step out into the brilliant sunlight and make my way toward the restaurant and bar Garrett and Zane both recommended.

I slide my cheap sunglasses on, wish I wasn’t wearing a jacket to cover my gun and scan the street for any signs of Courtney.

Not everyone is going to be as accommodating as May was. But a few well-placed contacts might be enough to locate her without Garrett and Zane investing too much time in my case.

By the time I reach the beachfront, sweat has started to crawl down my back, and I'm wishing I'd brought a bottle of water from May.

A thick crowd of people is sitting at the beachside bar, and inside, it looks to be fully booked.

Compared to the quaint store fronts and New England charm of the Bay, the restaurant is modern and captures a view of the entire bay.

The scent of garlic and seafood wafting from the outdoor grill makes my mouth water, and I'm suddenly so hungry I'm no longer thinking about anything else other than eating.

As I approach from the beach side a hulk of a man dressed in a tight black shirt is tending a bar.

His coffee-colored eyes find mine, and he instantly hands his customer off to another bartender before walking around the bar to greet me.

At the warm smile he gives me, I find myself smiling back. "You must be Jax," I say.

Even though he looks to be run off his feet, he extends his hand and nods. "Garrett called and said you'd be stopping by. We've stopped serving lunch, but I cleared a table for you."

After a bone-crushing handshake, I follow him towards a reserved table at the back and sit in the chair before he can pull

it out for me. “Do you want a plate of what Garrett’s having?”

He looks vaguely amused when I stuff a bread stick into my mouth. “Whatever is easiest.”

His eyebrow quirks. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

At the uncertainty on his face and the desperate looks he’s getting from his wait staff, I smile. “You make it, I’ll eat it,” I say.

With a slight frown, he steps away and returns to helping run the floor.

As I pass the time waiting for Garrett, I check the other diners lingering over their meals, and drinks, and wonder if Courtney has eaten here yet.

Garrett shows up mid-way through my second bread stick, but rather than sit at the table with me, he chooses a recently vacated table close by.

I stare at him, wondering what he’s playing at when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I pull it out and hide a smile as I read.

Just in case.

It’s smart really. I should have thought of it first. But I’m glad one of us did.

I watch the clock, and the people as they leave, noting the restaurant is thinning out a little as a waiter appears and places a whole lot of green in front of me.

“Edamame Noodles, Asian Stir-Fried Vegetables, and Sticky Tofu, compliments of the house,” he says.

He steps back and patiently waits as I assess my plate. “Er, thanks,” I say.

I’m not sure if he expects me to start eating, or to sample it, so I pick up my fork.

That seems to spur him away, he scurries back to the kitchen and appears moments later with another plate for Garrett.

When he catches me looking at him, he sends me a sly wink before picking up his own fork.

I sniff the plate, and when my curiosity and hunger override my caution, I twist the noodles around my fork and take a tentative bite.

An explosion of delicious flavors fill my mouth and have me going back for a larger bite.

I eat single-mindedly, ignoring Garrett’s amused glances, and the other diners until I’m scraping the plate, and wondering when tofu got so tasty.

Garrett seems to decide now the restaurant is all but empty is the right time to join me.

He carries his plate over and sits down opposite me. “Bacon for breakfast, tofu for lunch?”

He smiles as he spears a piece of broccoli. “Jax eats mostly plants. Sometimes he makes a big batch of this for his staff. I like to get in on it whenever it’s going. Can’t beat a free lunch.”

I glance at the muscled form hovering at the bar. “He doesn’t eat meat? How is he that size?”

“Genetic probably. His dad is a beast too.”

I look him over and wonder where Garrett’s father is and what he looks like. So far, none of the brothers have mentioned their parents.

Odd, considering how close-knit they seem to be.

“Is his father in the Bay too?”

Garrett shakes his head. “He retired two years ago. Left Jax to run the restaurant. He’s in San Francisco now.”

I take a sip of the lemon water placed on the table. “How many Reids are there?”

“In this Bay? Just the four of us, in the area. Dozens.”

“What about your parents? Retired like Jax’s?”

“That’s one way of looking at it. They’re dead.”

I choke on my water and his attempt at humor. “I didn’t mean to overstep,” I say.

He smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “You didn’t. We should talk about how we’re going to work together.”

I know he’s brushing me off, and I don’t blame him, I don’t like talking about my private life with other law officers either. Not that I have much of one.

“Work *together*?”

He slides his half-eaten food away and locks eyes with me. “I need Zane out in the field, so that means someone needs to

be in the office.”

When he doesn't say another word, I lean back in my chair and glare at him. “You're joking, right? You are not sticking me behind a desk.”

He picks up a piece of tofu and pops it into his mouth. “You'd be surprised how much you can learn by answering the phones and filing papers.”

I'm so annoyed he's flipped this on me again, I push back from the table. “This is bullshit. I'm not agreeing.”

Garrett slides a look around the restaurant before he looks back at me. “It's this or leave. The choice is yours.”

I'm so infuriated I can barely contain my annoyance when Jax appears, and I'm forced to be polite.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

I grit my teeth. “The food was amazing. The company, however, left a lot to be desired,” I say.



GARRETT

Jax eyes me, then my plate, and sends me a questioning look. “Not hungry today Chief?”

I shake my head. “You have to stop calling me that. Even as a joke,” I say.

Alessandra angles her head as she examines us both. “Where *is* the Chief?”

Jax picks up our plates and answers for me. “Anywhere but here,” he mutters.

The second he’s walked away from the table; Alessandra’s eyes find mine.

“There has to be another option,” she says.

Even if she’s pissed off at me, telling her we won’t be looking over the next couple of days has given me an out.

It’s hard enough reminiscing with Zane and Levi, let alone discussing how and when my parents died with a perfect stranger.

“There is, but you’re not in any shape to go looking in the Willywacks,” I say.

Her frown slips. “The *what?*”

I smile. “The middle of nowhere.”

She shrugs and the effort causes her to wince. “Why are you determined to make my life miserable?”

I narrow my eyes. “Why are you so determined to make it harder than it needs to be?”

A faint smile flickers on her lips. “Isn’t there a compromise?”

I shake my head. “I’ve already promised Zane we’ll be in tomorrow morning. Maybe the day after that too.”

She taps her finger against the water glass. “What if we split our time? The mornings in the office, then the rest of the day looking for her?”

It's not a bad suggestion. It will mean someone is in the office *and* I'll be able to keep an eye on her.

I look her over, note the anxiety on her face, and know if I don't agree I may land in it with the FBI when the time comes.

But it's not the FBI I'm worried about. It's the welfare of the agent sitting opposite me. "Alright."

She smiles so prettily it steals the wind from my lungs.

"So, now what do we do?" she asks.

A dozen thoughts spin in my mind, none of them in the slightest bit professional and I have to trample them back into place before speaking.

"Zane's already looking for anyone fitting her description staying in the area."

She looks out the window at the beach. "I need to take my pain meds, but I'd like to look at the Bay and check out any potential hiding spots."

There are worse things I can think of than driving her around the Bay, and I'm pleased she's not fighting me on this, so I nod.



ALESSANDRA

After a heartfelt thank you to Reid hunk number four, I look sidelong at Garrett as we walk back toward the police station.

“What *does* ‘Ayuh’ mean?”

“Just a form of agreement.”

I ponder that for a few beats, watching the tourists swarm into stores before responding. “Tell me about your absent Chief of Police,” I say.

His brow scrunches as he answers. “His health hasn’t been the best.”

It’s a fairly innocuous answer, but Garrett isn’t likely to come right out and say his boss is a deadbeat, but he has to be or I wouldn’t be dealing with his over-zealous deputy.

“So why isn’t he the one behind the desk instead of me?”

We’re almost at the police station and Garrett looks a little jittery as he walks around his truck.

I climb into the passenger side, feeling every one of my stitches pull. “A couple of reasons. We lost Jim Kelly this week, so that left a gap, and the Chief isn’t in the Bay right now so he can’t cover.”

I quirk an eyebrow as he buckles his seat belt. “How often is he out of the Bay?”

Garrett’s face stays expressionless, and I have to admire his loyalty, even if it’s not warranted.

“If you’re hoping he’ll show up and save you from a few days with me, you’re out of luck,” he says.

I rub my nose to keep my smile from showing. “Damn,” I say.

He smirks at me, and reverses carefully, avoiding my eye as he does.

I have a lot of questions about why Garrett seems to be running the place, but for now, I change the topic.

“What was the case Zane mentioned? You had FBI involvement in it.”

Garrett waves to a few people as he drives past, one of which is a stern-looking woman who gives me the stink eye.

“We had a spate of robberies just before winter. I needed a hand so Zane, Levi, and Jax helped out.”

I sit back and listen to him retell what happened, the events that unfolded and the ensuing romance between Zane and the woman caught up in all the mess, Felicity.

“She disarmed one of the burglars?” I ask.

He chuckles. “She did. Just after she’d called me.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve worked with your family?”

His smile slips, and his posture turns rigid giving me a lot of insight into what drives him. “People depend on me. Our limited resources means sometimes we have to get creative,” he says.

I watch him for a while, and even though I’m trying hard, it’s nigh on impossible to fault him.

I can’t really. I’m doing the same thing. More or less.

I gaze out the window as he drives a winding road and have to admit he lives in a stunning location.

Lush green hills surround the Bay, and with the sun glinting off the water, it really is beautiful.

“How many people live here?”

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel as he talks. “Blueskin Bay and the surrounding areas are primarily fishing villages. Our population sits around four thousand. Carey’s Creek, which you would have passed through on your way here has a population of around thirty thousand. Turtle Bay on the other side of the hills is more remote and sparsely populated, so you’re looking at under a thousand.”

“I wasn’t looking for a geography lesson,” I say.

He glances at me. “Then what are you looking for?”

“Insider knowledge. Things I can’t find out by reading a brochure.”

“You really don’t know anything about Blueskin Bay?”

I could bluff, but I barely had time to get the directions let alone learn about one of Courtney Wade’s favorite holiday spots.

“How about you fill me in?”

He’s just about to answer me when his phone rings, and he pulls over to the side of the road to answer.

“You have something for me?” he says.

A masculine voice speaks on the other end, and Garrett is courteous enough to put it on speakerphone.

“—a few days ago, and according to Ted she’s being a royal pain in his ass.”

I recognize Zane's voice and shift closer, so I don't miss what he's saying.

"You found Courtney?" I ask.

Zane sounds aggravated I'm listening in. "A woman fitting the description you gave me checked into Dawson's B&B a few days ago."

I straighten abruptly and feel a surge of excitement start to grow. "Is she alone?"

Garrett replies for them both. "No, she's not. But it might not be her. We get plenty of busty bottle blonde tourists visiting the area."

"Ayuh," says Zane, "Even after the ball shitshow way too many women are still coming here," he says.

I scrunch my brow and look at Garrett to explain what the shitshow entailed. But he just waves his hand. "When can you check it out?" he says.

"Soon as I have coverage here."

I curse under my breath as Garrett winds the call up without consulting me. "Why the hell can't we go?"

"Ted Dawson is a fixture in this town, and he knows I'm on leave this week. It'll look odd if I show up asking questions about his guests. Especially if I have you in tow."

"So don't have me in tow. Let me go ask him some questions by myself. I can be subtle."

I'm sure I catch a faint smirk appear on his face. "You really don't know anything about small towns, do you?"

I narrow my eyes and suppress a growl. “So that’s it? I have a lead and you’re blocking me from following it?”

“No, I’m delegating to the best person I have.”

My voice comes out too high. “How is your *brother* the best person for this?”

He doesn’t even waver, just eyes me. “Zane was on track to be a Criminal Investigator in the Marines Corps. So aside from being someone I trust, he’s also the most qualified person I know to get information.”

That shuts me up in a hurry.

Unfortunately, it also makes me want to ask a dozen other questions. “How did he wind up working for you?”

Garrett doesn’t take offense, just pulls out and drives along the coastal road leading out of town.

His voice is clipped, but he’s too polite *not* to answer me. “He came home when mom and dad died.”

At the rigidity of his jaw, I decide to drop it, and sink back into the seat, suddenly feeling exhausted.

I try to smother a yawn, but Garrett spots it and frowns. “Think it’s time we headed back to mine.”

I grumble a little but when he turns into his driveway I am relieved to see his cute little cottage come into view.

“When do I get my vehicle back?”

Garrett doesn’t miss a beat. “When I’m sure you’re not going to do yourself or anyone else in my Bay an injury,” he says.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GARRETT

Alessandra quits pretending she's not tired right about the time I decide I'm not going to humor her anymore.

She steps foot inside the door, tosses her cheap sunglasses and my hat on the counter, and stumbles as she tries to sit at the island.

I grab her by the arm, and motion to her shoes. "You want me to take them off so you can go lie down for a while?"

She starts to shake her head but gives up. "I'll manage, but yeah, I think I will go lie down, feeling a little dizzy from the sun," she says.

I don't argue it's got less to do with the sun, and more to do with her body trying to tell her something and let her wander down the hallway back to my spare bedroom.

I wait for a few minutes, using the time to check to see what I have in the refrigerator before I decide to risk going to check on her.

She must have heard my approach because she's propped up in bed, minus her shoes, the bottle of pills in her hands, and

is eyeballing me when I reach the spare room.

“Came to see if I’m lying in a heap on the floor again, huh?”

I cover a smile and hand her the glass of the water Levi left a few hours ago. “Just making sure you have everything you need before I go grab some firewood,” I say.

Her eyebrow lifts. “Are you really afraid of heights? Is that why Levi stacks your wood?”

I have to mentally switch gears a little at the sudden switch of conversation. “He’s stacking my wood as penance because he threw up in the back seat of my truck a week ago,” I say.

She laughs. “Got it. And now he’s trying to make you look bad, so he looks more attractive,” she says.

I shake my head. “Maybe. But he’s also gotten good at downplaying his own fears by bringing up others.”

She downs the pills in her hands and takes a gulp of water. “Since when did they teach psychology to rural police?” she says.

I laugh out loud at how nonplussed she appears. “They don’t. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out. And to answer your question, I’m not *afraid* of heights. I have a healthy respect for them, and I have vertigo, there’s a difference.”

She puts the glass back on the nightstand and makes a lousy job of showing it hurts her to do so.

“If you say so,” she says.

There's no point in arguing, and she's already moving on. "So, he doesn't think he's in direct competition with you for say, *my* attention?"

At the slight curve of her lip, I decide to play along. "I'm not worried about that."

She crosses her ankles and looks me up and down. "Oh? You're that confident I'd pick you over your brother?"

I freeze, and for the first time in a long while I feel like I just stepped into a trap of feminine design.

I deal with plenty of beautiful women in my capacity as law enforcement, I've been propositioned by dozens of them, but I haven't been interested in one for too long to remember.

Today's lunch with Alessandra at the Outrigger was the closest thing I've had to a date since I graduated police academy.

I shake off the thoughts and dismiss that I'm even thinking about her that way.

I need to stop it. She's just here until she captures Bryce Wade and then I'll likely never see her again.

I infuse a smile into my words even though I'm feeling deflated. "No, I'm just that confident you're smart enough not to pick Levi," I say.

She laughs so gustily I'm worried she's going to aggravate her wound again.

"You managed to slip in another compliment," she says.

I lean against the door frame. “I have no reason not to,” I say.

Her smile fades. “You’re not like anyone I’ve met before,” she says.

Given the expression on her face, she’s no longer playing. And we’re skirting dangerously close to territory we probably shouldn’t explore.

“I’ll leave you to rest. It’s going to be a warm night, so we’ll eat outside,” I say.

She smothers a yawn and slips down an inch in the bed. “I’ll just close my eyes for a few minutes.”

I send her a clipped nod and start to close the door. I’m a hairs breath away from shutting it when I hear her mumble so quietly, I’m not sure she meant for me to hear it.

“Any woman in her right mind would pick you over Levi,” she says.



ALESSANDRA

I don’t know why I said it, but it’s out there now.

I know he heard it, why he chose not to acknowledge it is anyone’s guess. If I had to, I’d likely say he didn’t want to muddy the water any more than it already is.

I put my slip of the tongue down to being tired and try not to dwell on what’s gotten into me as I lie back on Garrett’s soft spare bed.

The sheets smell fresh and clean like he's always ready for unexpected guests.

Or maybe Levi crashes here regularly?

I close my eyes and wait for the pain in my side to dull enough so I can nap for a while.

I know I'm pushing my body, and somewhere in the rational part of my brain, I *know* it's dumb to do so.

But this is my one chance to get what was stolen from me. It's not just my body on the line, it's my reputation and ultimately my career.

My mind is too riddled with possible outcomes to rest completely, so I drift in and out of a doze, fitfully dreaming of blondes with implants chasing Garrett while I'm watching helplessly from a boat.

I come to, with sweat rolling down my back, and my gun pressing into my ribcage as I try to orient myself.

It's getting dark, so with a groan, I pull myself to sitting. As I do, I hear the chime of my phone.

A text message from an unknown number is sitting proudly on the screen as though it's taunting me.

Stop looking for me in Mexico.

Despite the warmth, a chill runs down my spine.

Stupidly, as I slip into my sneakers, and manage to lace them up, I'm pleased I'm not staying at the dump I originally booked.

Even if I wanted to try to trace the source of the message and involve my boss, there's not really any point.

I know where Bryce really is, and where Courtney will be. Nothing in his message gives any indication that he knows I'm in the area and not in the hospital.

There's even a possibility he scheduled a bunch of text messages to be sent to me from various locations, just to throw us off the scent.

It certainly worked the first time I got a phone call from the Yucatán Peninsula and my boss was on a plane before I could tell him Bryce was too smart to do something so dumb.

As this is the first message I've gotten from Bryce since I left Boston, I text my own reply.

I can't tell them anything. I'm out of action thanks to you.

I wasn't really expecting a reply so when I don't get one it makes me even more convinced he's pre-planned these messages and calls to throw us off the scent.

Feeling surer of myself, I check my weapon and use the bathroom before I go locate Garrett.

He's not anywhere inside, so I follow the scent of charcoal and I find him sitting on the deck, gazing out to sea with a beer in his hand and his bare feet on a cooler.

His hair is shifting in the warm breeze, food is sizzling on the barbeque, and it's like peering at a three-dimensional postcard of what I'd imagined my life would look like if I'd chosen a different path.

For a moment, I just stand there, watching, wondering why a man like Garrett Reid isn't married, wondering why my breathing is getting a little faster, and why looking at this makes me feel like I'm looking at a missing piece of a puzzle.

From the barbeque at the edge of the deck to the potted herbs to the fruit trees planted at the periphery of the yard, and the breathtaking views of the Bay, everything is...perfect.

I think he hasn't seen me, but he has. He swings his feet off the cooler, reaches down, grabs another beer from the ice, and raises it in the air.

My feet inch forward as I try not to show how stupefied I am he knew I needed to just breathe the moment in.

Wordlessly, I take the beer, and follow his gaze, looking out to sea at the expanse of blue beyond the edge of the cliff face.

I stay there, drinking my cool beer, not saying anything until the sun starts to set, and the water over the Bay turns into a hazy orange glow.

Slowly, he turns and cocks his head at me. "Do you like lobster?" he asks.

I nod, far too eagerly as my stomach rumbles in agreement.

He smiles so warmly, a little of it transfers to my chest. "Good. Because I cooked one already," he says.

With nothing else to do but give in to his hospitality, I sit, and when he hands me a plate of freshly caught lobster, with a butter dipping sauce, bread and salad, I dig in.

As I eat, I sneak surreptitious glances as Garrett eats his own food with less gusto than me, I'm aware I'm more interested in him than in the excellent food.

"You're going to make some woman here in the Bay very happy one day," I say.

His eyebrow cocks. "Was that a compliment?"

"You can take it however you like."

There's a trace of amusement on his face as he pushes his plate away. "Well, I'm taking it," he says.

"So Jax isn't the only chef in the family?"

He takes a swig of beer. "I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a *chef*, but we all had to pull our own weight at home, so I can cook a little."

"From the looks of yours, you had to clean the bathroom too," I say.

He chuckles. "Ayuh. Nothing more humbling than scrubbing the toilet bowl you share with your brothers."

I laugh as I picture a younger Garrett chasing after his brothers with a toilet brush.

"What about you? Do you have siblings?"

I nod. "A sister. Constance. She's younger than me. About Levi's age and about as committed to avoiding responsibility as he seems to be," I say.

Garrett takes a swig of his beer and frowns. "She doesn't have a job?"

I shrug. “Last I heard she was tending bar somewhere. It won’t last. She’ll either quit turning up for work or take off. Then mom will get worried and call me and ask me to go find her.”

“She’s always been like that?”

I sigh. “Pretty much. Honestly, I think mom indulged her too much, but it’s also because she doesn’t have a clue what she wants to do with her life, or how privileged she is.”

He takes his time replying, but when he does, it’s surprisingly profound. “Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

My eyebrows rise. “What is that?”

He smiles. “A proverb. We learned a lot of them growing up. A few stuck.”

I’m not sure if he’s serious, so I test him. “What does it mean?”

“That when something is hidden it’s harder to bring to the surface, but wise council can reveal it.”

I sit with that thought for a while and finish my beer as we relax in companionable silence.

Aside from being easy on the eye, Garrett is easy to be with. He’s confident without being overbearing, masculine without being macho, and I wasn’t expecting to like his company or to feel so comfortable around him.

That I’m sharing information about my family with him is more than a little worrying.

Under any other circumstance, I'd have considered Garrett the perfect host, and this the perfect evening.

And maybe if I wasn't lying through my teeth to him, we might have stood a chance when this was all over.



GARRETT

Alessandra disappears after dinner. Making excuses about being tired, but even if Zane thinks I'm too trusting, I'm not naïve enough to believe she's being completely honest.

What she is doing is setting boundaries. And quite rightly so. I should have done too.

Having her in my home, sharing my food, my beer, and introducing her to my family would have been fine if she'd been some dumpy litigious investigator from the Feebs.

She's none of those things. She's bright, and beautiful and is just the kind of woman I know I would have been proud to bring home to meet mom and dad.

With the dinner dishes already in the dishwasher, I avoid going inside the house, and instead scrub the grill with hot soapy water, making sure it's clean for the next time I have a family barbeque up here.

Mom used to chide me for not spending any time looking for a woman to share my life with.

Dad, in his own way too. But he knew better than anyone it's not easy balancing the demands of a job that can be all-

consuming.

His attempts were more subtle and more about keeping mom happy than any real concern.

As I scrub away the darkened grease coating the grill, I try to recall the last 'official' girlfriend I had.

There were plenty before I left for the academy, mostly, on dad's advice came from outside of the Bay.

I always knew I wanted to be a state trooper, so every relationship I had, I had to think carefully about whether it might come back and bite me on the ass come background check time.

It also meant fewer repercussions for my family.

But the lines are blurring. Work has always been work, and home has always been that.

It was easier to compartmentalize my life that way. Safer too.

I was professional, courteous, contentious, and fair. I've never *flirted* on the job. Ever.

Alessandra's not from the Bay, and technically she's not even someone I'm officially working with.

I scrub faster, brow in knots as I frantically try to scour away thoughts I'm having about a woman I just met.

A woman I *shouldn't* be having any thoughts about other than helping her out, one professional to another.

Then why the hell does it bother me so much she alluded to me settling down with someone *inside* the Bay?

I scrub so hard my fingers start to ache, and I have to switch to my left so I don't fatigue my gun hand.

I don't stop until the grill is spotless, and the light is fast slipping away.

I toss the water into the garden mom helped me plant, and lock the deck door before heading back inside.

I flick the lights off as I go, wondering if Alessandra is a light sleeper and if she needs a light left on so she can find her way around in the night.

As I reach my room, I curse when I realize I never checked with anyone to see if they had room for Alessandra.

If there isn't, Alessandra will have to stay here indefinitely, and I'll have to figure out how to deal with having a beautiful woman not just in my home, but how to keep her safe.

Zane thinks I'm nuts.

Jax would probably give up his apartment for her the way he did for Felicity and Zane when they needed it, and Levi would have offered his place, *and* offered to act as her bodyguard.

I'm supposed to be keeping my distance, and making sure I play by all the rules so this doesn't reflect poorly on me, my family, or the Blueskin Bay PD.

I made those rules a long time ago. To protect me. To protect my family.

But as I pause at my bedroom door, and look at hers, all I can think about is what she said about most women picking

me over Levi, and what she'd do if I knocked on it right now to ask her if she's one of them.

I stand in the dark until my phone buzzing in my pocket brings me to my senses.

I pull it out and step inside my bedroom before answering. "It's late, Levi. You better not be drunk."

He laughs. "I'm not. But I have some good news. When I was chatting to Nicki today she said a client of hers canceled. A Flatlander staying at Dawson's B&B. They'll be gone tomorrow. The kid got sick so they're leaving. You should call Ted to see if he'll have a room vacant."

It takes me a full three seconds to realize I'm supposed to sound grateful he's calling to say Alessandra has somewhere else to stay.



ALESSANDRA

Garrett's spare bed is so comfy, I accidentally sleep in, and when I tumble out of the bathroom, it's almost nine am.

It's also pouring with rain.

I'm still yawning as I find Garrett reading a paper at the kitchen island.

"What happened to summer?"

He looks up and shrugs. "Life on the coast. It'll probably clear later on today."

I yawn and stumble toward the coffee machine. Unlike yesterday's bacon and eggs, Garrett has sliced fruit and a box of cereal out.

"I'm starting to get worried you're going to bill me for all this," I say.

He smiles and shakes his head. "How's the pain this morning?"

I gingerly pat my side. "A little better thanks."

He seems genuinely pleased which makes guilt tug at me.

As a means of diverting my thoughts, as I plonk my hot coffee on the counter, I ask him another question. "Won't your brother be wondering where we are this morning?"

He folds the paper neatly in half and eyes me as I pour cereal into my bowl. "He'll cope. Bad weather means less trouble as more people will be inside."

I stop chewing and send him a puzzled look. "So we *aren't* going into the office?"

He taps his finger on his empty coffee cup, the tension growing on his face making mine increase along with it.

"I'm not so sure if that's the best move now. Zane confirmed it an hour ago. Courtney Wade is staying at the B&B."

I shoot to my feet, spoon clattering nosily in my bowl as I start making mental notes of everything I might need.

"Why aren't you moving? And more to the point, why didn't you wake me?"

Garrett just sits eyeing me. Calm and controlled. Everything I'm not right now.

"I didn't wake you because you needed to rest and because check-in isn't until two."

I gape at him as my mind whirls into action. "Check in?"

"You'll be staying there too."

I have to hand it to him, I wasn't expecting that to come out of his mouth.

I'm a little pissed that his family have been taking care of this while I was zonked out, but I'm also a little in awe of how fast they've worked.

"Thanks," I say.

He waves his hand in the air as though it's not important. "I've been looking at the layout of the rooms. Courtney's is directly underneath you. But her mother is beside you. So I'm going to ask you again, are you *sure* neither of them will recognize you?"

At the serious expression on his face, I sit back down. "Bryce had no contact with either of them while I was his case worker," I say.

His eyes never leave mine. "That doesn't reassure me in the least. What if he sent a picture of you and told his wife to keep a lookout?"

I frown. "That's highly unlikely. And if they were looking out for agents, it wouldn't be me, I'm the least likely person to come down here. That's precisely why I did it."

He shifts a little closer. “I’m not risking it. You wandering around the Bay yesterday was bad enough, but now you’ll be in close quarters with her. You could get hurt again.”

I can’t exactly argue with his logic. There is a small chance Bryce has warned his wife.

I’m fairly confident I can blend in and come up with a suitable cover, but what I’m not sure of is how Garrett wants to stay involved.

“You can’t expect me to work at the police station with you now that you’ve confirmed she’s here.”

He works his jaw before he answers. “No. I can’t.”

I assess his face, and his posture, and know he’s struggling with this new development.

Maybe he didn’t really think Courtney would be here? Or maybe he thought he’d get a little free help in his office?

The downcast look on his face could be down to several reasons.

What I find harder to explain, is why I’m also a little disappointed I won’t be working with him too.

I speak without really thinking of the impact my words may have. “Although, it’ll look suspect if I’m staying at the B&B alone. A couple on vacation together is a better cover.”

His eyes catch mine and behind the carefully guarded exterior, I see a little wickedness trying to break through.

“We’d be better off playing a couple having a torrid affair.”

My spine stiffens a fraction, but I play along, unwilling to let him see the idea of having an *actual* affair with him is way too tantalizing.

“That could work. I’m a married receptionist from Boston named Allie Anderson, and you’re a...”

He answers way too quickly. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll keep being who I am. The stakes will be higher. Courtney may be able to identify with you.”

My heart starts to beat a little faster, my toes curling as I think of how great a suggestion that is.

If we really were having an affair and I was married, there’s no way he’d want his reputation ruined by it.

It makes sense we’d be *very* careful about sneaking around. And he’s right, if I can get close to Courtney and let it slip, she’ll have reason to trust me.

I resume eating and look at him. “For a rural-police officer you’re pretty quick on your feet,” I say between bites.

He looks so genuinely amused, I have to hide my smile all the way through the rest of my breakfast.

CHAPTER NINE

GARRETT

As I drive into the office, leaving Alessandra to prepare, two words started battering my skull.

Two words I never should have said.

Torrid and affair.

Two things that cause a lot of heartache, and misery.

I'm still trying to work out why I did say it when I pull up outside the police department.

I take a couple of seconds to pull on my waterproof jacket before jumping down from my vehicle.

I jog to the entrance, noting how few people are out in this weather and hope that will make it easier to keep an eye on Courtney Wade and her mother.

As I step inside the door, I can hear Zane talking to a woman in our shared office.

My most senior reserve, Dave Smith, is sitting at the duty desk, manning the phones, and sends me an irritated look as I stop to hang my jacket. "Felicity's here. *Again.*"

“Ayuh. We don’t have a rule against visitors. If we did, your girlfriends wouldn’t be allowed to bring you lunch,” I say.

He stops short of scowling at me, but I know he’s pissed. Dave and Zane have been butting heads since high school.

It’s just as well I dropped by, with Jim absent, and Zane and I distracted by Alessandra’s escaped informant, I can’t afford to lose another man.

I bypass his desk, head through the door to my office, and find Zane not behind his desk where he should be but making out with his fiancé.

Felicity squeaks as she jumps back from Zane.

Even if he has started acting like a love-struck teenager whenever Felicity is around, I’m happy for my brother. Most of the time.

“Not a good look, Zane,” I say.

Felicity’s cheek flush. “Whoops. We were talking about the wonderful night Zane proposed and got...well...”

I know all about the day Zane proposed. Despite him not wanting me to, it wasn’t hard to figure out he was planning to on dad’s boat, The Salty Dog, where Zane spent a great deal of time.

As far as I know, he had fireworks, and music, and docked in a small inlet in Turtle Bay. He even took Felicity’s rabbit, Roger, along for the trip, proving to everyone he was serious.

Not a bad effort for a grouchy former marine without a romantic bone in his entire body.

Zane scowls at me as he tries to recover. “You were supposed to call before you left.”

Felicity gently swipes his arm, and his face instantly softens as he looks at her. “Don’t blame him. It’s our fault. And he’s right, I’m distracting you,” she says.

She leans in and plants a quick kiss on his cheek before smiling at me.

“I’ll go. But I would love to hear more about Alessandra. Zane won’t tell me anything.”

I smile back at her, and a thought strikes me. “Are you working at the library today?”

She tosses her blonde curls. “I’m supposed to be working on a necklace, but I don’t have the materials I need.”

I ignore Zane’s frown and carry on. “Do you have time to check on Alessandra?”

Felicity’s eyebrow hitches, but I catch a sparkle in her hazel eyes. “Why?”

I go for a shallow shrug. “I want to make sure she’s okay while I’m not there.”

Felicity’s eyes shoot to Zane’s and at the incredulous expression on his face, she laughs softly. “And she’s gotten sick of dealing with the Reid boys by now I expect?”

Zane interrupts. “Felicity is a civilian. Now you’re involving her?”

Unsurprisingly, she looks annoyed. “*Excuse* me. I was a civilian when I helped catch burglars remember?”

His brow furrows. “And I wasn’t happy about your involvement then either.”

While they have a glaring match, I clear my throat. “Felicity won’t be in any harm. I just need someone I trust to keep Alessandra company until I get back.”

As always, Felicity is eager to help. “I can do that.”

Zane works his jaw and glowers in my direction as I thank Felicity.

“No problem. I’d love to go meet this FBI agent you have stashed away at your cottage.”

“She’s not *stashed* away,” I say.

She just smiles wider, and steps closer to Zane. “Oh, I’ll be fine. Stop worrying.”

Zane’s eyes drift over her face, but he relents when she kisses him softly.

“I’ll text when I get to your house,” she says.

The second she’s closed the door, Zane rounds on me. “What the fuck, Garrett?”

I back up a step. “Calm down.”

But he doesn’t. “You just asked my fiancé to go out in the rain to babysit a woman you know next to nothing about.”

He doesn’t give me time to answer, but I know he’s angry enough to do something about it if Alessandra so much as

looks at Felicity wrong.

“Are you sure you can trust her?”

His words bite into me. I take my time answering.

“I’m *sure* I can trust that Alessandra isn’t going to have a problem with Felicity showing up for a coffee.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t like any of this. You said you’d be here first thing. You also said she’d be behind a desk.”

To emphasize his point, he gestures to the clock on the wall showing it’s nearly ten am.

“The plan changed the second Courtney Wade and her mother checked in.”

He steps backward and runs his hand over his neck. “You can’t still want me to go look for the husband then?”

A little of my own irritation surges to life. “You mean go hunt down the man hiding somewhere in our Bay who viciously stabbed a woman less than a week ago?”

“I don’t like any of this. Something doesn’t *feel* right.”

“Which part?”

“It’s too convenient. Alessandra arrives the morning after Courtney and co check-in, and you just happen to find her. How do you know she isn’t setting you up?”

A warning tweak in my mid-section.

“Setting me up *how*?”

“I don’t know, Garrett. Maybe she did her research, and she knows you’re a good guy? Maybe she knew you’d help her? Maybe she’s spinning the entire story, maybe she’s manipulating you and she’s here for another reason?”

The phone on the desk rings, giving me the chance to unpick what he just said.

I tune out his phone conversation and instead listen to the voice I’ve tried hard to since I was a boy.

There’s no doubt that Zane has serious trust issues, Felicity can attest to that, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to discount what he has to say.

He was and still is, an extremely good investigator. His instincts are solid, and I’d be a fool to dismiss him.

I scribble a note on the closest legal pad and slide it in front of him before exiting the office.

Maybe he’s right? I’m getting too close to this. Too close to Alessandra.

What I need is some distance, and some time away from her to breathe.

Zane can stay inside out of the rain, and I’ll go look out in the Willywacks for any trace of Bryce Wade.

The more I think about the questions he asked me, the more my head gets tangled up in knots.

Because if Alessandra is manipulating me, it’s damn well working.



ALESSANDRA

I'm pacing Garrett's living room, checking the clock, and my cellphone when I hear a car pull up outside.

I'm so jumpy, my hand goes to my weapon, and I draw it without thinking.

With my heart in my throat, I cautiously make my way across the carpet and glance outside.

A pretty blonde with freckles, carrying a giant bag climbs out of the car and jogs towards the house.

A second before she reaches the door my phone chimes in my pocket, and I have to take my eyes off the woman to check it.

Put your weapon away, Zane's fiancé is coming to visit. Courtney and her mom haven't left the B&B. Levi will let me know if they do.

That Garrett guessed I'd have my weapon out makes me laugh out loud.

What's *not* so funny, is that he's obviously sent someone here and Levi is in charge of keeping tabs on Courtney.

I curse under my breath that Garrett has placed his younger brother in charge of such an important task.

It's darkened my mood even further. I could tell her to go away, feign a headache or something, but as she knocks, curiosity gets the better of me.

I haven't had the chance to talk to anyone outside of the Reid family. This is an opportunity to learn what sorts of things go on here.

More importantly, it's an opportunity to learn more about the man who's gone out of his way to help me.

I slide my gun back in the holster and open the door before she can knock again and plaster a smile on my face.

"Did Garrett ask you to spy on me or did Zane?" I say.

Her brown eyes widen giving her a doe-eyed appearance. "Oh. Do you want me to go away?"

I wave her inside so she's not standing out in the rain. "No, come in."

She laughs nervously and unbuttons her coat, giving me a good show of a tasteful emerald-cut diamond engagement ring on her finger.

"Since I'm busted, I hope I can still keep you company for a while? I think Garrett's worried about you."

As she hangs her raincoat on the hook beside the front door my stomach does a little backflip.

"He's probably worried I'm going to trash his place. I don't think he trusts me," I say.

Her lips tug up into a half smile. "That's the thing about small towns. Everyone knows everyone else's secrets. When people like us come in from the outside, it upsets the natural order," she says.

I bark a laugh and wander into the kitchen. “You want a coffee? I’ve had too much already but I need something to do.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve stopped drinking coffee. Garrett won’t mind if we ransack his cupboards to make some cookies.”

My eyebrow quirks. “I don’t really like baking.”

She grins at me. “Neither did Zane. But it’ll stop you from going crazy while you wait. I’ll assemble, you roll.”

My perky blonde intruder does have a point. I am going stir-crazy being trapped inside, and it’s only been forty minutes since Garrett left.

As Felicity pulls an assortment of items out of Garrett’s immaculately tidy cupboards, I settle in at the counter and watch as she sweeps her hair up into a ponytail, washes her hands and pushes her ring inside her pocket.

“It must be exciting being an FBI agent,” she says.

I study the back of her as she scrubs her fingernails. “It has its moments.”

When she turns to face me and gestures for me to wash my hands too, her lips are pursed, and her brow is knotted.

“You get to chase bad guys and carry a gun, to me that’s the coolest thing ever.”

“I guess. Some people think cops are the bad guys these days.”

She gives me a playful look. “Even if I didn’t before, which I did, it would be hard *not* to appreciate law enforcement when I’m surrounded by them.”

She carries on, making me wonder if she’s hankering for some conversation or is being polite.

“Well. I have no life outside of work, my friends from college thought I was nuts for signing up, and I haven’t had a boyfriend in about two years.”

I don’t know why I’m being so honest, probably because I’ll likely never see her again.

A lot of people would be shocked by such a large info drop, but she takes in her stride and just smiles.

“Oh wow. You sound like Garrett. This is the first sort of vacation he’s taken in years,” she says.

That piques my interest. “Is that so?”

Her nod is distracted as she cuts butter into chunks. “Your parents must be proud of you?”

Her voice rises slightly as she utters the word ‘parents’.

I’m not really interested in talking about myself, it’s my least favorite subject, but I humor her hoping she’ll get back to talking about Garrett.

“My dad left when I was a kid, but yeah, my mom is proud of me. But I think she’d have been proud of me regardless.”

“You’re close with her?”

I dry my hands and retake my seat as she measures out the flour. “Not physically close but yeah. We’re close. As soon as

I'm done with this case, I'll head back to see her and my little sister in Atlanta. What about you? Are you close with your family?"

I think I already know the answer, and she supplies it with a hint of wistfulness. "I haven't spoken to either of my parents in a year now. The Reids are my family now."

She seems so sweetly wholesome, it's hard seeing how that could have happened, but it does make sense that she's living all the way out here in Maine.

"What happened?"

She sighs. "I got caught on camera doing something stupid. It ruined my life, and by proxy, it ruined theirs too."

I take my time asking my next question. "Here?"

She shakes her head. "In Arizona. Phoenix."

I'm surprised she's being so honest, most people aren't when talking about an event that's shaped their entire lives.

"How did you wind up all the way here?"

"I ran away. Started an online jewelry business and somehow managed to get tangled up in one of the Reid family's adventures."

"I heard about that. Sounds like you were an integral part of the team, maybe you should consider joining your fiancé at the Blueskin Bay Police Department," I say.

She throws her head back slightly as she laughs. "No thanks, I'm happy sitting on the sidelines of any future investigations."

I smile and wonder if I should be helping more. Mom was more of a packet mix baker, so I have zero experience compiling ingredients in the right quantity and order.

I'm not even sure if I *can* bake in my oven at home.

"How did you end up staying with Garrett, anyway. He didn't say."

I think of the hell hole I escaped by the skin of my teeth and grimace. "A fluke. I mistakenly booked The Fisherman's Cottage and Garrett rescued me."

"That sounds like Garrett. He's selfless to a fault. But why are you visiting the Bay? Is it a joint police thing? Zane wasn't exactly forthcoming with details."

When I don't answer immediately, her cheeks turn scarlet. "I'm sorry. That's none of my business. I didn't mean to pry. I know how that feels, and I should have known better."

Either she's a fantastic actress or she's genuinely distressed. "It's fine. The cat's out of the bag now anyway. I'm here looking for someone. Garrett insisted I needed his family's help. So, here we are."

Her eyes widen. "He's insisting on helping you... undercover?"

"You can call it that if you like," I say.

Her mouth twists as she tries to keep a straight face. "Oh. Well, be careful, or you'll wind up falling for him and the Bay," she says.

Her company is proving a good distraction so I ignore her misguided attempt to matchmake.

“That’s not going to happen. We’re both professionals.”

She doesn’t say anything compelling me to talk even more and putting me on the defensive.

“Like you said, it’s in his nature to offer to help. It’s got nothing to do with me, it’s because I’m a fellow law enforcement officer, and this is his jurisdiction,” I say.

I sound like I’m rambling even to my own ears, so I mentally zip my mouth and instead toy with the pamphlet Garrett left for me.

“Oh, dear. I hope I didn’t offend you?”

I shake my head. “You didn’t. And for the record Garrett forced me to accept his help. If it had been up to me, I’d have been doing this without the Reid family’s input.”

Her back straightens, and I have to rush to soften my words. “It’s just a little infuriating having Garrett Reid treating me like one of his reserves.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t think he means it as an insult. It’s more of a reflection of how they were raised. I’m not sure how Levi fits in, but even he is a good guy underneath all the bluster.”

I snort a laugh that she’s figured out Levi. “Oh, I never thought they were bad, maybe just antiquated in their views,” I say.

She stops crumbling the butter between her fingers and frowns. “I’d take antiquated gentlemen any day. My father wasn’t one but he also blamed feminists for the downfall of modern society.”

Somehow we’ve swung back around to a topic I’m beginning to understand holds a lot of meaning for her.

“What’s your mother like?”

She looks up and I’m not sure I should pry any further when I note her eyes are moist. “I don’t have many fond memories of my mother. And the ones I have are fading fast.”

“But?”

Felicity swipes away her half-formed tears. “She’s my mother and sometimes I want to hear her voice,” she says.

I watch her for a while, and since she seems to need someone to talk to, I lend her my ear.

“How long have you been living in Blueskin Bay?”

“Just under a year.”

“And how long have you been engaged to Zane Reid?”

Her eyes crinkle as she smiles. “Engaged. Two months. Dating, a little over six.”

Gotta hand it to him, Zane worked fast. On several levels.

As she works, I ask her several more questions. “Does Zane want kids?”

She nods but won’t meet my eye. “Lots and soon. I guess it’s to be expected after the Reid boys lost their parents in such

a terrible way.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about, but she seems to think I do, so I bluff.

“Absolutely. A loss like that makes you hold the ones you love a little closer.”

She nods rapidly, and her blink rate increases as she holds back tears. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I should be happy, and I am...”

When she leaves another unspoken sentence in the air, I give her a chance to catch her breath before I speak.

“You think if you tell Zane you’re pregnant he’ll never let you out of the house.”

The bag of flour slips from her hand and lands with a *plunk* on the floor.

“How—”

I slip around the kitchen island and try to intercept her as she bends down to pick up the flour.

Pain shoots through my side, but I manage to kneel beside her a little easier than yesterday.

“It was an educated guess. You’re getting emotional talking about your estranged parents because you have meaningful news you really want to share with them.”

She sinks back on her heels ignoring the mess on Garrett’s spotless floor. “It’s not confirmed yet, I’m just late, and I’m *never* late. I’ve been avoiding buying a pregnancy test here. I

know everyone who works at the grocery store, so they'll know before I get a chance to tell Zane."

I haven't had a lot of experience with small towns, but the idea of my neighbors finding out I've purchased a pregnancy test is one of the most unappealing things ever.

"I can go buy you one. I can buy you a dozen before I leave if you like."

Felicity laughs and starts to sweep the flour up with her hands. "Thanks. I didn't really feel like driving all the way to Carey's Creek just to pee on a stick."

"Don't blame you, but then that's the only good thing about not having sex," I say.

When she waggles her eyebrows, she looks so goofy I laugh even though it hurts like hell.

"Never know. There are scores of gorgeous men in the Bay. Even if you don't think Garrett is cute, you still might get lucky," she says.



GARRETT

I pull up to my place, soaked to the bone, pissed off, and starving.

The rain may have stopped a few minutes ago, but I've just spent three hours looking for any trace of Bryce and have exactly nothing to show for it.

It should prove some consolation we can eliminate a few of the places Zane and I added to our possible location list, but all it does is add to the growing disquiet in my mind.

As I step inside, I'm fully prepared for Alessandra to be ready and waiting, but instead, I walk into a house filled with the scent of baking and Felicity and Alessandra laughing in my kitchen.

The second I enter the kitchen they stop talking making me instantly suspicious.

Alessandra's eyes find mine. "Any luck?"

I shake my head and snatch a cookie off the cooling tray. "Nothing. But I only covered a small area of the most obvious spots I know."

"What about Levi?"

I shake my head. "He's bored stupid, but they're still inside. Playing cards in the rec room he thinks. He managed to get inside to have a word with Ted. Courtney isn't happy with her room, and he says the mother is even pickier."

Alessandra smiles. "Yup. Sounds like them."

Felicity hops off the chair and grabs her oversized handbag. "I think this is my cue to leave. You both have my cell number so let me know if I can help," she says.

She's speaking more to Alessandra, so I'm a little surprised Felicity's offering her number to a woman she just met.

It wasn't that long ago Felicity had an intense dislike of technology and of strangers.

"If I need help subduing any masked men you'll be the first person I call," Alessandra says.

Felicity chuckles and looks meaningfully at me. "I guess FBI agents aren't all obnoxious then," she says.

I ignore the reminder of my previous experiences with federal agencies and nod at her instead. "Thanks for your help," I say.

She smiles at me as she puts her coat back on. "No problem. I hope you catch your bad guys," she says.

As she closes the front door, I take a closer look at the countertop. There's an assortment of beads, and clasps I've seen in Felicity's office.

Alessandra smiles at me as she holds up a circle of crystals. "Felicity helped me make a bracelet. It's part of my touristy disguise."

It's jarring that the same woman who drew her weapon on me yesterday morning made such a delicate piece of jewelry. "I didn't think you'd be interested in this stuff."

"I'm not really. But what did you think I was going to do for three and a half hours with Ms. Sunshine?"

I hold up the bracelet. "Not something quite so girly," I say.

Alessandra laughs. "I can be girly. When it's called for."

I stop short of asking her how she would have spent her time if Felicity hadn't been here and tap my watch. "It's almost two. I need to get changed. Then I'll drop you back at your vehicle."

"Wowee. Am I really allowed to drive myself all the way to town?"

At the sarcasm in her tone, I smirk at her. "I can't be seen dropping you at the front."

Amusement dances across her face. "Got it," she says.

"You got the layout of the B&B I left?"

She gestures to the brochure from Dawson's. "I'd gone over it a dozen times before your sitter arrived. If we need to follow her discretely, the fire escape will work."

I wince at the idea and hope it doesn't come to that.

By the time I've changed and packed everything we might need, Alessandra is standing by the front door, wearing the bracelet Felicity made her, and a long flowing pastel-colored dress that just skims her ankles.

Unfortunately, while it's breezy, it plunges at the neckline and highlights her breasts, making it even more difficult to pretend she's just another cop.

If she weren't tapping her toes and back to looking impatient, I'd have risked paying her another compliment.

"Is that a disguise or how you usually dress?" I say.

She shrugs a slender shoulder. "The former. I need to look the part of a friend of Courtney's if the situation arises."

I will my eyes to stay on her face as I sling my pack over my shoulder and grab her bag before she can stop me.

“They better not have left the B&B,” she says as we walk out the door.

I glance at her as she hitches her dress to avoid getting it wet and almost wish I didn’t see the small tattoo on the lower part of her foot.

A guttural noise escapes my throat as a shudder of lust travels through me.

“Where are you keeping your gun?”

“Trade secret,” she says.

I laugh, but it’s more to cover how unsettled I’m starting to feel. Up until this moment, I thought I was in control of this situation.

I’d been convinced that she was my guest and that I was the one running the show.

But I’m beginning to feel that she’s been in control the entire time.

CHAPTER TEN

ALESSANDRA

It starts coming down in buckets just as we arrive at the crap heap I was planning on staying.

With an instruction from Garrett to contact him when I'm settled, I make it to my vehicle, do a quick check nothing has been tampered with, and climb inside.

I release a breath as I reach inside the glovebox and find my lip gloss. The rain has damped my hair again, so I tease it up and pucker my lips so I can plaster red shiny gloss over them.

If I'd not been busy with Felicity I would have put more makeup on, but in my experience, men won't remember more than boobs, hair, and lips anyway.

When I reach the parking lot behind the town's largest bed and breakfast, I'm dry and ready to check in and hopefully flirt some information out of the owner.

I do a quick check, and find Levi slouched in his car right across from the parking lot entrance.

I half expected to find him asleep, but he's awake enough to notice me as I climb out.

Rather than be discrete, he winds his window down, and wolf whistles. "Want some company, darlin?"

Usually, if anyone pulls that, I'd wander over and give them the death stare, but I just pretend I didn't hear him and take my bag from the passenger seat, and head around to the front entrance as quickly as I can.

There's no one behind the desk, and it's deadly quiet in the reception area, so I pick up the bell and ring it.

I wait a few minutes, look around and nearly have a heart attack when I spot a reed-thin woman, dressed in a grey cardigan, and slacks, coming down the stairs.

She looks so much like Courtney Wade's mother, Ida, that I have to will myself to breathe as she smiles.

"I'm so sorry. I was called away. It's Ms. Eason, isn't it? I'm Marie."

I nod. "Allie is fine."

She looks down at my bag and pushes the register toward me. "You're a friend of the Reid family?"

I pause mid-signature. If she passes it on that I'm friends with the local law, it'll kill my chances of connecting with Courtney.

"More a passing acquaintance. I had a little accident this morning just outside of the Bay. Deborah Beach, I think it was, he was kind enough to help me out."

Her eyes widen and her hand goes to her heart. “How awful. That’s right where his parent’s died.”

I hold my breath, far more interested than I should be in where this story is going. “That’s why there are two crosses at the side of the road?” I ask as I sign.

She’s silent for a moment, and I can see her fighting with the urge to be polite to a paying guest and guarding the privacy of a man she obviously respects.

Instead of placing her in an unnecessarily awkward situation for my curiosity’s sake, I smile benignly.

“No need to discuss it. I can see it’s upsetting you. If it’s alright with you, I’ll go up to my room and unpack.”

She’s so relieved she has my key in my hand in under three seconds.

After another smile, I trundle up the stairs as quickly as I can and locate my room.

I’m fully prepared to meet either Courtney or her mother, but I am not prepared to be placed in an incredibly romantic room with a four-poster bed and a claw foot bath.

“Oh, come on, Garrett,” I mutter.

I open my bag and start pulling out the electronics gear I brought with me.

When I’ve assembled all the wire taps I sourced from a great online store, I take a step back and stare at them.

What I need is to get into Courtney’s room, and plant one of them, possibly some visual so I get an idea of how she’s

doing.

I've never met the woman before, but I have studied enough footage of her to feel reasonably confident I can befriend her.

I leave out a couple items and pack the rest away so I can check to see if the fire escape will work as I'd hoped it would.

As I exit my room, checking to make sure no one is about, I think about how my impulsive decision to come here seems to have been upended by a lone man.

It's crazy to think that two days ago I was lying in a hospital bed, feeling like a complete failure and somehow in the space of twenty-four hours all my plans involve Garrett Reid.

When I'm sure I can open the fire exit without it setting an alarm off, I head back to my room, take my cell out and walk over to the window so I can look at the view as I call him.

The rain is down to a drizzle. The beach is empty, and only a few hardy souls are strolling along the street, kids in tow, perusing the stores I've yet to step foot in.

Garrett answers on the first ring. "I'm all settled. Room 201," I say.

"Do you want some lunch? I can ask Jax to send something over."

My stomach answers for me by growling so loud he probably hears. "Yup. I'm starving and all I have to eat is stale crackers," I say.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how I plan to get in without anyone seeing me?”

I smile and refuse to let him know I am interested. “See you when I see you,” I say.



GARRETT

I wait for Ted’s truck to leave before making a dash across the side street, and behind the stairs where there’s another entrance.

If money was tight, and it usually was, mom used to clean here during summer, so Zane, Levi, Jax and I learned every nook and cranny of this place, including all the best hiding spots.

Or in Levi’s case, all the best places to bring Flatlander girls without mom and dad finding out about it.

When I’m sure I can make it upstairs without being seen, I haul ass and arrive breathless at Alessandra’s door.

I don’t even need to knock, she opens it, and closes it the second I’m inside the room.

She gets right down to business, and gestures to the bed. “I need to get ears in her room. Can you call Jax and have his guy deliver the food to Courtney’s room instead of mine?”

I frown. “So you can introduce yourself and leave a listening device behind?”

She smiles. “Right.”

My stomach tightens. I'm now actively involved in her planning illegal surveillance.

I look over the equipment she's scattered over the floral bedspread and try to stall.

"Oh, I get it. You're losing your nerve," she says.

For some reason the tone she's using gets my back up. I don't get a chance to reply, a knock sounds at the door, and I immediately head into the bathroom just in case.

As I stare at the porcelain toilet I run my hand over my neck and curse at the mess I'm getting even further into.

When the door closes, and Alessandra opens the bathroom door, she smiles so innocently that I know I'm being played by a master.

"Better come get it while it's hot," she says.

As it's becoming apparent I'm losing this battle with her, I allow my nose to lead me to the table beside the window where Alessandra has laid out the food.

I scan the contents and make a mental note to thank Jax for making his incredible seafood pizza.

He's even included a six-pack of light beer, bread sticks, and potato wedges.

Alessandra takes a bite and groans. "Your cousin is a genius," she says.

I take a seat opposite her. "I'm not letting you bug any of the rooms here."

She eats an entire slice of pizza before replying. “You knew what you were getting into when you signed up for this.”

I run my eyes over her face and know before I speak the effect my words will have on her.

“I did. Just like you must have known that me conducting a full-scale operation off the books was never going to happen.”

Her brow furrows. “You have got to be kidding me? How am I supposed to find out where Bryce is if you won’t let me get ears on her?”

“By allowing me and Zane to do our jobs. If you want to follow Courtney around in your own time, that’s your prerogative. I’ll accommodate you so you can stay safe, but it doesn’t mean I’ll give you free rein to break the law.”

Her nose wrinkles in distaste. “What are you saying? That if you catch me doing more than talking to her, you’ll *arrest* me?”

I sit back in my chair in case she throws something at me. “If it comes to it. It’s my job to protect the rights of everyone in the Bay, that includes Courtney Wade’s, her mothers, *and* yours.”

She rocks back in her chair, and eyes me, looking a lot like mom used to when she was at the end of her rope with one of us.

When she doesn’t speak and I hate to see Jax’s food get cold, I snatch a piece of pizza and take a bite just as I hear a door slam a few doors down.

Alessandra's eyes shoot to the door, and I can see her straining to listen as footsteps clomp down the hallway.

She lets out an exasperated breath and spits the words at me, "That could be her."

I shake my head. "Zane has the entrance covered remotely. If she leaves. We'll know."

"You...what?"

I swallow and pull the same trick on her and finish a slice before replying. "I'm not going to allow a visiting FBI agent to conduct an off-the-books operation, I, can, however, authorize the use of a remote-controlled drone covering the B&B as an extension of my usual patrols."

For about two seconds she remains expressionless before she arches an eyebrow and slowly leans over the table. "You, Garrett Reid, are a giant pain in my ass," she says.

I pop a wedge into my mouth and shrug. "I've been called worse."

She laughs. "I'll bet you have."

I'm about to ask her what the worst assignment she's been given as an agent when I hear what can only be described as a couple having sex on steroids.

Alessandra's eyes shoot to the wall behind me, and her head cocks. "Wow. You think she's faking it?" she says.

I try to hide my discomfort by tearing the bread into pieces. "You'd know more than I would."

She shakes her head. “I don’t fake orgasms. If I’m not having a good time, I let whoever is in my bed know.”

I choke on my bread. “I bet that goes down well,” I say.

Her voice is teasing as she reaches over to open a beer. “Well, if *he* isn’t, something has to.”

She passes me a beer as my brain starts dragging my thoughts to places they haven’t visited for a while.

I shift in my chair and try not to listen to the couple next door who sound like they belong in porn not in my Bay.

Alessandra laughs lightly as the woman moaning increases in volume. “I guess this isn’t a good place to have dirty loud sex with the Deputy Chief, then. The walls are paper thin.”

I look her over and frown as I consider the consequences of having sex right under Ted and Marie Dawson’s nose.

Lord knows Levi got caught more than once.

“The *Deputy Chief* would know better.”

Her eyes meet mine. “Than to have dirty loud sex?”

As the woman starts to moan louder, my eyes drift unconsciously to the tops of Alessandra’s breasts.

My heart rate is speeding and when she puts her glossy red lips around the top of a long-necked beer bottle all the blood rushes to my cock.

The words slide out. “No, I meant to have it *here*,” I say.

Her lips twitch into a smile as I clear my throat, struggling to get control when she takes pity on me.

“Not that I remember what that’s like. I’d need to dust the cobwebs off first. I’m not even sure everything is in working order,” she says.

I shake my head at how glib she is when I’m sitting here trying not to imagine it’s us making the walls shake. “Do you always talk like this?”

“How else am I supposed to talk? We’re sitting here listening to two strangers rutting in the next room. We can’t pretend we don’t hear it. Why not joke about them having hot sex?”

My heart beats triple time as too many thoughts jab at me. “Because I’m not so sure we are talking about them anymore,” I say.

She takes a breath as if readying herself to retort, her eyes lingering on my face, but instead of denying it, she grabs another piece of pizza.



ALESSANDRA

I’ve had a lot of practice sitting in hotel rooms before, I’ve spent an entire month walking around a mall watching a suspected terrorist, but I’ve never been forced to listen to a couple having hot sex with a man I find both infuriatingly straight-laced *and* sexy.

I’m not sure if I want to punch him for being so ridiculous or tear his clothes off for getting under my skin the way he has.

I was so sure I'd figured him out. So sure I was the one calling the shots, then he goes and says something like that, letting me know he's more aware of his impact on me than I first thought.

A shiver of lust runs down my spine as he stretches revealing his toned abs and the tuft of dark hair at the base of his jeans.

He looks out the window, laces his fingers behind his head, and in a moment of indulgence, I don't stop my eyes from drifting lower to his crotch.

At the sizable evidence he's concealing, I suppress a groan, and mentally scold myself for being so weak at the worst possible time.

Even if I could find the time after locating Bryce Wade, it's not like I can do anything with the hot deputy anyway.

I can barely bend without hurting myself, a night of wild sex before I leave is completely out of the question.

"What?" he says.

I flinch as I try to cover getting caught looking at him. "You want to play cards? There's a deck in the drawer behind you."

The slight curl of his lip tells me he's not buying it, but he's hardly going to call me on looking at him when I haven't called him out on staring at *my* assets earlier.

"Sure. Guess we don't have a lot of other options."

I can think of some other options, but I tidy away the remains of lunch and settle for seeing if I can beat Garrett at poker.

After less than two hands, turns out Garrett is a lousy card player. If we were playing for money, I'd have cleaned him out by now.

“You’re really terrible at this,” I say.

He chuckles and doesn’t seem in the least bit offended. “Zane’s the best poker player we have in the family.”

That tracks with what I know about his steely-eyed brother. “What about Levi? What’s he good at?”

“Surfing. Though he’ll tell you he’s good at other things.”

I don’t doubt that. I’m sure he thinks he’s God’s gift in and out of the bedroom.

“Has he never had a serious relationship?”

Garrett folds for the third time running and shakes his head. “Since he figured out girls thought he was good-looking he’s been strutting around like a peacock.”

I snort inelegantly. “What about Jax? Is he single too? He’s a good-looking guy if you’re into that muscled look.”

His eyebrow lifts. “Are you saying you aren’t?”

I’m ready with my answer when I hear a door open and a woman’s voice directly outside our door.

I jump out of my seat and move as quickly as I can to press my ear against the door.

It's definitely two women in the hallway. And it sounds like they are arguing.

Even with poor insulation, it's next to impossible to hear anything. If it is Courtney and she's arguing with her mother, I want to know what about it.

I spin on my heel and grab the remains of the food and have the door open before Garrett can stop me.

"I'm just taking the trash out," I say.

Garrett's on his feet in an instant, but he doesn't have time to stop me before I intercept Courtney and her mom in the doorway to her mother's room.

"Oh! Whoops, sorry," I say.

They immediately stop talking and look at me. Courtney looks like a deer caught in headlights, but her mother appears as shrewd and cool as she'd reported being.

"Don't leave without me," she says.

Courtney's lips are plumped to shiny pink perfection, her blonde hair is teased up, and she's wearing a dress only slightly more over the top than mine.

I steal my opportunity, gesture to her outfit, and giggle. "Wow. I love your dress, we could be sisters," I say.

For a moment I think I've blown it, but she grins back at me. "I came up here to sneak a menthol, but my mom caught me," she says.

I cross my eyes and groan. "Uh oh. I quit a few months ago but I have zero will power," I say.

“Cigarettes and men. My two weaknesses,” she says.

I cast a furtive look down the hallway before stage whispering. “There’s a fire exit at the end of the hallway. You can smoke there,” I say.

She’s so pleased she actually claps her hands together. “Perfect. You can keep me company,” she says.

I dump the empty pizza box in the garbage can at the end of the hall, and make my voice come out high and squeaky. “Sure! But do *not* let me smoke, kay?”

She crosses her heart with long red nails and totters down the hallway toward the fire escape.

Thankfully she goes with my suggestion of just opening the door so the smoke blows away, rather than climbing out on it.

I’m about due my pain meds, and I’m not sure I can get away with climbing in this dress anyway.

After chatting inanely about how many cute stores there are here, and whether the hairdresser could handle frosting her tips, she’s almost halfway through her cigarette and I’m running out of time.

“Can you keep a secret?”

I can see the glee on her face as she inhales another toxic breath. “Totally!”

I chew my lip and look at the door to my room. “I’m staying here because I’m seeing someone important in the Bay. We’d get in a lot of trouble if we get caught.”

Her eyes shift from me to the door. “Is he, like married?”

I shake my head. “I am, and my husband has a mean streak,” I say.

Courtney’s face pales and she looks genuinely concerned for me. “Aren’t you worried he’ll *find* you?”

I worry my lip some more. “A little. But he thinks I’m with my mom, and she won’t rat me out. She *hates* him.”

She nods slowly. “My mom doesn’t like my man either. She thinks he’s bad for me. But she doesn’t know him. Not really.”

I keep my expression passive. “Where is he?”

Her expression turns wary. “I’m not sure. But he promised he’d be here soon.”

My heart starts to race at the confirmation I was right, and I’m already planning my next step but I don’t let any of that show, I just sigh.

“I need to go, but maybe we can hang out again sometime before he gets here?”

Courtney’s smile is a little forced, but she nods. “Sure. I’m not doing a whole lot.”

I smile at her and leave her to finish the remaining portion of her cigarette as I walk triumphantly back to my room.

It’s hard not to smile but I lose the desire to when Ida opens the door precisely as Garrett does.

Without a second thought, I jam my lips against his and shove him back inside before she can see his face.

Rather than break the kiss off he returns it, far more greedily than I'd expected.

My own mouth parts and I eagerly accept his tongue as it searches for mine in what turns out to be a spectacularly hot impromptu kiss.

So, hot, in fact, I'm pretty sure I'm going to forgive him for almost blowing my new cover.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GARRETT

With her lips still attached to mine, I manage to navigate my way back into her room without having to break contact.

This is reckless and stupid. But the second I felt her lips on mine, my brain ceased to function, and even the taste of her lip gloss isn't enough to jump-start it.

There's no logic behind why she's still in my arms, or why we're still kissing, but rather than quitting, I'm having trouble remembering why I haven't kissed her before now.

In the rational part of my brain, I'm registering she kissed me to keep up the disguise, but what's not so clear is why she doesn't appear motivated to stop.

When my hands drift lower than her waist, and she moans into my mouth, I start to wonder if I'm cut out for close-quarter surveillance with a beautiful FBI agent.

If this is an act, her tongue sure as hell has me fooled.

I draw my body away from hers before she realizes I'm now hard as a rock and fast losing all common sense.

My voice comes out thick as I release her. "Apologies."

She looks supremely disconcerted as she frowns at me. “What for? Kissing me back or giving me no other option?”

I rake my fingers through my hair as I try to pull myself together. “Take your pick.”

Her lips twitch into a half smile. “Why did you come looking for me? I thought you didn’t want to be seen?”

I cross the room and pick up a napkin so I can smear any residual lip gloss off my mouth. “I don’t. But I also don’t like not knowing what you’re up to,” I say.

Her shoulders jut back, and she half rolls her eyes. “Oh, for crying out loud. I was just down the hall. I had to make contact with her some time.”

I eye her and toss the napkin in the trash. “You didn’t have to do it when you were out of my line of sight. I assured Ted you wouldn’t be any trouble. You might be planning on leaving soon, but I’m not.”

Her face relaxes a fraction. “If I’d stopped to ask your permission, I may not have gotten the information I needed in time. He’s going to be here soon. She confirmed it.”

Rather than feel pleased she didn’t risk herself needlessly, I remind her of my duty. “You just confirmed the man who attacked you is close by. If he sees you again, we’ll have no way of knowing what he might do.”

She huffs out a breath. “I need to stay close to Courtney. I think her mother has an idea she’s here to meet with Bryce.”

She looks so mad, I can almost picture steam coming out of her ears. “I’m not letting you out of my sight, Alessandra. If

you'd rather negotiate with your boss, go ahead and call him. Better yet, let him deal with this."

She doesn't say anything, but I can see her conjuring up all kinds of comebacks.

Instead of insulting me, she slowly walks across the room and stands directly in front of me so we're almost as close as before.

"I'm going to take a bubble bath. But don't worry, I'll leave the door open just in case you start fretting about me."

True to her word, she saunters into the bathroom and starts running the water.

With nothing else to do but wait, I take a seat, and try not to think about how many things could go wrong.

Bruce could show. Courtney could get wise. And I can't guarantee Alessandra I'll be there if either of those things happen.

I slump in my seat, run a hand through my hair, and wish I could call dad and ask him for advice.

I'm caught in my thoughts when out of the corner of my eye I spy her standing just inside the door and it's like someone knocked the wind out of me.

I knew she was beautiful, but seeing her undressing makes it a deadly kind of knowledge.

Her back is facing me as she ties her hair into a knot and slowly unties her dress so it slips to her waist.

My phone rings, but I can't stop looking as the fabric slips further down her body.

When her back is fully exposed, she wriggles her dress past her hips, giving me an excellent view of her toned ass and thighs as well as her choice of lacy black underwear.

My cock now at full attention, and with the sight of her standing in her underwear, and the taste of her still on my lips, I don't think I could stop watching her undress even if I wanted to.

She leaves her underwear on as she leans over the tub and pours bubble bath into the water.

I know she's doing it to prove a point, but I'm way past caring about right or wrong.

I shift in the chair, cock throbbing painfully as the fabric of her panties stretch tight over her ass.

My body twitches with the need to get up and go to her. Every reason I thought I was doing this seems to have faded into the background.

I'm no longer a deputy chief, I'm not doing this out of civic duty, or out of a need to protect everyone in my town.

I'm here because Alessandra is affecting me in a way no woman has ever done.

It's selfish, and crazy, and doesn't make any sense, but I want her.

Before the thought is even fully formed, she steps out of my line of sight, leaving me staring at the tub and feeling like I

just lost the warmth of the sun.

The seconds tick past, but my arousal doesn't fade just circles back to how she felt in my arms, how her tongue tangled with mine, and how much my body is aching to do it again naked.

My phone rings again, jarring me a little, digging into my skull, and poking my brain into action as thoughts other than Alessandra start to creep back in.

I glance at the screen and wince that I've ignored two calls from Levi. Considering the number of times I've chewed him out for ignoring me when he's been with a girl, the hypocrisy isn't lost on me.

I'm just about ready to give up and call him back when as if landing a knock-out punch, she appears wrapped only in a towel knotted at her chest.

Her eyes linger on me, and she leans in as if going in for another kiss. Her mouth is inches away from me as she stretches her arm out behind me as if searching for something to lean on.

"Let me know if Courtney leaves," she says.

With a coy smile, she shifts back, beer bottle in hand, and with all the confidence of a heavyweight champ having defeated a lesser opponent, she turns on her heel.



ALESSANDRA

I quickly check my wound is healing well before I slip under the water and cover myself with bubbles just in case Garrett decides to call my bluff and come in here while I'm soaking.

As I picture the pure expression of lust on his face, a twinge travels the length of me and heads right to the part that will get me in trouble.

I lie back, close my eyes, and wonder how long I can stay here before I get bored.

I'm more of a wash-and-go kind of girl. Long luxurious soaks in a six-foot claw foot bath never held that much appeal.

I don't even really know what possessed me to strip like that. If we'd really been working together there is no way I'd have done anything like it.

At the sound of him talking, my eyes open, and I have to strain to hear.

From what I can gather he's returning a call to one of his brothers, but when he stops talking but doesn't relay any information, my impatience gets the better of me.

I could call out but shouting anything in a bathroom that amplifies sound is never a smart move.

I sit up, wince a little as I bring my knees to my chest, and ball up a washcloth and throw it in the room to get his attention.

He takes his time coming in and when he appears at the door, he's carrying a look of annoyance, not lust.

“You want me to wash your back?”

I should have expected that, but the suggestion and the ideas that pop into my head makes my toes curl under the water.

“I heard some of what you said to Levi on the phone. Was it about Courtney?”

He tilts his head and frowns at me. “She’s booked an early surfing lesson with him tomorrow morning. She wants to go to the beach straight after breakfast.”

I’m so happy things are coming together, I’m not sure why Garrett looks annoyed with me. “What’s wrong?”

He stares at me for so long a chill runs down my exposed spine. “There’s only so much of this I’ll take, Alessandra.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks as I get his meaning. There’s nothing playful about the way he’s looking at me.

My voice comes out too throaty. “Before you do what?”

His eyes travel the length of my soap-covered body and his lip curls into a half smile.

Without a word, he steps back, and closes the bathroom door, leaving my question hanging in the breeze.

CHAPTER TWELVE

GARRETT

If kissing Alessandra confused me, and seeing her almost naked made me feel like a hormonal teenager, sharing a queen size bed is a special kind of torture.

I barely got any sleep, and I can't see how she's managed to. But as I lie awake, listening to her steady breathing, it's becoming more and more apparent I know next to nothing about Alessandra Eason.

From the second I saw her on the side of the road, everything she's done seems to have been carefully planned to throw me off balance.

But I refuse to let that happen again today.

While she's been sleeping, I've been brainstorming. And while she says she's happy with my strategy for tomorrow, there's a lingering doubt in my mind, she's going to do whatever it takes regardless of how reckless it is.

To set my mind at rest, I run over the plan I've set in motion one more time before I get up, and hope everyone does their part safely.

Weather permitting, Levi will be at the beach tomorrow. No one will be surprised that he's blown off group lessons for Courtney.

Even if I don't like him doing it, it would probably look worse if he *didn't* cancel because an attractive bored tourist wanted a one on one lesson.

Zane will be acting as back up just in case Bryce shows up and I need assistance.

As far as I can tell, I've covered all access points and made sure everyone knows not to engage.

There are two things I can't control. One is the weather and the other is Alessandra.

My growing feelings for her, and the tension between us is making me nervous.

I can't predict what she's going to do any more than I can guarantee it'll be sunny when I need it to be.

The best thing I can do is pray and hope she doesn't do anything that'll endanger herself, my family, or anyone else around her.

I fold my arms behind my head and try not to think about what happens if we manage to find Bryce Wade today.

If he's cocky enough to come out of hiding and visit his wife on the main beach, things will come to a head a whole lot quicker than I anticipated.

On the one hand, that means a fugitive is out of my Bay, but on the other, that means Alessandra will also be leaving.

I'm supposed to be thinking about the violent offender loose in our community but instead, I'm obsessing about Alessandra's long legs, and what it would feel like if she wrapped them around me.

Not surprisingly, I woke hard and had to call on every ounce of my self-control not to push the pillows we used as a barricade away and make use of it.

If flirting with her started out as a game, it's becoming a tantalizing one.

The only problem is, the more time I spend with her, the less I'm sure it's one I can win.

I give up trying to figure it out and drag myself out of bed so I can stand under a cold shower for a few minutes before she wakes up.

Ted and Marie serve breakfast at seven am, so I need to be dressed, and ready to sneak out in case they decide to service the room while Alessandra is eating downstairs.

I shower and dress quickly, pulling her trick and leaving the door open, more so I'll notice if she tries to leave without my knowledge.

Unsurprisingly, she's up and waiting to use the bathroom when I come out. Her hair is wild, and she's covering yawns as she stumbles past me.

"Morning," I say.

She raises a hand in acknowledgment and heads into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

I pack up my things, send a text to everyone involved in today's project and check the weather forecast before sitting at the table to wait for her.

She comes out twenty minutes later, already wearing a one-piece, flip-flops, and a sarong tied at her waist.

Her hair is up in a knot, sunglasses are on top of her head, and she's hooked a canvas bag over her shoulder.

"You know the water isn't going to be warm, right?" I say.

She nods. "I have no intention of going in. I doubt Courtney will either. She'll probably dip a toe in and spend the day shopping or drinking."

"And you'll be right there beside her?"

She adjusts the sunglasses on her head. "Of course I will. You and your team can still watch from close by."

That's not exactly what we discussed, and she damn well knows it. "We'll go over the details after breakfast," I say.

A look of triumph appears on her face making me wary. "We better sneak you out of here," she says.

I make it to the door before she does and open it a crack to check the floor is clear.

Courtney is standing two doors down, her back is turned, but it's evident she's waiting for her mom to emerge from her room.

I smother a curse and glance in the direction of my other means of escaping without detection.

With time ticking on, I take a breath, mutter a prayer and ease out of the room, leaving Alessandra to cover any sound I might make.

I've never been good with heights. Add in a slight issue with vertigo, a couple of close calls, and my dislike seems to be increasing with each birthday.

I glance at Alessandra and feel a modicum of relief she's not witnessing that my hands are shaking, and I'm starting to sweat.

I swipe my hands on my jeans, and when I hear a door open behind me, clamber out the window, and cling to the railing with a death grip.

I suck in a breath, trying to control my breathing, trying to stay calm as I twist my body so I can climb down the ladder to the street below.

As I find my footing, my stomach churns, and my limbs feel like lead as I force myself to move.

Thinking of Alessandra sitting alone in the dining room, I grit my teeth and make it to the ground without puking my guts out.

I bend over, leaning against the wall, sucking in gulps of air too rapidly as I struggle to compose myself.

As I jog around the side of the B&B, it dawns on me that not for the first time since meeting Alessandra, I'm completely out of my comfort zone.



ALESSANDRA

Breakfast was a bust. Courtney's mother wasn't happy with the fare on offer, so she left just as I sat down, making for an awkward apology to Marie Dawson.

With my impractical footwear slowing me down, I make it to my vehicle just as they speed past me.

I slam my hand on the dash, and curse aloud when I see Garrett trailing after them.

He even has the audacity to give me a friendly wave as he drives ahead of me.

Despite how annoyed I am at him for getting ahead of me, I can't fault him for doing what I wanted to.

I probably can't fault him for much at all. If I *was* working with him in a joint operation, he's given me numerous reasons to applaud his ability.

And he has agreed to let me bring Bryce in when he shows his ugly face again.

I follow Garrett's truck down the main street and am pleased when I see Courtney's red Prius pull into the parking lot of the Outrigger.

If Jax's breakfasts are as good as the rest of his food, it's no small surprise the parking lot is half full even at this early hour.

I have no idea how I'm going to have a meeting with Garrett if Courtney and her mother are eating in the restaurant, but I'm committed now, and so is Garrett.

I grab the closest spot I can to Courtney, note Garrett has chosen to park his car beside the beach, and check my reflection in the rearview before climbing out of my car.

At precisely the moment Garrett catches my eye and looks spooked, my side starts to ache as if forewarning me of a threat.

Instead of following Courtney, I divert to the beach, and walk straight past Garrett as he opens his trunk, cell pressed to his ear as though already talking to someone.

The second my feet hit the sand, I pull out my cell phone and am not surprised when it rings.

I press speaker and shield my eyes as if admiring the view. "What did you see?"

Garrett's only a few feet away from me, so I carry on walking in case anyone is watching.

"I'm not sure. Head to the lifeguard tower and wait for me," he says.

"This better not be a way to keep me out of the action."

He growls the words at me. "Do it."

I purse my lips together, pissed this morning isn't going nearly as well as I'd hoped it would.

But I slip my phone into my bag, ignore my impulse to go after Courtney, and walk in the complete opposite direction

that I want to.



GARRETT

I make sure Alessandra is heading away from the Outrigger before I close the trunk and walk towards the man I spotted smoking lurking near the entrance.

With his pot belly, scruffy beard, and tufts of hair poking out of his cap, he's so close to the description Alessandra gave me of Bryce Wade that with every step I'm positive he's going to stub out his cigarette and head inside after his wife.

But he's staying where he was. And even though none of them gave any signs of recognizing each other as Courtney and her mother just walked right past him, I'm still not willing to risk it.

When he just lights another cigarette using the end of his first and tosses the butt on the sand, I almost wish I could write him up for littering.

Instead, I walk parallel to him, slide my shades on and keep one eye on him as I head to the side of Jax's restaurant so I'm out of sight.

At the dumpsters outside the kitchen, I pull out my cell, tap out a message to Zane and Levi and hope they are in the area.

At a pinch, I know I could ask Jax to back me up but involving my cousin when I need him to possibly contain Courtney in the restaurant would be my last resort.

I wait for the reply to come in and am surprised when Levi answers first.

There in two.

I scan the beach to make sure Alessandra hasn't doubled back and let out a breath when I see her climbing the ramp to the lifeguard tower.

She sits down, places her bag beside her, and leans against the door. She's too far away for anyone in the lot to recognize her, but it's still making my nerves crank even higher as my suspect doesn't move.

I assess him again and note the bulky jacket he's wearing, the tight look on his face, and the way his eyes are darting about the lot.

Even if I wasn't on the lookout for a man fitting his description, he'd have gotten my attention. Zane's and maybe even Jax's too.

I'm still running through possible reasons for him to just be standing there smoking when I see Levi's truck speed into the lot.

I groan aloud as the man stiffens and drops his cigarette before stubbing it out with his heel as his hand shifts to his side.

Given he's now alert and looks about ready to bolt or pull a weapon, I'm pretty certain he's up to something he shouldn't be.

The door to Levi's truck opens, but it's not Levi that climbs out. It's a brunette with a bob hair cut, strappy sandals,

and a skimpy dress.

Definitely a Flatlander, and definitely another clueless one-night stand Levi's bringing to the Outrigger as compensation for never hearing from him again.

She giggles as Levi climbs out of the passenger side and joins her. I'm not close enough to hear what he says to her, but the guy I'm watching is.

As the brunette takes Levi's hand and tugs him towards the restaurant, he relaxes visibly.

I don't know whether to applaud Levi's ingenuity or smack him silly for it, but the girl wanders over to the man and blocks his view for a moment.

As she bums a cigarette Levi ducks behind a car so he's out of sight.

I try to signal him, hoping he'll recognize this isn't a game but give up when he just rocks back on his haunches and pulls faces at me.

Almost five minutes after Levi arrives, I see Zane on foot, dressed in his civvies and looking like he's just out for a stroll.

He positions himself behind the man, and as a trio, we wait for any sign this is the guy we're looking for.

Sweat is rolling down my back, saturating my t-shirt, and making it cling to me, but he still doesn't move.

Either he has his orders, or he's incredibly patient. He was there when I arrived, and by the number of cigarette butts on the ground he's been there long enough to smoke four.

Levi stretches one leg out, then the other and pulls a ‘what’s taking so long’ face at me.

Alessandra will be fuming by now. But I’d rather she was furious for being out of possible danger than walking right into it.

If this is her man, she can arrest him, *after* we’ve made sure he’s not carrying.

Zane’s too professional to risk making eye contact with me as he moves closer, but even he seems to be wondering what’s going on.

Sweat is beading on my upper lip, and the more I wait, the more I start to second-guess myself.

I take a quick look at the beach to check Alessandra is still out of harm’s way.

I do a double- take when I spy her strolling away with a woman who can only be Courtney Wade.

I’m still grappling with why Courtney isn’t inside when a door-slams draws my focus back to the parking lot.

A car has pulled up into the lot, its tinted windows preventing me from seeing its occupants.

My hand twitches on my gun, and my feet shift as Zane’s posture changes.

The man we’ve been watching slides his hand into his jacket moments before Zane starts to run, weapon raised towards the parking lot.

I look at Levi, and motion for him to stay where he is before I yank my own gun from my holster and yell the words as I break into a sprint, “Blueskin Bay Police Department, nobody move!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALESSANDRA

When I spotted Courtney sneaking out the rear exit for a cigarette, I couldn't believe my luck.

But when she saw me too, and she almost jogged to get to me, there was no way I was going to miss this opportunity.

“Hi ya!” she squeals.

I grin at her and climb down from where I've been sitting, bored out of my mind as I furtively watched Garrett assembling his brothers.

“Hi!”

“What are you doing?”

I grimace and follow her lead when she walks away from the restaurant. “I was planning on grabbing some breakfast with the guy I told you about, but he canceled just as I pulled up.”

She winces as she pulls out a packet of cigarettes. “You didn't want to get any breakfast at the B&B? I thought I saw you there.”

I sigh dramatically. “Oh I was just being polite. My boyfriend got me the room short notice.”

She fumbles with her cigarette and I instinctively grab her wrist to steady it so she can light it.

Her lips quick upwards and as I hold her hand, it’s trembling, and up close the thick layer of make-up doesn’t hide the dark shadows under her eyes.

A niggle of worry tugs at my midsection. She was cagey before, but she seems doubly so this morning. “Is everything okay?”

She lights her cigarette and takes a deep drag. “I’m fine. Same as you I guess. Guy troubles.”

Before I can get her to elaborate her face brightens. “Hey! I found this little cove yesterday, it’s really private, and I have some hash I’ve been dying to smoke. Want to come smoke it with me?”

Inwardly, I groan. Garrett’s going to be angry with me as it is for abandoning my post. I doubt he’d take kindly to me smoking weed on one of his beaches. “Won’t your mom be mad you’ve left her alone?”

But Courtney is not about to be dissuaded, she grabs my hand and pulls me further away from the restaurant.

“Oh, come on! I have a surfing lesson with this cute instructor in an hour, you can come to that too, mom let me off the leash and I want to have some *fun!*”

I grit my teeth but plaster a smile over it and add an unusually high level of brightness to my voice. “Okay!”

Like a kid let out of the house she slips off her shoes and breaks into a run. “Come on! Race you!”

I feign a laugh and use the one and only opportunity to contact Garrett by slipping my flip-flops off my feet.

As I place them in my bag, I haul out my phone and dial his number.

He doesn't even give me a chance to explain, I can hear Zane's voice in the background, and he sounds as tense as Garrett.

“I told you to stay put. What the hell are you doing?” he growls.

“What any good agent would do. So, if you're going to follow me, you better hurry up,” I growl back.

When Courtney spins on her heel and frowns at me, I press end call and switch my phone to silent.



GARRETT

As my phone goes dead in my hand, I turn around and try again to smooth things over.

Zane's glaring at me, and so are the two tourists who just happened to pick this morning to have breakfast with two old friends to tell them he'd lost his job and his wife all in the space of a week.

A small crowd has gathered outside the Outrigger, and diners are watching on as I try to find a way to apologize for

overreacting.

I've screwed up. Big time. I've embarrassed an innocent man, and his friends, and now I need to write it up.

There is no way I can stop the Chief from finding out about us working with Alessandra.

"Again, my deepest apologies," I say.

One splutters, his face still pale from having a gun in his face. "So much for small-town hospitality," he mutters.

To make it worse, the third friend is black. I can only imagine how bad this would look if we were accused of racial profiling and the press got hold of it.

I cringe at the thought and can't seem to find a reply that isn't going to sound too glib. My actions have cast the entire department in a negative light.

Thankfully, Jax steps in, making up for the annoyance on everyone's faces.

"How about three complimentary breakfasts? Anything you like."

The man I was so sure was Bryce Wade scowls in my direction, but nods. Probably unwilling to argue with the mountain of muscle standing in front of him.

They agree, and after a final look of disgust move off, avoiding a scowling Zane, and accept Jax's apology on my behalf.

"Send me the bill," I call.

Jax waves a hand in my direction as Zane and Levi approach. Zane annoyed, and Levi looking amused.

“As fun as that was, I need to book it. I have that surfing lesson to get to and I’m not set up yet,” he says.

I nod vaguely. “You have time. I just saw her disappear down the beach with Alessandra.”

His eyebrow hitches. “Then I’m going to get some grub while I can. Check in with you later. Maybe don’t try to arrest any more of Jax’s customers, eh?”

I ignore him. I’m more concerned about what Zane is going to say, and how loudly, so I gesture to my truck. “I need to get changed.”

Zane stays quiet until we reach my truck. “You fucked up. We need to report this.”

“I know.”

I yank off my boots, shirt and use him as a shield as I strip so I can pull my board shorts on.

“What are you doing now?”

“Blending in. Alessandra’s on the beach somewhere with Courtney, and I need to be too.”

He runs his hand over his head. “This isn’t like you, Garrett.”

I ball up my clothes, grab my towel, wrap my gun, and phone in it, and slam the door shut. “Leave the report for me. I’ll take care of it when I get back.”

He leans on my truck and shakes his head. “I don’t think so.”

I freeze. “What?”

Zane hardly ever backs down, and one look at the set to his jaw and I know this isn’t going to be one of those times.

“I’ll be writing this up.”

I lock eyes with him, and like always with him, it’s akin to locking horns with a bull.

How Felicity managed to get through his thick skull is completely beyond understanding.

Like he thinks he can intimidate me, Zane shifts his weight and places his palm on his weapon.

“If you write the report, you’ll leave her out of it to protect her, and I’m not going to let that happen.”

If he wasn’t here because I needed him, or maybe it’s because he is, it gets my back up even more that my brother is trying to out-manuever me.

“Don’t test me, Zane,” I warn.

“You need to call The Chief,” he says.

I walk away before we cause another scene in Jax’s parking lot.



I'm stoned, probably sun burned, starving, and way too relaxed when Courtney groans beside me.

"I should really get back to the main beach," she says.

I stretch a leg out in the sand and look out at the blue water lapping at the shore. "You sure you want to?"

Courtney sighs. "I told mom that's where I'd be now. She's probably waiting."

I feel so good, I turn on my side and barely feel the slightest twinge of pain as I look at her. "How come you're on holiday with her if she won't let you do anything?"

Courtney's so at ease with me now, she answers without hesitation. "We always come to Maine for our summer vacations."

I angle my head to study her and try not to sound like I desperately need to hear her answer.

"So, like, why's she so controlling?"

Her voice catches slightly, and she stares down at the sand. "She just likes to keep an eye on me. In case the guy I told you about turns up and takes me away from her again, I guess."

I'm so close to getting the information I need and not entirely in control of my tongue, so the words spill out before I filter them. "Why is that such a big deal for her? It's your life, right?"

She looks at me, and even with the drugs in her system, there's a hint of wariness in her expression. "He's done some bad things."

I hold my breath. “We’ve all done things we regret.”

She shakes her head. ‘No, I mean. *Really* bad things. Or at least he’s hung around people who have. You know, guilty by association,” she says.

I nod as excitement bubbles in my chest. “Yeah. I think I get it. People can be so, judgmental,” I say.

She nods as she makes a circle with her heel in the sand as she answers. “I know, right? He got mixed up with the wrong people and they took advantage of him. That’s all.”

At her continued caginess, I decide to play the sympathetic friend role. “Well, I still think it’s not fair. If you love this guy, and he loves you, you should be together.”

She sighs and slowly gets to her feet prompting me to do the same. “I’ll tell him you said that.”

Even in my sluggish state, my heartrate increases. “He’ll be here in the Bay soon then?”

Courtney nods and flashes me a smile. “He promised he would.”

I need to press her for more specifics but she’s already walking back toward the main beach.

“Gotta go get some food,” she calls over her shoulder.

I scramble to my feet, swaying a little as the effects of smoking weed, not eating and the sun take effect.

“Me too,” I call back.

I trail after her, willing my legs to move faster to keep up with her. With every step closer to the main beach, a little of

my buzz wears off and my nerves increase.

With Courtney sitting so close, I haven't checked my phone, so I have no way of knowing whether Garrett found Bryce or not.

If he has, this is over, but if he hasn't, I need to keep close to his wife.

As the parking lot comes into view, I squint to see if he's still in the same place he was an hour ago.

When I see no sight of him, I release a shaky breath and walk with Courtney as she heads toward a sign advertising surfing lessons.

"When did you hear from him last?" I say.

She looks at me and shrugs a shoulder. "Hey, we should exchange numbers," she says.

I smile as widely as I can and nod enthusiastically. Dual SIMs in the same phone can be a pain in the ass, but they can also be lifesavers.

"Totally. Maybe we could, like, have a double date in that cove again before you go?"

It's so absolutely ludicrous, I almost laugh out loud, but she seems torn as we pick our way through sunbathers.

"I really want to, but I don't think he wants me to tell anyone when he's going to be here," she says.

I frown and pull a sad face. "Aaaw. That's okay. But lets exchange numbers anyway. Just in case you can convince him to meet me and..."

As I scramble for a name, I can seem to think of anyone else and it makes no sense to complicate things anyway. “Me and *Garrett* for a picnic,” I say.

She smiles, and while we do the obligatory number swap, I check my messages and read a half dozen from an irate Garrett.

It’s difficult to keep smiling when the most cordial man you’ve ever met is sending increasingly agitated text messages.

Courtney lets out an odd squealing noise, drawing my attention away from the screen. “Is that your boyfriend? He’s looking right at you, hon. And he looks kinda mad,” she says.

I follow her line of sight and nearly drop my phone when I see a furious Garrett dressed in the same pair of board shorts he was wearing the day I met him.

“Wow. He’s *gorgeous*. Puts my Brycey in the shade that’s for sure,” she says wistfully.

She’s not wrong. Aside from looking angry, Garrett is giving off a smoldering vibe that is drawing a lot of lustful looks from women as he stalks past them.

My mouth runs dry as he stomps right past Levi and stops directly in front of me.

He looks at Courtney, gives her a wooden smile, then looks back at me. “Alessandra, I need to talk to you. Now.”

I release a tinkling laugh and hope he’ll settle for sitting near Levi so we can watch Courtney take her lesson.

“Only if you apologize for standing me up?” I say.

His brow creases and I’m a little worried I may be pushing my luck, but he smiles so tightly, his face must hurt.

“I’m *sorry* I stood you up. Now can we talk, please?”

I look at Courtney, but she’s already backing away. “Go ahead. I’m late for my lesson anyway. Text you later! Maybe we can have dinner together?”

I don’t have time to answer her, Garrett’s fingers close around my arm, and he tugs me away from any potential eavesdroppers.

I plonk down on my ass, and he tosses his towel on the sand beside me before sitting beside me.

“I don’t even know where to start. Aside from Zane thinking I’m having a nervous breakdown, I nearly arrested three innocent men because I was convinced one was Bryce Wade,” he growls.

My lips move but I wish they hadn’t. “*Are* you having a nervous breakdown?”

His mouth opens, shuts then opens again. “This is funny to you?”

I shake my head and try not to smile. “Not at all.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

My stomach growls loudly. “I’m so hungry. Can we talk about this *inside* Jax’s restaurant? I feel like pancakes. Does he make pancakes?” I say.

He squints at me, leans closer, and looks into my eyes. “What the—are you *high* right now?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Just a little bit.”

He groans. “Dammit it, Alessandra, I’m putting my reputation and my *career* on the line here, doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

His face has started to swim a little and I’m in danger of saying something completely unhelpful. “Of course, it does. It means a lot. Buy me some breakfast and I’ll tell you everything Courtney said to me,” I say.

His eyes find mine, and he releases a sigh. “Not here. We have some food back at the station. Levi’s lessons take an hour or so, you can tell Zane everything at the same time.”

He helps me to my feet, and I stagger slightly, enough for him to have to steady me.

It’s so similar to the situation we were in last night when I kissed him, a wave of lust swims through my body as I recall every delicious moment his lips were on mine.

His lip twitches and I have to wonder if he’s thinking the same thing I am when his gaze travels to the tops of my breasts.

“Morning, Deputy, don’t usually see you on this beach,” a woman says.

Garrett’s cheeks flush and he almost pushes me away. “Morning Ada,” he says.

She pauses and looks expectantly at him as he struggles for an answer.

Since he's got stage fright, I sniff loudly, drawing her attention, "Thanks for your help, I was so sure it was here, but I'll keep looking for my husband's wallet," I say.

When she still doesn't move, I dab my eyes. "It had all our money in it, ID's everything."

I feel a twinge of guilt when her expression switches and she pats my hand. "Oh, my, that's terrible luck. But don't you worry, Garrett and Zane will help you and your husband, where are you staying?"

I sniff again and don't even have to feign feeling weak at the knees. "I need to get you back to the station," he says.

She clutches her chest, offers to pray for me, and leaves Garrett to escort me away.

He looks sidelong. "That's going to be spread all around the Bay before the day's out, guaranteed," he says.

Sure he's being overly dramatic, I wave my hand in dismissal. "I'm sure she has better things to do with her time."

His reply comes out deadpan. "Spoken like a true Flatlander."

Regardless, we carry on the act, passing by Levi and Courtney as he gives her a very hands-on lesson on how to balance on the board.

Garrett stops beside his truck and opens the door so he can pull a shirt on.

When he cranks the passenger door open, and gestures for me to get in, I shake my head. “My car is over there,” I say.

He doesn’t move. “I’m not letting you drive under the influence. We’ll have some breakfast then you can go sleep it off at the B&B.”

“But—”

He narrows his eyes. “Or you could get behind the wheel and I could arrest you, either way works for me.”

I grumble a little but am too tired to argue. I got what I wanted from Courtney, I know Bryce will be contacting her soon, so I climb in, and let him close the door behind me.



GARRETT

She’s starting to fade as we drive down the main street. I’m still pissed off she’s put me in this position, pissed at her, and pissed at Zane for challenging my authority.

She spills out of my truck and walks on wobbly legs toward the station. At this point, I’m not sure if she’s faking it for sympathy, or genuinely feeling worse for getting baked in the morning sun.

I open the door, and ready myself for another confrontation with Zane when the smell of cinnamon and sugar hits my nostrils.

From the satisfied look on Dave’s face and the cinnamon scroll in his hand, Felicity has dropped by again, this time with

baking.

Unlike the last time, Dave doesn't complain, he's too busy gawking at Alessandra to care.

"Is there something I can do for you, ma'am?" he says.

There's so much hope in his voice, I almost feel sorry for him when Alessandra's eyes dart to the plate.

She pulls her shoulders back, smiles, and looks pointedly at the extra scroll on his plate. "Those smell *amazing*," she says.

Dave is on his feet instantly, offering her the plate. "Take it, I'm Dave, Senior Reserve," he says.

Alessandra smiles and snatches the pastry off his plate. "Garrett's taking care of me, but thanks."

Before he can say another word, she breezes past him and heads into my office a step ahead of me.

I shouldn't be surprised Felicity is in the office, but after Zane chewing me out over Alessandra, I'm not sure he's in the position to criticize.

Felicity's eyes widen as she takes in Alessandra, but Zane stops mid-chew, sits back in his chair, and crosses his arms.

"You look amazing. You're wearing the bracelet, too," Felicity says.

Alessandra holds out her wrist, showing off the bracelet Felicity made. "Of course, I am. It completed my outfit," she says.

Zane narrows his eyes, his posture rigid and unyielding as he glances at me.

“You found her, now maybe you can explain what is going on.”

Felicity’s brow creases. “Do I need to leave?”

Alessandra shakes her head at the same time Zane nods. Since I have the deciding vote, all eyes go to me, and as I’m the only one not eating, I grab a cinnamon scroll off the plate.

“She can stay. Alessandra, go ahead and tell us what Courtney told you.”

Five minutes and four interruptions by Zane later, everyone seems to understand Bryce is close by, and Alessandra will be leaving soon.

Diplomatic as ever, Felicity dusts the crumbs off her hands and looks at Alessandra. “I need to get to work. But maybe you could walk with me?”

Alessandra fails to get a word out before the office door crashes open, and Levi appears grinning, eating one of Jax’s breakfast sandwiches and smelling of coconut sunblock.

Alessandra pounces on him. “Where’s Courtney?”

He looks her over, his eyes lingering far too long on her cleavage before he answers. “Relax, darlin. She’s gone back to her room. She was toasted.”

Alessandra’s eyes shift to me. “Then I need to get back there too,” she says.

Felicity picks up her bag, giving Alessandra what can only be described as a conspiratorial look. "I'll go with her."

Zane looks less than pleased, but even he knows when he's outdone. He just accepts Felicity's peck on the cheek and aims all his aggression at me.

As the door closes on them, he sighs and steeple his fingers. "There's still the report, Garrett. We need to get ahead of this in case the tourists complain."

Levi takes a chomp of his sandwich, swipes the egg from his lips, and sits on the edge of the desk.

"What's the problem? You were just doing your jobs."

I scratch my chin as I try to explain this to him without making it sound worse than it is.

When I take too long to answer, Zane gets out of his chair and stalks to the window.

"We haven't exactly been going through the proper channels. The chief doesn't know anything about Agent Eason being in the Bay, and Garrett could get in a lot of trouble if a complaint is investigated," he says.

Levi gulps and seems to lose his appetite. "I mean, I get it, she's hot, she'd mess with both my heads, but she's not wreck your career hot, man."

Zane snorts. "That's what I've been telling him since she arrived."

I can see them gearing up to tag team me on all the errors I'm making, so I hold my hand up and preempt them.

“Fine. I’m sick of you second-guessing me. Go ahead and make some subtle inquiries about Alessandra, but don’t tip them off she’s here, got it?”

His expression darkens a fraction. “How am I supposed to do that?”

I finish the rest of my cinnamon scroll before replying. “No idea. But if you think I’m being influenced by her, this is your chance to prove yourself right,” I say.

While Zane looks equally perplexed and exasperated by the task I’ve assigned him, Levi is back to chomping through his sandwich. “I’m happy to stick close to Courtney. She’s bored, lonely, *and* she’s horny,” he says with a grin.

I hand him a napkin to wipe the bacon grease off his face. “Just let me know if she wants more lessons.”

He grins even wider. “Ayuh, she will. They *always* come back for more.”



ALESSANDRA

My legs are still a little unsteady as I walk, and even with the delicious cinnamon scroll in my stomach, I’m still ravenous.

I glance sidelong at Felicity and catch her looking at me. “What?”

She flushes. “I’m just wondering how you do it,” she says.

I frown at her, not sure what she's referring to. "Do *what* exactly?"

She gestures to my outfit. "I'd never be able to wear that. I don't have the confidence."

I shrug. "Courtney dresses like this. I needed her to feel comfortable around me."

It's not a long walk from the police department, so we reach the grocery store before she can ask me another question.

She doesn't come inside, just reaches for her purse to which I wave away. "I owe you for the bracelet anyway. Courtney loved it. It was a talking point," I say.

Felicity's brow knits, but she relents as a busty redhead calls her name. "Oh, crap. That's Nicki. Hold on to the test for me, and I'll get it as soon as I can."

I have no idea who Nicki is, but I step inside, eager to find more food to eat and to make good on my promise to Felicity.

The frosty air inside is a welcome reprieve after the heat outside; it wraps around me like a cool blanket as I head to the back of the store.

I grab a pack of three pregnancy tests, and on a whim, grab some condoms, a new toothbrush for Garrett and go looking for semi-healthy food to snack on.

When my basket is filled, I stroll up to the counter, stomach growling and my side beginning to throb a little.

Thankfully May isn't there, so I don't have to deal with her again.

I do however get a somewhat judgmental look from the grey-haired, overweight check-out operator as she scans the condoms and the pregnancy test.

I'm not about to try to justify myself, so I pay, and scurry out of the store, nearly knocking into someone as they enter.

I dodge him and hurry down the street, cursing my flip-flops and annoyed with myself for not taking my pain meds earlier.

By the time I've reached the B&B, and climbed the stairs, my side is pinching, my stomach is raw with hunger and my toes are aching from gripping the rubber beneath them.

Inside my room, I dump my supplies on the table, fish out a bottle of water, and after locating my pills from beside the bed, I swallow two.

A little too late, the wisdom of taking them on a mostly empty stomach and mixed with an illegal substance hits me.

I groan aloud at my stupidity and grab the sandwich, potato chips, and fruit I purchased in the hopes it'll offset the combination.

I make it through everything except the last part of my fruit salad when the room starts to spin, and I feel the floor slipping out from under me.

In a last-ditch attempt to stay awake, I crawl onto the four-poster bed, switch the TV set on, turn the volume up, pull out my cell phone and do the same.

A warm fog has settled in on me, and I'm struggling to keep my eyes open. My arms and legs feel like they've been chained to the bed, and I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to move from this spot even if my life depended on it.

I should have suffered through the pain. Anything would be better than lying here so stoned, I'm about to fall asleep.

A yawn overtakes my body, and even with the TV blaring, I know I'm not going to win this battle.

Before I give in completely to the drowsiness overtaking me, I grab my phone, squint at the screen, sloppily tap out a text, and pray it will make sense to Garrett.

The screen is getting blurry, and I'm paranoid I'm going to send a text to Courtney, so I send another one, hit send before I mean to, then forget what I said.

I give up, and just accept that I'm going to be out of action for the next few hours.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GARRETT

After delegating to Zane, what should have been my first priority when Alessandra told me who she was, guilt has started to press in on me.

But it's too late for remorse. Zane's like a Pitbull when it comes to his job. In the Marines it served him well, and that hasn't changed now he's working for me.

I leave him to it, and take a dozen witness statements with me and a laptop, so I can make good on my promise to help with paperwork.

I'm supposed to be on vacation anyway, so I don't bother to get changed, just park my truck up outside the Outrigger and grab my phone ready to call Jax to see if he can bring me something to eat one-handed in my truck.

A few messages have come in from Alessandra all in rapid succession.

But the more I read the clipped text, the more concerned I get. They are so bizarre; I'm wondering if it's a cry for help.

Banana on TV.

Fucking autocorrect.

Not banana.

Her final text is a bunch of random emojis.

I text her back and wait, toes tapping on the pedals as I grow more concerned for her wellbeing.

When my messages to her both go unread or unseen, I reverse and head back to the B&B.

I try calling her, but when I get no reply, I grab my gun from the glovebox, wrap it in a towel, jump out of the vehicle and run across the parking lot doing my best to conceal my weapon and my anxiety.

With a lot of activity going on, it's too risky to try to use the back entrance again, so I walk right up to the front door and hope I can bluff my way through needing to check up on Alessandra.

Ted is manning the front desk and looks up from his paper as I stroll inside. "Morning. What can I do you for, Deputy Chief," he says.

I nod my acknowledgment and lean against the counter. "It's about the woman I asked you to find room for," I say.

A smile starts to creep over his doughy face. He really needs to start getting in a little exercise and cut back on saturated fat.

"Ayuh, what about her?"

This is going to be about as awkward as it gets. Thankfully, Ted's more discrete than some in the Bay.

“I need the key to her room,” I say quietly.

His eyebrows rise in time with his mouth dropping. “You going to tell me why? Or do I not want to know?”

I work my jaw as I see visions of gossip spreading that I’m sneaking into women’s rooms.

“If it weren’t an emergency I wouldn’t be asking.”

Ted eyes me for a long while before nodding. “I know you wouldn’t be. And if it were anyone else, you’d be prying this key from my cold dead hands,” he says.

That he trusts me makes me feel even worse, but if Alessandra is in danger, I need to know, so I accept the key and promise to get it back to him ASAP.

I take the steps two at a time and hurry to Alessandra’s door in case I run into anyone else who knows me.

As I get closer to her room, the distinct sound of shots being fired makes me freeze.

I yank my weapon out, press my ear to the door, and listen for any sounds Alessandra has discharged hers.

Heart now beating painfully in my chest, I unlock the door, and kick it open, gun in hand as I scan the room.

Alessandra is sprawled on the bed, the television set on too loudly, and Bonanza is playing.

I release a shaking breath, and check that the rest of the room and bathroom is secure, before taking the key out and closing the door again.

I set my gun down on the bed, grab the remote and turn the volume down, and check on Alessandra.

Her hair has come loose and is covering half of her face and her pain meds are beside the bed.

At least that explains the text messages she must have sent me before she conked out.

Banana was probably her phone trying to spell *Bonanza*.

I'm pretty sure marijuana amplifies the effects of other drugs, and after a quick call to Carey's Creek ER, they confirm she could be out to it for some time.

They also recommend someone monitor her vital signs until she wakes up.

I get up, ready to go get the files I need when I spy a pack of condoms and a pregnancy test spilling out of the grocery bag on the table.

My eyes snap back to her, brain whirling with the possible implications of what Alessandra purchasing those two items combined might mean.

And for *who*.



ALESSANDRA

I wake, groggy, thirsty, cold and I'm starving again.

I groan and gently ease myself to a sitting position and find Garrett sitting at the table, now dressed in jeans, t-shirt and

boots, and he looks like he's been here for a while.

“What time is it?”

He doesn't look up from whatever it is he's doing. “A little after two,” he says.

Dammit! I've been asleep for nearly four hours!

I throw myself off the bed and put my hands on my hips as I question him. “Why didn't you wake me!”

His lips twitch as he looks up at me. “I *did*. You told me to get the hell away from you,” he says.

I frown at him and reach for my water bottle. “I did not.”

He puts his pen down and shakes his hand out. “Ayuh, you did. And after I made sure you were alive, I decided it was safer to let you sleep your cocktail off.”

His eyes drift to the pill bottle and I wince as I comb my hands through my hair. “Oh, right. I guess it wasn't the smartest thing to mix them,” I say.

He stretches his hands behind his back and eyes me. “It was stupid. You could have overdosed, and I'd have been none the wiser.”

I could scoff, or try to deny it, but if the shoe had been on the other foot, I'd be thinking the same thing.

“How did you get in my room?” I say.

His eyebrows drag together as he frowns. “I had to ask Ted Dawson for a key,” he says.

I snort a laugh before I compose myself. “Guess your reputation isn’t so squeaky clean now, huh?”

He smirks at me. “My reputation is fine. I told him you were mentally unbalanced and on drugs.”

My hands slide from my hips, and I gape at him. If he’s serious, and gossip spreads fast, all the locals in Blueskin Bay I meet will think I’m a lunatic. More importantly, Courtney might.

I nearly growl the words. “If that gets back to—”

“To Courtney? It won’t. I’ve asked Ted to keep it between us, and he will.”

I’m not so sure, but when he passes me my cell, I forget to be angry with him.

A text message is sitting on the screen from Courtney, and from the expression on his face, Garrett’s already read the invite.

“Courtney’s mom has a migraine, so she wants to have dinner and drinks with us tonight at the Outrigger.”

He eyes me and shakes his head. “Not going to happen.”

I sit on the edge of the bed and look at the text message. “She could be vetting me before she tells Bryce it’s safe to come get her, did you think of that?” I say.

He slides his thumbs into his belt hoops and shrugs. “I did. And that’s why you can’t go. I can’t keep an eye on you. Too many people saw me pull my weapon this morning. They also saw Zane.”

Even though it's painful to admit it, he may well have a valid point.

“Tell her you want to meet somewhere else. Somewhere I can keep watch.”

I spread my hands. “Where? The tavern looks skeezy and they only serve Fried Haddock Sandwiches.”

His lip curls in amusement. “Ayuh, The Sitting Duck is where Lobstermen and their sons all drink.”

At the odd expression on his face, I can't help but ask him about it. “Did you used to drink there?”

He smiles but doesn't answer me. “What about a cruise? There's a yacht at the jetty. I might even be able to find you a Captain and some lobster.”

My eyes widen and I say the first thing that comes to mind. “You continue to surprise me, hot shot.”

There's the smallest hint of mocking in his reply. “Likewise. You want to tell me why you needed condoms *and* a pregnancy test?”

Oh. Shit. Whoops. I forgot about Felicity.

“You were looking through my gear?”

He gestures to the bag of groceries he moved off the table. “Didn't need to, they were in plain sight.”

I'm not sure if I want to get into this, I barely know Felicity, but it doesn't sit well that Garrett might know she suspects she's pregnant before Zane does.

“Courtney asked me to buy one for her. Her mom’s watching her like a hawk and her period is late.”

His eyes don’t shift from mine, and I get a look at how he operates as a police officer.

He’s waiting for me to say something to incriminate myself.

I’m not above using my own techniques, so I don’t blink as I hold eye contact with him.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the condoms?”

His eye twitches. Then his lip. “They’re not for Courtney?”

Dammit. He got me. That would have made sense too. But I’m committed now so I keep my voice light as I reply, “No, Garrett, they’re mine,” I say.

He slowly stands, his eyes never leaving mine as he steps so close my pulse starts to speed.

His eyes drift over my face, languishing on my lips before he slowly leans in as though he’s going to kiss me.

Instead, his lips brush against my ear and his voice comes out husky and low, sending a shiver down my spine, and making my nipples stiffen, “Let’s hope you find time to use them,” he says.

He steps back, grabs the files he was working on, and is gone before I remember I also bought him a toothbrush.



GARRETT

I'm still smiling when I step inside the station but it vanishes when Zane has some bad news to share.

"The shoot's been changed to tonight," he says.

I dump the files on his desk and frown. "Why?"

"The photographer got a last-minute engagement party booking and she wants to shoot the last photos tonight."

I curse under my breath at my bad luck. "I can't tonight. Alessandra is meeting Courtney and I need to be there," I say.

He shrugs. "Not much I can do about it. You've already put her off for a few weeks. We can't delay any longer or we'll miss the print deadline."

I ignore the smug expression on his face. He knows I can't back out of it. Whether I like the idea of getting my photograph taken, it has to happen, not only will he make my life miserable but we'll have to refund money investors already spent.

"Is Felicity going to be there tonight?"

Annoyance flickers in his eyes, but he keeps his face impassive. "Yes, she is. She's helping Nicki with props. And she's spent enough time babysitting. If you're worried about leaving your FBI agent alone, ask Levi. He did his photo weeks ago when Becca was in Carey's Creek."

It's the height of irony he's recommending our womanizing brother. When push came to shove he had his own doubts about Levi keeping an eye on Felicity.

He takes my silence as the same reluctance he felt. “She’s a big girl, she can handle him.”

That makes me laugh out loud. “I’m not worried about Alessandra *handling* Levi. I’m worried about our brother handling her.”

“Ayuh. She’d give him a run for his money, that’s for sure.”

Multiple scenarios roll around in my head as I think about the conversations we’ve had. Considering she came out and told me she wasn’t interested in Levi, box of condoms or not, I’m confident she’s immune to his charms.

“Any progress with finding someone at the Boston field office?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve hit a wall of red tape. I doubt I’ll get anything over the phone.”

Given the annoyance in his voice, he’s dealing with the same attitudes and lack of cooperation I’ve encountered.

“Keep trying. Call the Portland office and use my name if you have to.”

We’re interrupted by a knock at the door and Dave steps inside.

“Call out for assault at the Sitting Duck. Looks like Eric’s boys are at it again.”

Zane curses and rises to his feet, grabbing the BBPD jacket off the back of his chair.

“You need assistance?” I ask.

There was a time sending Zane in to break up a fight would have led to an even bigger fight, but the military trained that out of him, and whatever spark remained, Felicity seems to have dampened down even further.

Zane looks more annoyed than concerned. “I’ve got it. You sort your shit out so you’re all ready for tonight.”

“As long as I have your assurances this is a one-time deal?”

He doesn’t give me any reason it won’t be, just calls over his shoulder as he walks out the door, “See you at the Surf Club at six. And don’t be late, she charges by the hour.”



ALESSANDRA

Garrett doesn’t return for almost an hour, and when he opens my locked door, I nearly jump out of my skin.

“Well? Did you arrange everything with the yacht?”

He sinks into the chair and nods. “Levi’s going to skipper for you.”

“Levi?”

He runs his hand over his neck and looks increasingly anxious. “He’s an excellent sailor and won’t mess around when it comes to safety.”

“Fantastic. I’ll text Courtney and ask her now.”

I tap out an enthusiastic text message, with an overabundance of emojis and cross my fingers that she'll go for it.

While I wait, I glance at Garrett. "Where will you be again?"

"Busy at the surf club until around seven. So don't take off," he says.

That doesn't make a lot of sense, he'll be close to the jetty, but he *won't* be able to offer back up?

"Is there a meeting or is it something else?"

"Something else," he says.

I have a dozen questions I'd like to ask him, but when he switches the TV on, it's apparent I'm not going to get to ask him a single one.

Courtney sends me her reply a few minutes later, and I can almost feel her excitement popping off the screen.

I'D FRICKIN LOVE TO!

I relay confirmation to Garrett, but he only looks marginally interested. "Are you going to tell me why you're so wound up? You look like you're about to face a firing squad," I say.

"Telling you won't make any difference. I'll still have to do it."

I frown at him, puzzled and intrigued by how stressed out he seems. Whatever it is, he doesn't want me to know about it. And of course, that makes me want to know even more.

In case he's playing games with me, I pause in my line of questioning and instead dig through the food I have.

I find a bag of buttered popcorn, rip it open, and offer it to him.

“How long will this ‘something else’ take you to do?”

He eyes the popcorn and scoops out a handful but doesn't seem particularly interested in eating it. “An hour at the most.”

My mind starts to scroll through the possibilities but when he gives me a ‘drop it’ look, I sit beside him on the bed, and watch the program he's chosen as a distraction.

Every so often, he checks the time, but mostly he stares straight ahead, idly eating popcorn and looking like a coiled spring.

So much so, he seems to have forgotten our earlier conversation, so I don't even have to worry about dodging the condom-shaped elephant in the room.

By the time we've finished the popcorn and he gets up to leave, I've made a decision.

Even if I have to get sneaky, I am *absolutely* going to find out what Garrett is doing in the surf club.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GARRETT

After stalling for as long as I can, I'm just walking out of the station when Zane rolls up.

From the looks of him, there was more than a bar fight to be dealt with and when I see Jax's vehicle pulls up alongside, I find out why.

Zane jumps out and scowls as he spots me. "You should have left by now," he says.

I tap my watch and look to Jax for an explanation as to why he's here. "I've got time. No arrests then?"

Zane grunts. "Nobody wanted to press charges. Mostly because Jax picked tonight to visit his competition and they thought he was my back up," he says.

My eyebrows hitch as I study Jax's impassive face. Since Jax never sets foot inside The Sitting Duck, his reason for doing so must have been important.

"I just wanted to talk to their old man," Jax says.

Zane gives me an 'I told you so' look as I connect the dots. Jax has always prided himself in looking out for the kids in

our community.

After rescuing Eric at sea a few months ago, Jax now thinks a part-time job at The Outrigger will keep him out of the same trouble his brothers wind up in regularly.

“Soon as this is done, I can talk with Eric’s fath—”

Zane cuts me off. “He won’t give you the time of day. He’ll just make up some bullshit excuse same as he’s been doing with Jax.”

I frown at him. “Regardless, we’re going to have to figure this out later.”

Jax isn’t happy with me brushing him off and I don’t really blame him.

Eric Junior’s behavior has been increasingly erratic and with little supervision, he’s fast turning into a carbon copy of his older brothers.

A few more years and Zane and I will be called to break up fights he’s starting.

Zane shifts his weight to one foot and looks over my shoulder towards the beach.

“What we need is a female officer on staff for delicate situations like this. She could talk to May,” he says.

I gawk at him, sure I misheard his use of the word *delicate* and deciding whether to laugh at him, but Jax is nodding about as vigorously as a man with a tree trunk for a neck can do.

“You two should get right on that,” he says.

With a nod at Zane and myself, Jax spins on his heel and climbs into his truck.

I'm still thinking about how I'm supposed to find a female officer when Zane slaps me on the back and points to the surf club.

"You're out of time, Mr. March," he says with a grin.



ALESSANDRA

I have to hand it to the Reid family. They certainly know how to pull out all the stops.

I know next to nothing about boats, but even I can see the yacht is impressive.

Courtney gapes at me. "Your boyfriend *owns* this?"

Since I was somewhat vague about the how and the why, I just shrug. "Let's just say he acquired it for the evening," I say.

Her brow wrinkles and her heavily glossed lips purse. "So, like where is he then?"

I gesture to the surf club. "Having some silly meeting he couldn't get out of."

Her eyes dart to the surf club. "And you're sure he won't mind me taking a look-see? I've never been on a yacht before."

I wave my hand as though dismissing the very idea. "He's still trying to make up for standing me up this morning for

breakfast.”

She giggles, but when Levi appears, grinning and dressed in a uniform and wearing a Captain’s hat, her smile turns shamelessly flirty given she’s supposedly waiting for her soul mate to arrive.

“Levi? Is that you?”

He tips his hat and grins at her. “I’m *Captain* Levi tonight. Can I help you aboard?”

He holds out his hand, and with his hair tied back, even I have to admit he does look the part.

Courtney accepts his hand, and totters onboard, allowing him to steady her, and giggling a lot while he does it.

She bats her eyes at him. “You seem to be popping up on my radar a lot today, *Captain* Levi,” she says.

Since my plan will work better with him distracting her, I step on board without assistance, so his full attention is on Courtney.

He grins playfully. “What can I say? I’m a lucky guy.”

While they flirt, I follow them to the stern of the boat, barely taking in the polished decking, how pretty the harbor looks, or the luxury surrounding me.

I’m not even troubled by Courtney’s blatant behavior, it can’t be easy being married to a man you haven’t seen in a year, and even harder when a natural-born lady killer like Levi has set his sights on you.

Now I've got her here, and she's relaxing, I'm desperate to get off the boat without compromising myself or placing Levi in danger.

I glance at him as he hands Courtney a glass of sparkling wine, and winks at me. "Everything okay?"

I should be joining them, but instead of stepping forward, my sandaled feet move back.

"No. I left my cellphone in the car and I wanted to get some photos," I say.

He waves his hand. "No worries."

Courtney is too pleased to be alone with him to mind if I disappear for a few minutes, so I leave them while I go take a sneaky peek at the surf club.

There are five vehicles parked in the small lot behind the club. Garrett's car is among them, the diesel truck belongs to Levi and I'm pretty sure the Ford Explorer is Zane's.

I check my wristwatch and when I see it's after six thirty, I pick up my pace. Just as I reach the lot, a door to the back opens, and the red head called Nicki who Felicity was avoiding comes out carrying a box.

I carry on walking as if I'm heading for the beach, then bend down as if adjusting my ankle strap.

Nicki scans the lot, frowns, and starts walking toward Levi's vehicle.

After dumping the box on his hood, she looks around as if expecting to see him appear.

For a second I think she's staring at me, so I straighten and carry on walking away from the surf club.

When I hear a car start up, and drive away, I spin on my heel and race back to the lot.

I make it to Levi's truck winded and as casually as I can, I pull the box towards me and peer inside.

The contents make little to zero sense to me. Whatever they've got going on inside it required a fireman's helmet and an axe.

I push the box back where I found it and make my way to the door Nicki came out of.

I open the door, and after a quick listen to make sure no one is coming, I step inside and try to figure out where a meeting might be held.

Voices draw my attention, so I follow them and find a place where I can listen.

"This isn't working. You need to *relax*, bub," a woman's voice says.

I freeze as I hear Garrett's clipped reply. "I'm *trying*," he says.

"I just need one good one, then you can go," she says.

My eyes just about pop out of my head as my imagination starts to run wild.

"What was wrong with the last one?"

She sighs. "Okay. Let's try something else. Open your mouth and massage your jaw for a bit, you're way too tense."

What on earth are they doing in there?

“Why didn’t Zane’s take this long? He didn’t want to do it either.”

What the literal fuck? *Zane* was with this woman tonight too?

“He was out quicker because I told him to pretend the only person who’d benefit would be his fiancé.”

“Doesn’t hurt she was in the next room and is the motivation for all of this,” Garrett says.

The woman laughs. “That too. So you want to try it? Is there a lucky lady you think would like this, bub?”

I hold my breath, far too interested in what he has to say.

“What about Jax? How’d you get him to take *his* clothes off and look like he’s enjoying it?”

My indignation that Garrett’s being forced to do something against his will compelling me, I step out from my hiding place and risk taking a look.

Inside a concrete-blocked conference room, a flimsy curtain has been erected, so I quietly push it aside just as I hear the distinctive click of a camera.

All the air leaves my lungs at the same time as Garrett’s eyes meet mine.

I don’t know what I expected to find, but it certainly wasn’t Deputy Garrett Reid standing completely naked in front of a short blonde photographer with nothing but his BBPD cap covering his junk.

My entire body flushes from head to toe, and I'm rendered speechless.

Garrett's lips curve into the slightest smile and the photographer starts to click like she's on a mission.

"Way to go Deputy! We got it," the photographer says.

She turns and grins at me. "Guess he did have a lucky lady after all," she says.

I gulp and back up so fast that I get tangled up in the curtain. While I'm fighting my way out of it, I can hear him thanking the photographer.

I manage to get myself out of the sheet only to have a robed Garrett grab my elbow and lead me out of the room into the club's changing rooms.

I sink down on to the closest bench and stare up at him. "Why?"

He grabs his clothes and shrugs his boxers on under his robe. "Fundraising Calendar," he says.

I can't even begin to imagine how desperate he was to do this. "Your boss *allowed* you to do this?"

"He did. We need money and this was our best option. We used to have a bachelor auction but that got canned after bad press."

My head is so scrambled, it's impossible to concentrate on what he's saying, and not picture him gloriously naked.

"And *this* is your solution?"

He sits down and pulls on his jeans. “It works. We’ve already sold enough pre-orders to fund SAR for the next quarter.”

I scrunch my nose up. “SAR?”

“Search and Rescue. We operate on a volunteer basis.”

I swallow hard as he takes a sip of water. When a drop spills down his chin, and he licks it off his lip, I accidentally moan.

When his eyebrow hitches, I laugh too loudly. “I should go. I just came by to...”

I can’t seem to finish my sentence. It hangs precariously as he studies me almost as much as I studied him moments ago.

“Came by for what? You’re supposed to be with Courtney.”

“I, uh, you were acting weird earlier, and I wanted to make sure you weren’t off trying to find Bryce,” I say.

His head cocks, and he unties his robe, reminding me of what I just witnessed. “Off finding Bryce in the *surf club*?”

“You could have been lying about where you were. I wanted to confirm it,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “So why didn’t you leave when you confirmed it? You must have heard me talking or you wouldn’t have come into the room.”

I refuse to admit I was there out of simple curiosity, so I stand up abruptly. “I need to go back. I left her with Levi.”

He moves just as swiftly as I did and blocks my exit. “Levi can deal with her for a few more minutes.”

When I don’t move, he brushes his thumb across my cheek. “You feel a little warm, Agent Eason.”

His touch burns my already blistering skin. “Of course, I do, it’s summer,” I retort.

His hand falls away from my cheek and a lazy smile appears. “The A/C is on.”

I follow his gaze and am annoyed at myself for not noticing sooner. “So what? I’m embarrassed. That’s all.”

His lips twitch into a suggestive smile. “I like this look on you, I think I was wearing it last night,” he says.

I swallow. Hard. But it doesn’t do me any good. My body is drifting towards his, the memory of his lips against mine propelling me into him, and at the look of lust reflected on his face, I know it’s true.

I *am* lusting after him. I was before I saw him almost naked, and now that I have, it’s only intensifying.

Worse than knowing he turns me on, is knowing I feel so good when I’m with him, that I don’t really care.

Heat rushes to my cheeks as need crowds out all logic. “Dammit, Garrett,” I whisper.

“You need to go,” he says.

I take a couple calming breaths, annoyed he’s thinking more clearly than I am.

I turn to move, but he catches my hand and grasps it tightly. “Do *not* go anywhere other than the yacht.”

I’m so flustered, I just nod. “I wouldn’t dare,” I mumble.



GARRETT

After thanking the photographer for the work she’s done, I lock up, and head back to my truck, and am still thinking about why Alessandra came looking for me when my phone blips.

Since its Zane, and he’s aware I’ll be spending the next few hours sitting here, I climb inside my truck and keep my eyes on the fifty-foot yacht I borrowed from an old friend of dad’s.

From where I’m sitting, I can see Alessandra sitting at the stern with Courtney, laughing and drinking wine.

“Ayuh?” I answer.

“Are you done with the photo yet?”

I recline my seat back a fraction. “Just finished. I’m in the parking lot keeping an eye on Alessandra.”

He mutters down the line. “You might need to leave. Dave was dealing with a drunk driver, forgot to switch the phones over, and missed a call from the FBI’s Boston office.”

I sit up a little straighter. “When?”

“An hour ago. You want the number? Or you want to wait till tomorrow?”

I grab a notepad and pen. “I’ll call now. Go ahead.”

When I have the details, I end the call and don’t hesitate to dial.

After seven rings, I’m about to give up when a gruff masculine voice answers. “Agent Carver.”

“This is Deputy Chief Garrett Reid from Blueskin Bay PD,” I say.

My eyes drift to the yacht. A twinge of guilt smacks into me for doing exactly what I promised Alessandra I wouldn’t.

“Are you there, Agent Carver?”

“I’m here. We’re short-handed at the moment, so your call got routed to me via Portland. I’m a little puzzled as to why you’re trying to reach our office in such an indirect manner regarding the case you closed out in winter.”

So that’s how Zane wrangled this phone call. I should be grateful but now I have someone on the line from Boston, but I wish I didn’t have to twist the truth to get some answers.

“I won’t keep you any longer than I need to. But I was hoping to talk to an agent working in the area.”

His reply is delivered with zero finesse. “Far as I’m aware we don’t have anyone in your area. What’s this about, deputy?”

I’m not getting anywhere, or any information I don’t already know, but if I don’t come up with a good reason for

calling, he might send someone to investigate anyway.

“I have a possible large-scale smuggling situation here, and my local CI wants assurances he won’t face federal charges if he gives me information on his supplier.”

His tone shifts slightly, and he obviously thinks I’m a moron. “That’s something we’d assess when we have all the information. Was that all? I should have been at home an hour ago. My wife is already pissed.”

I mentally cross my fingers and bluff. “I won’t keep you. I just need a name. Sounds like he’s worked with someone out of your office before. If I can confirm it with you, I’ll call them tomorrow and hand it over officially,” I say.

“Alright. You have a name for me?”

I pause like I’m searching for the name. “Eason. Alessandra Eason.”

When silence crackles down the line, my gut sends a warning something’s not right.

“Your CI is wasting your time.”

My heartrate jumps. “How so?”

“Agent Eason was suspended a week ago. I’ll have someone else reach out to you regarding your CI,” he says.

I don’t know what else he says, just that when I finally think to speak, he’s hung up on me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALESSANDRA

I'm a little tipsy, and almost positive Bryce is going to contact Courtney soon when we tip-toe past her mom's room.

After making her promise to text me if she hears from Bryce, I slide my key in the lock, open the door and nearly jump out of my skin when I notice a figure sitting at the table in the dark.

"We need to talk," Garrett says.

After taking a few deep breaths to calm down, I sit on the edge of the bed, switch the lamp on, and try to pull my sandals off my feet. "I agree. I think Bryce is going to show up soon. Courtney drank too much wine and let slip she wanted to be on the road with him before the weekend."

When he doesn't reply, I look up at him. He looks so angry, I stop trying to undo my shoes. "What's happened?"

"What's happened is you've been lying to me."

Oh, shit. "You called the Boston office, didn't you?"

He gets to his feet and starts pacing the room. "I'm such an idiot. No wonder you don't have your badge. They made you

relinquish it, didn't they?"

I freeze as a shudder of dread runs through me. Until now I hadn't realized just how good it felt knowing he was backing me up.

But that's not going to continue if he thinks I've broken his trust.

While my heart rate is speeding, I try to sound calm. "Let me explain," I say.

He doesn't even hear me, just walks back and forth, his hand on the gun at his hip, as he fires angry words at me.

"I placed Levi in danger, I wasted resources, nearly arrested an innocent man, I risked my neck, and for what? You're up to God knows what, manipulating me, and making me look like a prize asshole."

I get to my feet and pray I can reason with him. "Are you going to give me a chance to speak?"

He blows out a breath and turns to look at me. "Go ahead? I'd love to hear what you have to say."

Momentarily caught off guard, I flounder trying to think of the best way to explain my actions.

"You're trying my patience," he says.

That does it. All the pent-up anger and frustration inside me releases in one jumbled speech.

"I told you I didn't want your help, but you *insisted*. And this is why I didn't want any. You have no idea how things

work outside this cozy little bay and now you're pissed because I used *real-world* tactics."

He just stares at me, and I'm so riled up I launch into another rant that probably serves no purpose other than to make me feel better.

"Yes, I've been suspended, my pencil-pushing boss used my injury as an excuse to kick me off *my* case."

Garrett shifts his weight and glances at his wristwatch. "Four minutes till I place you under arrest," he says.

Shit, shit, and mega shit.

"Oh, come on! You're really going to arrest me? I tried repeatedly to tell you I didn't want help, but you just couldn't leave it alone. All I wanted was to find Bryce and make sure he was back under house arrest. I just wanted to complete the job I was given. What difference does it make if I'm on suspension? They'll lift it as soon as I get him back."

His jaw is working so hard that I don't think he's buying a single word I'm saying.

But I have to try. I can't lose his support now. Not when I'm so close to proving my boss wrong.

His tone of voice shifts completely, and it's so cold and so formal, a lump forms in my throat. "Tell me the truth. Why were you suspended?"

I swallow and try to keep my voice steady. "I'm not sure. They didn't tell me the details. My boss has had it in for me ever since he took over from my old one. Being dumb enough to let Bryce get hold of a knife sealed the deal, I guess."

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I frown at him. “Why *would* I tell you? I had no reason to trust you. You kept threatening to either call my office or lock me up. One of which you obviously did, or you wouldn’t know I’m on suspension.”

He eyes me, his face stony as he growls. “You aren’t expecting me to apologize?”

I’m not dumb enough to push my luck, even though I am hurt and pissed he called when he assured me he wouldn’t.

“No. I’m not. And I won’t be apologizing to you either,” I snap.

To emphasize I’m allowed to be annoyed at him too, I jut my chin out and square my shoulders, and lay it on as thick as I think I can get away with.

“Well? Are you going to arrest me for trying to do my job despite sustaining a grievous injury in the line of duty?”

He lets out a breath he runs his hand over his neck. “Arrest you? No. Too much paperwork. Drive you out of the Bay, I’m thinking it over.”

My pulse increases as no small measure of panic start to blaze to life.

“The second Bryce gets Courtney, he’s gone. Regardless of what you think of me, he is a valuable witness, and we need his testimony.”

His eyes narrow. “This has nothing to do with what I *think* of you. This has to do with fact. And that fact is you misled

me then continued to do so.”

“That’s ridiculous. You placed me in an impossible situation and forced me to accept your help.”

He chokes out a laugh. “I forced you *not* to stay in the Fisherman’s Cottage? Did I force you not to pass out while trying to tie your shoes? You needed my help, you’re a health hazard.”

Heat tracks over my cheeks. “And you’re a controlling self-important sexist pretending to be a nice guy.”

His nostrils flare as he fights to contain his anger. “Be ready to leave first thing tomorrow. I’ll arrange for someone to escort you out of the Bay,” he says.

My mouth flaps open, but he’s already slamming the door.

I throw up my hands and issue every curse word I can think of, but it doesn’t change a damn thing.

Garrett went behind my back and now I won’t have Bryce, but I will be in even more trouble.

I doubt he even considered that when he called to spy on me.

There is no way I’m just going to pack up and go without a fight. I played by his rules, and this is my reward?

I stalk to my bag, pull out the smallest of the listening devices I have, a receiver, and sprinkle water on my face, smudging my mascara in the process.

I grab my phone and tap out a text to Courtney saying Garrett and I had a fight and cross my fingers she’ll take pity

on me.

Her reply comes in confirming I can go to her room just as a phone call comes in from an unknown number.

I set up the voice recorder into my bra and answer.

“Hello?”

“Oh, hello. Is this Alessandra? This is May from the grocery store,” she says.

I’m so riled up, and so eager to get to Courtney’s room that it takes me a moment to connect her voice. “May! How are you?” I say.

“I’m fine. I just wanted to let you know I heard your mom is staying at Dawson’s B&B.”

It’s a little too late, but I ready myself to thank her when she carries on. “I meant to call you yesterday, but it slipped my mind. The only reason I remembered is a man came in asking about your mom just before closing time.”

This can’t be a coincidence. How many people would think to ask in a grocery store for information?

“Can you describe him?”

“Well, he was tallish, with dark hair and eyes, he wasn’t memorable as such, but he had a name that reminded me of Batman movies.”

I hold my breath as I try to sound casual. “Batman?”

“Ayuh. My youngest son loves comics. I scrawled it on a pad and Eric noticed it before I did. It wasn’t quite Bruce Wayne...”

I squeeze the phone so tight my fingers hurt. “Bryce Wade?”

“Yes! That’s it. Do you know him?”

I let out a shuddering breath as adrenaline surges through me.

“Yes, I do know him. Thanks so much for calling me, May. You’ve helped more than you can know,” I say.



GARRETT

I’m not a big drinker, but right now, that’s all I want to do.

I leave my truck where I parked it and walk to the Outrigger in the hopes the exercise and fresh sea air will calm me down.

If that doesn’t do it, talking to Jax will. My oversized cousin has the calming effect of a full day spent fishing.

As usual, it’s packed inside. Jax signs off around eight on Friday so he can avoid rowdy tourists who’ve heard about him, so I’m not surprised one of his bartenders directs me out back.

I wander to his poky office and find him sitting at his desk with Levi, still dressed in his sailing get up in the chair opposite, and they are both drinking glasses of rum.

Levi springs up from his chair and looks behind me. “Where’s Alessandra?”

I grunt a reply and accept a glass of Sebago Lake rum and sit in Jax's recliner. "She's back in the B&B," I say.

He sits back down, looking disappointed. "Pity. She was a laugh tonight on the boat and I'm pretty sure I have Courtney on the hook. When's the next babysitting mission?"

I swallow the rum in one gulp, barely tasting it. "There won't be any. Alessandra's leaving tomorrow," I say.

Jax pours me another serve. "You found your guy, and nobody told me?" Jax asks me.

I shake my head but don't have time to explain when my phone rings and I grudgingly answer it.

"This is Garrett Reid," I say.

"Deputy Chief? This is Special Agent Mike Carver. I'm here in Blueskin Bay. Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

What the hell? He's here? The guy must have hustled something wicked after we spoke on the phone.

"I can meet you at the police station," I say.

I can hear the hesitance in his voice. "I was thinking somewhere more discrete."

Great. More cloak and dagger crap. My patience is fast wearing out, so I glance at Jax.

"I'm at the Outrigger having a drink out back with two of my colleagues. That discrete enough for you, Special Agent Carver?"

I'm sure I catch a hint of annoyance in his voice, but he concedes. "I'll see you in five."

The second I end the call, Levi looks at me. "Since when are Jax and I *colleagues*?"

I toss back the last of my rum and frown at him. "Since I'm about to meet another FBI agent I can't trust," I say.

I have just enough time to fill them in before there's a knock at the door, and the same bartender who motioned me through pokes his head around the door.

"Some old guy looking for Garrett, okay to send him back?"

Jax nods his permission, and the bartender closes the door seconds before a fifty-ish man wearing a crumpled suit, enters.

I rise to my feet, and out of politeness extend a hand in greeting. "Garrett Reid. This is Levi and Jax."

His eyes barely graze over them, but I get the feeling he's taking in every detail in the room.

"And they'll be staying? I'm not sure I'm comfortable discussing this."

I offer him the seat, which he refuses so I decide to stand too. "Since you dropped everything to come here, I'm assuming time is a factor in why my phone call prompted a visit?"

He doesn't look pleased, but he can't exactly argue when he's arrived about as unceremoniously as Alessandra did.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a photo of Alessandra, likely the one that would be hanging on her ID badge.

“It might be. I checked through Eason’s past cases. It looks like your CI may have been correct about working with her before. I’d like to speak with them.”

I fold my arms across my chest as I try not to let my annoyance show he’s spewing out such obvious bullshit.

There’s no way Alessandra has been working in my area before. Aside from taking pride in having good relationships with all other law agencies in the area, she’s a beautiful woman, and that in itself would have gotten attention.

Either he thinks I’m a moron, or he thinks I’m lazy or incompetent. Either way, it pisses me off to no end he’s taking me for a fool.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, I’m still investigating and since you’re telling me Agent Eason isn’t an option, my guy isn’t going to talk to anyone but me.”

He doesn’t look pleased but nods as he tucks away Alessandra’s picture.

“I’m more interested in finding her right now anyway. Her credit card was used to book accommodation nearby and several purchases were made in the local grocery store in the last few days.”

“Do you have any idea what she might be doing here?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “That’s what I came to find out. But if she’s representing the Bureau while on suspension, I’m sure I don’t need to tell you the seriousness of that.”

Jax doesn’t move one of his sizeable muscles, and Levi’s stopped blinking. A sure sign neither of them trusts the guy standing two feet away from me.

I may be pissed at Alessandra, but I’m not an idiot. Getting suspended is one thing, having a senior agent show up alone looking for you is another.

I’m taking too long to reply, so he narrows his eyes. “If you have any information about her whereabouts, it’ll be better for you both if you tell me now.”

Jax rises to his feet. “That sounds like a threat.”

Carver flinches as Jax towers over him. “Not at all. Just a friendly reminder we’re all on the same team.”

Jax locks eyes with me. He doesn’t say a word. He’s not buying it, and neither am I.

For a man who wanted to get home to his wife a few hours ago, he’s remarkably committed to finding a junior agent.

Alessandra isn’t my favorite person right now, but if she’s in over her head, I don’t want to be the reason she drowns completely.

If he already knows she’s here, he will find her, and she’s so damn stubborn she’ll probably wind up getting shot.

As much as it pains me, I’d rather be involved when Agent Carver brings her in.

It's the only way I can keep her safe.



ALESSANDRA

I'm in Courtney's room, fake crying, and trying to find a place to plant the recording device I've already switched on before I'm kicked out.

"I think it's over. He was really mad."

Courtney's nails tap on the side of her wine glass. "I thought I heard arguing. These walls are like, really thin."

I nod. "They are. I hope you're having more luck with your guy?"

"Huh?"

"Bryce? I hope you've heard from him?"

"Oh right. Ooh! I know what'll cheer you up. Let's go skinny dipping," she says.

That's the last thing I feel like doing. I want to *stay* in her room not leave it. "I dunno. What if your mom comes looking ___"

She grins and gets to her feet. "Come on. It'll be fun."

I highly doubt that, but if she's busy taking her clothes off I may be able to put the listening device in her bag.

"Alright," I say.

She claps her hands, and grabs her bag, slipping her phone inside as she goes.

“We can go back to that cove again.”

I grin as enthusiastically as I can while she drags me out of her room. “You think we should get some more wine?” she says.

I shake my head. “I’ve had enough. Any more and I’ll be calling Garrett for some super-hot make-up sex.”

She giggles. “You should take naked selfies and send them to him,” she says.

At the mention of naked photos, it’s impossible not to think about Garrett and his naked pics and the comment the photographer made about me being Garrett’s lucky lady.

Not that I need to worry about any of that anymore. He’s made his feelings for me clear, and I certainly don’t need to be thinking about him naked.

It’s ridiculously juvenile, and probably the wine talking, but the idea of sending him a snap of me as a reminder of what he missed out on is appealing.

Ted Dawson is at reception as we leave, and eyes me with concern. “Everything alright ladies?”

I smile as brightly as I can. “We’re fine. Just out for a moonlight swim,” I say.

His eyes nearly bulge out of his flabby face, but at least I won’t have to worry about him or his wife if I’m not staying here anymore.

It’s darker than I realized outside, and it gets even darker the closer we get to the beach.

A little of my confidence ebbs as we walk further away from the main beach and have to rely on the moonlight to guide our footsteps.

In the daylight, the cove is the perfect place to relax but come night-time, the shadows and overhanging cliffs seem menacing and the perfect place for snipers to lurk.

It's not cold, but nerves are making shivers run down my spine as I undo my dress, and shimmy it down slowly in the hopes she'll change her mind.

In my peripheral vision, I can see she's stopped removing clothing and is shamelessly standing topless staring at me.

"What's that on your side? Did you get a tattoo or something?"

I look down at my side and the small bandage. "Uh, no. I just had an accident."

She moves closer, and peers at it then lets out a tinkling laugh. "For a second there I thought you had a wire."

I laugh along with her as she slaps a hand to her head. "Oh, right. Yeah, I totally forgot. How is that now? Did it hurt a bunch? Bryce felt real bad when he did it."

All the blood rushes to my toes as her words sink like lead balloons around me.

My voice comes out strained and small. "You know who I am?"

The sound of her laugh bounces off the rocks behind us. "Well, duh. I'm not an *idiot*," she says.



GARRETT

To make it look good, I leave Carver with Jax and Levi, while I pretend to make the phone calls I promised.

When I step back inside the office the atmosphere is frosty and it has nothing to do with the air conditioning.

Jax is a man of few words at the best of times, but his stony expression and Levi's pissed-off one means they aren't happy I might be landing Alessandra in it.

"Did you find her?" Carver asks.

I nod slowly and look at Jax and Levi and hope they know I'd rather not be cooperating. "She's at our biggest B&B. I'll go speak to the owner," I say.

Carver doesn't allow me to get ahead of him. "I'll follow you."

I glance at Jax and Levi and tap my fingers on my gun as I address them. "Be ready to move."

I exit the Outrigger quickly and make my way to my truck. Carver's hot on my heels all the way, riding my bumper as I start to pray Alessandra isn't going to make this even harder.

With my stomach in knots and my heart in my throat, I park outside and check I have plenty of ammo and my cuffs before I jump out of my vehicle.

Carver shadows me as I open the door to the B&B, walking so close I know he trusts me about as much as I trust

him.

Ted's on reception and he frowns as his eyes shift from me to Carver beside me.

I'm about to preempt anything he might have to say but he speaks before I can.

"She's not in her room," he says.

I curse under my breath and step closer to the counter.

"Do you know where she is?" Carver snaps.

Ted's eyes narrow and he doesn't answer, just looks at me. "It's important we find her," I say.

He pointedly ignores Carver and answers me.

"She's gone swimming with her friend, Courtney," he says.

Carver mutters something under his breath and looks at me. "Where is safe to swim at night?" he says.

I lower my voice so Ted doesn't hear me. "We'd be better off waiting until they come back."

Annoyance flickers over his face and his voice comes out agitated. "I'm not risking her running. For all I know she's packed and ready to leave."

He's in such a hurry he barely acknowledges me or explain why he's concerned just hurries back outside.

"Everything okay, Deputy Chief?" Ted says.

I nod. "Ayuh. All good. I just need to check Alessandra's room."

He shakes his head but goes back to the crossword puzzle he was working on.

As I climb the stairs, I pull out my phone and dial Levi. “Agent Carver just left to look for Alessandra. I need you to follow him.”

“On it. You want me to call Zane?”

“No. Leave him out of it. But stay well back, and don’t approach him.”

“Zane gave me a—”

“Leave it in your glove box. You won’t need it.”

Giving Levi permission to carry a weapon is like letting him loose in a nunnery.

He might have the best intentions but when Levi gets pumped for action mistakes get made.

I can’t afford any tonight.

“Zane won’t like you leaving him out of this,” he says.

“I know. But I’ll call him when I need him. Stay in touch,” I say.

I end the call and cautiously make my way toward Alessandra’s room. The sound of an argument makes me freeze.

The door opens and Courtney Wade’s mother steps out, looking distraught as she dabs a tissue to her red-rimmed eyes.

Everything happens in slow motion, I see Bryce step out of the room, hear his sharp intake of breath, and see his eyes

widen as I reach for my weapon.

Ida screams, and ducks back inside her room just as Bryce makes a grab for his own weapon.

I have no time to think, acting on instinct alone, I sidestep, and press my gun against his temple as I yell, “Blueskin Bay Police Department, drop the weapon!”

The gun thumps to the carpet, and he starts peppering me with questions. “Where is she? She’s supposed to be *here*.”

Adrenaline is surging through me as I kick the gun away and shift back. “Put your hands on your head. *Slowly*,” I say.

He does as I ask, his eyes darting about as doors start to open as people get curious about what’s going on.

“Stay in your rooms,” I bark.

The last thing I need right now is more distraction. I snap the cuffs on Bryce and spin him around and check his pockets for ID.

With his face rammed into the wall, his voice comes out muffled. “Where’s my wife? Is she okay?” he says.

He’s not carrying any ID, which tracks with what Alessandra told me. “Your wife is fine for now anyway. She’s with Agent Eason,” I say.

His eyes widen before he starts to chuckle. “No fucking way. She made it here? You gotta let me see her. I need to explain.”

I shake my head and pull out my cell ready to call Zane and tell him I have Bryce and need his help processing him.

“That’s not going to happen. She’s in a lot of trouble because of you.”

His smile disappears. “How so?”

“She’s been suspended and there’s now an agent here looking for her.”

He stares blankly at me. “They’re all in Mexico.”

I’m not about to have an argument with someone I just placed in handcuffs, but my belly is sending me warnings I decide not to ignore.

“Special Agent Carver isn’t,” I say.

Bryce bangs his head against the wall. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Courtney must have called him. She’s going to wreck everything,” he says.

As curious as I am, I need backup so I can go looking for the other piece of this puzzle.

I get my phone out and Bryce shakes his head. “Does he know where Courtney and Alessandra are?”

My finger hovers over Zane’s number. “He’s out looking for them,” I say.

He releases a sigh. “You cannot let him find Courtney *or* Alessandra. Bad things will happen in your nice little Bay if he does.”

“You want to elaborate?”

He glances at the gun on the floor and then grimaces. “Carver’s not just here looking for my wife. Alessandra is the real fly in the ointment,” he says.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ALESSANDRA.

Sweat has started to roll down my exposed back and my heart is thrashing painfully against my rib cage.

“You *knew* who I was all this time?”

“Not right away. You look different. But Bryce sent me a picture of you just in case you figured out he’d come looking here. He said you were smart and kinda relentless. I think he had a crush on you.”

I shake that idea off. “Why did you keep hanging out with me? Why not text Bryce and leave?”

She shrugs. “I was bored and kinda lonely. And I couldn’t tell Bryce. He uses those burner phones so I can never reply. He just told me to come to Blueskin Bay with mom like we usually do and wait for him to come find me.”

I groan aloud. “What do you think is going to happen now, Courtney?”

“We can still go skinny dipping,” she says.

I choke out a laugh and reach for my dress. “No, I mean what’s Bryce’s plan?”

She sighs as she eyes the ocean. “He’ll be here tonight. Then we can all go get the money and then we all disappear just like Bonnie and Clyde.”

I frown at her. Wondering which part of that puzzling sentence to address first. “Bonnie and Clyde both *died*,” I say.

She giggles. “Oops. Maybe the three of us can just make it look like we died then.”

“The three of us? You’re not including me in this?”

She grins. “No! I’m including Mike Carver. Mike says Bryce will be okay with us splitting the money three ways.”

Mike? Mike? *Michael* Carver, my recently demoted boss, and the reason I was given Bryce’s case, Mike?

Mike says they’ll split *what* money three ways? Since when was there money?

I tie my dress back up and try to sort through what on earth is happening.

I thought I’d been so lucky being given so much responsibility but now I’m not so sure it wasn’t for nefarious reasons.

“Carver is setting me up,” I say.

She shrugs. “Now you don’t have to be in the FBI. You could look at it that way?”

I groan and try not to smack her senseless. “Why did Bryce stab me?”

“I told you. He likes you. He didn’t want you to get in trouble, he thought if you were injured no one would believe

you were involved.”

That does make sense. And we did get on, oddly. But I had no inkling Mike Carver had been talking to Bryce.

“I’m *not* involved,” I grumble.

Courtney pulls a face as I try to think. Unfortunately, the more I do, the more I see all the pieces fall into place.

Mike recommended me, then he was demoted. I thought his growing distance from the division over the past year was due to his workload when in reality he was distancing himself from *me*.

My pride and ego made me an easy target. I was so cocky, so positive I deserved a promotion that I never questioned anything.

Tears prickle in my eyes as I try not to let emotions take hold. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Courtney wrinkles her nose. “I don’t know. Maybe because it’s almost over.”

The penny drops.

“Mike’s here, isn’t he?”

She nods. “He said to call him the second I knew when Bryce would be arriving, but when I called, he said the police here already asked him to come. Isn’t that great?”

Unbelievable! If Garrett had let me bug her room when I wanted, I wouldn’t have walked into this trap.

“You brought the money to Maine with you?”

She lets out a tinkling laugh. “I don’t have any money. I just have a key to some box thingy.”

“What kind of box *thingy*?”

She shrugs. “I have no idea. And I don’t even have it anymore. Bryce made me give it to mom. I’m always losing things.”

I groan. No wonder Bryce was looking for Ida. “Does Mike know your mother has the key?”

She shakes her head. “Should I tell him?”

I take a breath and try to think of a way to tell her as simply and concisely as possible.

“The second he gets his hands on the key, he’s going to kill you, Courtney. He’ll also shoot Bryce and maybe your mom,” I say.

Her brow wrinkles. “Why would you say something so horrible? He promised me Bryce would be okay with splitting the money,” she says.

“Mike used you, Courtney. He lied to you and made you feel important. Just like he *used* me,” I say.

A second thought makes me feel like throwing up. “I’ve made it worse for myself by coming here.”

He can kill Bryce and Courtney, leave Garrett and Zane to clean up the mess, and he can blame me, the rogue FBI agent for it all.

He can spin it any way he likes. Make it look like I went off the deep end because Bryce stabbed me, and I was left out

of the search for him.

Or he can say I allowed Bryce to escape, and planned to meet him here.

Mike must have been overjoyed when he realized I was here because I'd located Courtney.

I reach down and grab my bag. "We need to go. I have to let Garrett know what you just told me," I say.

She doesn't move and seems confused. "But what about our swim?"

I pick up her bra and toss it at her. "If Mike finds Bryce, he'll be looking for us next."

When she still doesn't move and just lets her bra fall on the beach, I dig into my bag and pull out my cell phone.

"The coverage isn't great here, Levi said the cliffs block it or something," she says.

I squint as I try to make out the signal strength. "Get dressed. We need to get moving," I say again.

I can almost make out her pout. "I dunno. I really wanted a swim before we left," she says.

I'm so past the point of caring, I dial Garrett's number and snap at her. "Put your fucking clothes on Courtney. We are *leaving*."

I jam the phone against my ear and press my finger in the other so I can hear if there is a dial tone.

I can't hear a damn thing, so I look at my phone and curse when I see the call hasn't been connected. Paranoia and fear

mix into one as I push my phone back into my bag and pull out my gun instead. Courtney lets out a squeak of fear as I slide my bag over my shoulder.

I spin around checking no one is creeping up on me and motion for her to follow. “Come on. We’ll head back to my car then I’ll call Garrett for backup,” I say.

It takes me another five minutes to convince her she’s in as much danger as I am, but she gets dressed and reluctantly starts to follow me.

When the main beach is in sight, and only sand dunes are flanking us, I haul my phone back out again and breathe a sigh of relief the signal is stronger.

Still walking, I press the phone to my ear and pray Garrett isn’t mad enough to dodge my calls.

Even with the backdrop of the ocean dimming the volume, I can hear the anger in his voice. “Where are you?”

A part of me is miffed he’s taking that tone when I have something critical to tell him, but the smarter part of me knows to override it.

“Walking back to the beach, I think Bryce is—”

He interrupts me. “There’s an FBI agent named Carver looking for you.”

A shiver tracks down my back. Carver’s so confident he can pin this on me he went directly to Garrett. “What did he tell you?” I say.

Garrett ignores the question completely. “I’ve been trying to reach you for the past thirty minutes. He’s watching your car.”

Any pleasure I felt that he’s warning me is lost when I look around me.

The only exit is over the sand dunes, and I have no idea where that will lead. Maybe if I was alone, I’d risk it, but Courtney is a civilian, and I have a responsibility to keep her safe.

I lower my voice, so she doesn’t freak out. “If Carver heads down the beach, we have no way out of here.”

Garrett’s answer isn’t unexpected, but it doesn’t fill me with as much hope as I wish it did.

“Stay where you are. And I mean it, Alessandra. I’m going to rappel down the cliff face. If you aren’t there waiting for me, I’ll hand you over to Carver myself,” he growls.



GARRETT

I call Jax immediately and can’t believe I’m saying the words aloud. But if Alessandra is near the cove, she’s right. She’s boxed in, and if Carver gets to her first there’s no telling what he’ll do.

“I’m driving to Marina’s Cove. I need to borrow a climbing kit from SAR and some camo gear from the office,” I say.

He doesn't miss a beat. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

True to his word, while I've been studying the route, Jax pulls up in just under nine minutes.

I stand in front of his truck before he hits the brakes, switches his flood lights on, and jumps out. He reaches into the back and hauls a bag out and dumps it on his hood.

He lists the items as he pulls them out, laying them out in front of me. "Ropes, Harnesses, Belay, Carabiners, Top anchor, Helmets, and radios," he says.

He pulls out an FN Ballista sniper rifle and slides it over his shoulder. "A present from Zane," he says.

I have so much adrenaline flooding through me, my hands are shaking as I pick up the radios. "You called him?"

He nods and starts putting a harness on. "He's on standby and will meet up with Levi."

After a nod of acknowledgment and three attempts I get my own harness on, I pull my helmet on, switch the headlamp on, and take a tentative step toward the cliff.

Jax sets up the ropes through the anchor, feeding them to me as I get my tether ready and leave my backup untied from the rope.

I clip the rappel device to my belay loop with a locking biner, then pull up a few feet of both strands of rope.

It's heavy, so Jax holds the rope up so it's easier for me to clip in. When he's ready, I use the slack to create two small

bights in each strand and orient the brake on my dominant side.

After checking the rappel device is set up correctly, my biners are locked and I have an autoblock set, I blow out a breath, and check Jax is all set too.

With one hand firmly on the brake strands in a locked-off position, I undo the tethers connecting me to the anchor.

It's too dark, and the cliff face too unstable for us to rappel backward, so I go face first, praying the entire way down, for me, for Alessandra, for anything to keep my mind off plummeting to my death and winding up smashed to bits for my family to clean up.

Just like I had to for mom and dad.

I make my way methodically, concentrating on what I'm doing, the only sound my yelling, "Off rappel," to Jax and his returning reply.

When I reach the bottom, I'm covered in sweat, my legs and hands are cramping and I'm thanking God for getting me down.

I have just enough time to unclip myself when Jax glides down effortlessly free rappelling before he lands elegantly on the sand.

He's mid-way through unclipping himself when a scream makes us both freeze.



ALESSANDRA

“I need to pee,” Courtney whispers.

From where I’m crouching behind some scrub, I frown at her. “Then go. But be quiet. We’re hiding, remember?”

Movement catches my eye just as Courtney starts to stand. “Get down,” I hiss.

But it’s too late, a shadow on the beach stops and looks in our direction before the beams from a flashlight land on Courtney.

Courtney blinks, and instead of doing anything sensible, she looks down at me for direction giving my position away entirely.

“What do I do?” she asks.

From the beach, our intruder breaks into a jog, his flashlight bobbing as he moves closer. “You know this isn’t going to end well,” he shouts.

Anger and fear bubble up inside me as I recognize Mike’s voice.

I grab Courtney’s hand and yank her hard. “Get down before he shoots you,” I say.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I yell at him.

“Taking a hostage is the worst thing you can do right now,” he shouts back at me.

Courtney rocks back on her heels, tugging her hand from me as she gasps. “I’m a *hostage*?”

I mutter under my breath. “He’s trying to mess with you, you aren’t my hostage,” I say.

In the moonlight, she tilts her head at me. “So, I can, like go?”

I cover a groan and try not to lose my temper with her. There’s a reason Mike was able to manipulate her. She’s so completely gullible she’ll believe anything.

“I know he made you promises, but he’s a liar. You can’t trust him. I’m trying to keep him from hurting you and Bryce.”

She frowns. “But you’ve been lying to me too. And Bryce did say if you showed up *not* to go with you,” she says.

Before I can try to reason with her, she’s on her feet and raising her hands. “Don’t shoot me! I just want to see Bryce.”

She runs down the sand bank, flailing and blocking my view of Mike and giving me no chance to try to shoot.

The second she’s close enough, he drops the flashlight and grabs her. She lets out a yelp as he jams the gun against her temple. “Throw your weapon down and your cell phone or I pull the trigger,” he snarls.

I smash my fist into the sand as I desperately search the area for any signs of Garrett.

There’s no way he could have gotten here by now. I’m alone out here, with no backup.

An idle thought rolls into my brain as I try not to let panic take hold.

If I'd come clean with Garrett, and worked with him instead of fighting against him, we would have found Bryce, and Courtney would have spilled the beans.

Now, if I make one wrong move, Courtney will die, and it'll be because I lied to the most honorable man I've ever met.

I have no choice but to do what Mike says and leave my hiding spot.

I slowly rise to my feet, arms raised as I prepare to toss the only lifelines I have away. "She doesn't know anything, Mike. You must have figured that out by now," I say.

He doesn't engage me. "Get rid of the phone and your gun and don't try anything, I know all your tricks," he shouts.

That pisses me off. Mostly because it's true. He does know them. But he doesn't know I'm recording and if the quality is as good as I hope it'll be, I'll have both Courtney and Carver on record admitting the part they played in Bryce's escape.

More importantly, he has no idea Garrett is on the way, or that his family is Maine's version of the A-Team.

I take a breath and toss my gun as far as I can. "Keep your hands up, and walk towards me," he says.

I keep my hands up and do my best to walk, but my dress keeps tripping me, so I growl at him. "I need to hold my dress up or I'm going to fall on my face."

He's managed to pick up the flashlight again, and once he's verified I'm telling the truth, he shouts back at me, "Do it one-handed," he says.

I glare at him, and I'm sure I hear him chuckle as I hitch the dress into my underwear using one hand.

I linger at my crotch and pray he'll be so focused on watching what that hand is doing he'll neglect to watch the other.

I place my hand on my head and pull out the tiny canister of pepper spray I hid in my hair and tumble down the dunes towards him as sloppily as I can, wedging it into my hand as I go.

As I get closer, I can see the terror on Courtney's face and the amusement on Mike's. "Surprised to see you're moving at all, let alone wearing this get-up," he says.

"Must be the sea air," I say.

He laughs and almost seems sorry. "You really are a hard ass, Eason."

"I should be. I learned from the best," I say.

His smile slips, his grip on the gun loosens, and for a moment I think there's a chance to turn this around.

But then Courtney speaks, ruining the moment. "Where's Bryce?"

Mike's face hardens and presses the gun harder against her head. "I'll find him later. Where's the key?"

She whimpers and I flinch at how far he's willing to go for money I didn't even know about.

"How much is there?" I ask him.

His gaze is unwavering and without a hint of regret. “Fifty-seven million,” he says.

I suck a breath in through my teeth. There’s no way he can hide that much money and still live a normal life. Maybe that was the plan all along? Abandon everyone and everything?

“Fifty-seven million to betray your country,” I say.

Anger flashes across his face before he aims the gun at me. “You don’t get to sit in judgment of me. When you’ve given thirty years of your life to the government and they bench you, you’ll see things differently too,” he says.

I should keep my mouth shut, I need him to talk but I’m so pissed he’s trying to justify what he’s done I spit the words at him, “I will never see things like you.”

He backhands me before I can dodge it. Instead of fear, rage starts to burn in me, and I blast him with the pepper spray.

I manage to punch him in the throat, but he’s too fast, even struggling to breathe, he lashes out at me and hits me square in the stomach.

I drop to the sand, sucking in breaths as pain tears through my side, and I fight not to pass out.

“You can’t win this,” he spits.

I look up at him through watery eyes and choke back bile as my vision swims.

“I looked up to you. All the times I wanted to quit, you were there to encourage me and tell me I needed to stick it out, was that just so you could pin this on me?”

His jaw works, and he rubs at his eyes. “It wasn’t meant to go down the way it did. June was threatening to leave, she’d had enough, said she’d wasted her life waiting for me to put her first,” he says.

I glance at Courtney, praying she’s not going to ruin this by opening her mouth; but she seems to have been shocked into silence.

“So this was your solution? Give Bryce a weapon then tell him to stab me? Were you waiting in the parking lot? Is that how he was able to get out of the building?”

He nods, and even in the moonlight I can see glimmers of the man I trusted, and admired so much.

“You always did ask the most inconvenient questions, Eason. I’m not the only one who’s noticed,” he says.

The gun he’s holding has a hair trigger, if I so much as breathe the wrong way, it’ll be over before I can blink.

“That’s why it was so easy to get me suspended? I’ve been asking the *wrong* questions?”

A faint smile appears. “You forgot the golden rule. If you want to advance, don’t upset the apple cart.”

I risk a soft laugh. “I never was good at following rules.”

He locks eyes with me, and I’m sure I catch a moment of hesitation as he raises the gun. “I am sorry, Eason. I’ll make sure you come out of this looking golden.”

“Golden but dead?”

His head cocks to one side. “That’s the way it has to be.”

I swallow hard, my bravado disappearing as I look to Courtney but she seems to have already checked out.

My heart is thumping so frantically in my chest, it's difficult to know if the roaring sound in my ears is the ocean or my final moments on this planet.

I take my final shaking breath and thank the Lord above at least I died with my boots on the ground, facing my murderer and not begging for my life.

Just as I've resigned myself to my fate, the smallest amount of movement makes my stomach drop to my toes.

Garrett is approaching, face blacked out, looking like a cross between a Ninja and a SEAL as he approaches from behind.

With the covering of the waves rolling in, Garrett has crept in, and possibly overheard some of the conversation.

Whether it was arrogance or overconfidence Mike didn't think to check his six.

"Drop your weapon, we have you surrounded," Garrett growls.

Right on cue, Jax emerges from the darkness carrying a semi-automatic rifle, dressed in full camo and looking reminiscent of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his action flick hey day.

Carver's eyes lock with mine, desperation swimming in his as he grapples with the decision to die or face the consequences of what he's done.

“Is this really what you want to do?” I say.

His eyes water and pain mingle with the hopelessness in his eyes. “Another fucking question,” he says.

A shot rings out, and I leap forwards as Mike sinks onto his knees clutching his hand.

I kick his gun, and a lot of sand away from his reach as my eyes dart to Jax who shrugs one hefty shoulder. “Finger slipped,” he says.

Approaching from behind, Garrett growls at him, but I doubt he’ll be angry Jax was so quick thinking Mike only has a hand injury and not a critical one.

The sound of the gun firing seems to have snapped Courtney out of her stupor.

She starts screaming at Garrett, and at Jax as two ATVs appear, red and blue lights flashing.

Garrett calmly steps away and glances at me. With his face hidden, it’s hard to tell whether he’s angry or not.

“Are you okay?”

I nod and pull out the tiny bug I had hidden in my bra. “Voice recorder. Thirty two feet range. It should have everything.”

His lip curls. “We’ll talk about that later.”

My shoulders sag. “Oh, I’m sure we will.”

Both our attention is drawn away as Levi jumps down from one of the ATVs and surveys the carnage and whistles. “I missed all the action, again,” he says.

Zane doesn't seem as bothered to have missed out, just stands by as Garrett starts issuing commands. "Levi, get Courtney back to the station and tell Dave to put her in the same cell as Bryce. I'll be there ASAP. Zane, you take care of Carver and watch him close. Jax give me a hand with Agent Eason, I need you to take a look at her wound."

I shake my head, but Garrett isn't taking no for an answer. He stalks over to me and grabs me by the shoulders as if about to shake some sense into me.

"You *still* don't trust me?"

With the war paint on his face and the evidence of how far he'll go to see justice served, I'd be a fool to deny he's trustworthy.

"I don't trust that Carver won't do something stupid," I say.

The corner of his lip curves and all traces of the nice guy vanish as his anger rises to the surface.

"Then do what I'm asking so I can get this motherfucker out of my Bay before he does," he growls.



GARRETT

After making sure Alessandra went to her room, I'm too jacked and too pissed off to trust myself to process Carver, so I leave it to Zane and sit outside, so I can clean my face, and think about how I'm going to explain all this away.

When nothing comes to mind, and Levi trots out and joins me, I give up trying to find an argument to excuse everything I've done.

“Zane managing?”

Levi chuckles. “Carver isn't. He wants a lawyer,” he says.

I lean my head back on the wall and look at the B&B to see if Alessandra's light is still on.

Levi follows my gaze and nudges my shoulder. “Why aren't you with her celebrating catching all the bad guys?”

“I needed a breather. Feel like I can't catch it when she's around.”

Levi's uncharacteristically quiet as we both watch the window. “You're *really* into her, aren't you?”

I sigh. “Ayuh. I am,” I say.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Not much I can do. She's leaving,” I say.

He stomps hard on my foot. “You just climbed down a cliff in the dark for her but you're not going to tell her you dig her?” he says.

I kick his foot away and try to shake off his comments. “We both have responsibilities,” I say.

He scowls at me and looks way too much like Zane. “I don't get you. If I found a girl I was prepared to face my greatest fear for, I'd chase her hard and I wouldn't stop until I reeled her in.”

“Women aren’t fish, Levi. This is a little more complicated than that,” I say.

He shrugs. “If you say so, Chief.”

“Stop calling me—”

He grins and I know that by telling him not to he’ll just keep doing it, so I let it go.

We’re still sitting there five minutes later when Zane comes out and slides his ass down the wall to join us.

“He’s a piece of work. Still trying to tell me your agent is part of it. Even with her recording, it’s going to get complicated.”

Levi shifts forwards so he can look at Zane. “Better not call Alessandra *his* agent. He’s too chicken to go tell her he’s smitten,” he said.

Zane cocks an eyebrow but doesn’t pay a whole lot of attention to Levi, just keeps talking. “Bryce gave me a statement earlier. He didn’t want to testify, and he didn’t trust the FBI to take care of him. He figured his best chance for survival was to say he’d stashed some money. All he had to do was wait for someone greedy enough to take the bait.”

Another flickering of anger burns reminding me again I’m glad Zane is here to handle this.

“*Is* there any money?”

“There is. But not in the amount Carver thought. Just enough to get Bryce and Courtney to South America.”

“So...Courtney was Carver’s insurance? Bryce gave him the slip too, so Carver contacted her instead,” Levi asks.

Zane nods. “Ayuh. Not just a pretty face then,” he says.

Levi flips him the finger. “Speaking of pretty. It’s still early and there are plenty of pretty tourists at the Outrigger,” he says.

Before he moves to go, I slap my hand on his forearm. “You’ve got a brain in that head, how about you use it,” I say.

He slaps his hand down on my mine and grins. “And you’ve got a dick, how about you use it before it rusts off,” he says.

Zane laughs as Levi jumps to his feet before I can punch him. I glower at Zane, and he gets the hint and gets to his feet.

“I’m going to have to pull an all-nighter. I still have to take Courtney’s statement, and now her mother’s camped out in the office.”

I groan and haul myself to my feet. “I’ll go ask Jax if he can back you up. I’ll come back and take Ida’s statement and advise her not to leave the Bay. If we’re going to make any of the charges stick, her testimony will be crucial.”

He hooks a thumb in his belt. “I can take care of all of that. You need to have a conversation with the Chief. He’s called three times.”

“In the morning. I want to make sure Agent Eason is okay,” I say.

His eyes drift to the B&B. “You know, I can count the times I’ve heard you use the word ‘motherfucker’ on one hand.”

I run my hand over my neck and feel my shoulder muscles protest at the movement. “I let it get personal.”

He turns to go but pauses. “Maybe it needed to get personal. Maybe you need to lose your shit on occasion.”

“You’re *agreeing* with Levi?”

His lips curve before he shakes his head. “Forget it. Go grab some sleep. I’ll call if anything happens.”

I extend my hand. “Watch your back.”

He slaps his hand into mine. “Always.”

Now I’ve stalled as long as I can, I head back to the B&B, still trying to figure out who to listen to, what to say, and what to do about how I feel.

I’m about to open the door when Jax exits, carrying his medical bag, and minus his camo paint.

“How is she?”

He slings the bag over his shoulder. “Tired. Bruised. But her stitches held. I had a confab with the doc and gave her something a little stronger for the pain. She’ll probably be out till morning.”

After the day I’ve had, it’s about the best thing I’ve heard. I’m in no mood to argue with her about anything.

“I hate to do this, but I’m still short-handed.”

He slaps me on the shoulder. “You better go. If she wakes up and you’re not there, she’ll come looking for you,” he says.

I smile. That’s exactly what she’ll do.

After thanking him for his help, I head into the B&B and am relieved Ted just waves me up rather than engaging me.

“Go up before Marie sees you. She’s not happy you yelled at our guests,” he says.

I do as he says, make a mental note to send a bunch of flowers to Marie and a bottle of rum to Ted, and hurry upstairs.

I sneak inside the room, holding my breath, until, in the dim light see Alessandra in bed, sound asleep.

I pause to look at her, and at the bruising marring her beautiful face, my fists curl at my side.

It hits me. What I’ve been running from. What I’ve been pushing down.

All the rage, all the frustration, starts to unravel as I see myself leaving the B&B and walking back into the station.

I picture smashing my fists into Carver’s face, hearing the bone crunch beneath my knuckles, and know if it came down to it if there wasn’t anyone there to stop me, I’d do it.

I take a final look at Alessandra, and head into the bathroom, so I can make the phone call I’ve been putting off.

“What in the hell has been going on?” The Chief yells in my ear.

“Everything will be in Zane’s report. I’m calling to resign.”

My voice bounces around the room, and the words stab into my chest as my motivation reveals itself.

Resigning won’t fix anything. I know it won’t. But I compromised the integrity of the office for a woman I just met, and I need to be held to account.

“Garrett, I know this has been a hard couple of years for you. But let’s not jump the gun.”

My voice cracks. “I’m no longer fit for this position. I need to tender my resignation.”

“No,” he says.

His response momentarily throws me off, and I repeat his response. “No?”

“No. I’m not accepting your resignation, Garrett. I can’t,” he says.

I rub my head and try to convince him he’s better off without me.

“I conducted an improper investigation and used resources and manpower without—”

His response is as droll as he is. “I’m about to hand in *my* resignation. We can’t both resign.”

I slump against the wall. “If you resign, I’ll have to offer the position to Zane, and we both know he’ll hate it. You’d be punishing him as well as the entire town,” he says.

“I wasn’t impartial or logical,” I say.

“Sounds like your instincts were right on point regardless. This is an important case. The FBI let slip the CIA has an interest in Bryce Wade too and they’re pissed Eason found him first.”

I curse under my breath. “This isn’t going to go well for her, is it?”

He chokes a laugh. “She doesn’t have a chance. She’s a junior agent caught right smack in the middle of an inter government agency pissing match.”

“You really think it’s that bad?”

He coughs a laugh. “Put it this way. The sooner she leaves the Bay the better.”

I mutter a few words, say goodnight, and feel so shitty I hang up wishing I’d never bothered calling him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALESSANDRA

I wake, groggy and feeling like someone stomped on my face.

Garrett's asleep beside me, face pressed into the pillow and his arm wrapped around it.

Beside me, my phone vibrates and since Courtney is locked up and Garrett's in bed beside me, there's not a lot of people it can be.

I move away from Garrett, and reach for my phone, wincing as I feel the results of Carver's punishment last night.

There's a text message on the screen, signaling a phone call is to follow most likely from my very irate boss.

Calling as soon as I get to Boston. I want an explanation and it better be good.

I pull a face and place my phone back on the nightstand as quietly as I can.

Garrett stirs beside me, opens one eye, and gives me a smile that makes me wish we were waking up together under different circumstances.

“Hope you don’t mind?” he says.

I roll on my side and plump my pillow so I’m facing him.
“I don’t mind. You did save my ass last night.”

He smiles. “You sleep okay?”

I nod. “Like a log. Did you tell Jax to slip me a sleeping pill?”

Garrett laughs. “Didn’t need to. I think your body had had enough.”

He’s not wrong there. My body has been through a lot of trauma over the past week. I’ve not been paying it the attention it deserves.

With that thought, my mind starts to wander to the fact I have a very sexy man lying next to me.

One I’ve been flirting with and fantasizing about enough to purchase a box of condoms.

Condoms that are within easy reach.

There’s no easy segway from small talk to dirty talk, so I clear my throat and hope I don’t look as bad as I think I do.

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to you last night,” I say.

He props himself up on one shoulder, back to looking serious. “That was intentional on my behalf,” he says.

My stomach twitches. “You were avoiding me?”

“Just an argument.”

I chew on my lip and decide to let that slide. “Who’s watching Carver?”

“Jax. He’s wearing earplugs. Levi got drunk and decided to sit outside Carver’s cell and sing all night,” he says.

I laugh so loud, I have to grab my side. “Your family is one of a kind,” I say.

He smiles. “So are you.”

There’s no way I can laugh that off. Not when he’s in my bed, and not when he’s looking at me like that.

“So now what?” I say.

His eyes roam over my face before pausing on my lips. His voice sounds flat as if he’s as torn about this as I am.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. You got what you came here for. You can leave the Bay,” he says.

“I need to speak to my boss. He’ll probably send someone here to pick everyone up.”

“You still aren’t fit to drive back to Boston. Either he arranges a driver for you, or I will,” he says.

I’m not even sure I want to ask. Saying goodbye is hard enough, driving out of here without Garrett at my side to share the glory feels wrong on so many levels.

“Would *you* be free to drive me back to Boston?” I ask.

“That depends on what happens when we get to Boston.”

“I guess, I show you my apartment, make you dinner and we take it from there,” I say.

His lip curls, but there’s something in his eyes that make me certain I’d be making a huge mistake in thinking we can

keep this casual.

My phone buzzes just as I'm considering how long it'll be till my next lot of vacation days.

I moan and apologize as I reach for my phone trying not to sound like I'm lying in bed with the Deputy Chief.

A familiar voice growls down the line. "I just got a call from some hick town Chief in Maine saying he's arrested Mike Carver for attempted murder, and they also have Bryce Wade in custody."

I ignore every last word he said bar the final thing as I glance at Garrett and cover the speaker, "You didn't put in the report that I was the arresting officer?"

As my boss continues to yell down the line at me, reminding me I'm on suspension, Garrett just gives me a look that makes my insides melt. "We couldn't. The arrests wouldn't have been legal," he says.

Inwardly I smack myself on the head because he's right. "Thank you," I whisper.

My Section Chief shouts down the line so loud, Garrett hears every word.

"Are you hearing me? Four agents are on the way. They'll deal with the locals and with the mess you've made. This never should have gone out of the department. Now I've got the CIA interfering, you know how much I hate Spooks, Eason."

My cheeks heat as anger fights with my desire to finally have my voice heard. "I told you I had—"

“If you want to save your job, you better be in Boston by the time I land. And do *not* bring anyone from Maine with you, there are enough fingers in the pie as it is, got it?”

I glance at Garrett. “The Blueskin Bay Police Department was instrumental in—”

“Do I make myself clear?”

I can’t look at Garrett as I answer. “Yes, Sir. I understand completely,” I say.



GARRETT

Alessandra runs her fingers through her hair and flinches. Given her boss didn’t stop to ask her if she was okay, I doubt he’ll care if she’s aggravated the wound she sustained less than a week ago.

“So that’s that then?” I say.

She throws me a look. “Don’t start, okay? I can plead my case and let him know how helpful your department has been when I see him.”

I don’t even know where to start with that statement. “You think I’m worried about how my *department* looks?”

She climbs out of bed, wearing nothing but her underwear, giving me a good view of her incredible body, and the damage she received last night.

I throw the covers back and find my jeans so I can yank them on. “Your boss may not be worried about you, but I am.”

“I’ll be fine.”

I stand and look at her, incredulous that she’s okay with walking away under these circumstances. “I’m driving you,” I say.

She shakes her head and sits to pull a pair of jeans on. “I can manage,” she says.

Considering she looks like she’s about to pass out, she probably won’t make it to Carey’s Creek.

“It’s not up for debate. I’ll drive you as far—”

She stops mid-buttoning of her shirt and looks at me. “Please don’t do this. It’s hard enough as it is.”

I should have guessed she’d breeze out of my life as quickly as she breezed in.

“I want to clear my name,” she says.

I sit on the edge of the bed and watch her as she starts to pack up. “Are you sure you can trust the Bureau? If they need to pin this on someone, you’re the best target.”

She doesn’t look at me, just jams everything into her overnight bag, in such a hurry to leave, she almost seems to be talking to herself. “I’m not going out like this. I’m not going to lie down and take it.”

She’s so set on getting her credibility back, so sure the blame lies squarely on Carver’s shoulders, she’s not even listening to anything I’m saying.

“Carver won’t get away with it. Bryce won’t either. And I’ll make sure you get the credit you deserve.”

“Alessandra, slow down and *think*. How many allies do you have left in Boston? How sure are you they aren’t complicit in any of this?” I say.

She starts to mutter as she sorts through her overnight bag. “I should probably try to figure out who they are sending here,” she says.

When I don’t say anything, she finally gets the message she’s having a one-sided conversation.

She pulls her shoulders back and swallows. “You think they’re going to throw me under the bus along with Carver, don’t you?”

I watch her closely for her reaction. “If you’re lucky they won’t file criminal charges.”

She blows out a breath and then takes several more as if trying to calm down. “I’ll get a lawyer. I’ll be fine.”

I slowly shake my head. “Only you would think you could take on the Bureau and win.”

Her cheeks flush, and she sits to slide on her sneakers. “I’m not saying the odds aren’t stacked against me, I’m saying I’m not giving up without a fight.”

As she struggles to put her shoes on, everything inside me is aching with the desire to help her one last time.

Out of pure mutual stubbornness, she gets them on, and I finish getting dressed so I don’t make an even bigger ass of myself by trying to reason with her.

She heads into the bathroom and comes out a few minutes later, smelling of toothpaste, with her hair pulled into a ponytail.

As she places her holster on, and the same jacket she was wearing when she arrived, she looks every inch an agent.

She picks up her bag, does a final check of the room, and gives me a tentative smile.

“I’ll pay the bill before I leave.”

I nod and go for professional rather than indifferent. “Stay out of trouble.”

She pauses, reaches into her coat pocket, and hands me a new blue toothbrush. “You needed one,” she says.

I don’t know whether to thank her or give it back to her instead, I extend my hand.

She accepts the gesture and slides her fingers into mine. “Thanks for risking your neck for me.”

“Any time.”

I hold her hand a microsecond longer than I mean to and have to use every mental resource I have to let go.

Her hand is already on the handle when she turns and looks over her shoulder. “See you later, hot shot,” she says before she walks out the door.



As if leaving him this way wasn't hard enough, the agent waiting outside the B&B makes it ten times worse.

He's a shade under Jax's size, wearing a badly fitting suit, and is about as friendly as I'd expected.

"I'll be escorting you back to Boston," he says.

His expression stays the same, but from the cold shoulder he's giving me, Garrett may be right.

"I'd like to stop by—"

"My orders are to escort you without delay," he says.

"Right, and you aren't willing to deviate from those orders one iota?"

He doesn't even bother to acknowledge me, just gestures to the parking lot.

I hold my anger in check and walk back as slowly as I can just to piss him off.

Another agent is waiting in his car and the second he sees me, he starts the engine.

Gritting my teeth, I climb into my car, and as soon as I'm behind my wheel, I pull out my cell, punch in a number and buckle up.

It rings for so long, I have no choice but to start my engine, and pull out while I wait for Greg to answer.

Greg Hoskins is a Computer Scientist in the Cyber Crime division and the closest thing I have to a friend in the Bureau.

If anyone is going to let me know how much shit I'm in, he's going to be the guy.

He answers as I'm driving past the Police Station. "Hey," I say.

"So now she calls me back. I've been trying to get hold of you for days. I came to visit you in Boston General but they said you'd checked out?" he says.

"Yeah. Sorry. I didn't want anyone to know where I was going. Just in case."

"Ah, yeah. Now I get it."

"How bad are things looking?"

"On a scale of one to ten? Ten being the worst? We're at a six right now."

I glance in the rearview and glare at the car behind me. "But I brought Bryce in? And Carver?"

"Yeah, and everyone's in a flap over it. Trouble is, this isn't Mission Impossible, you can't just drop off the grid and go all vigilante."

I almost hate to ask. "What are my chances of keeping my job?"

He takes his time answering. "Depends on which way the wind is blowing. You might get lucky and get bumped down to cyber and wind up working with me," he says.

I groan. "Just for doing my job?"

"Yeah, but you were *suspended*, and you just showed how disorganized the Criminal Investigative Division is, what did

you think was going to happen? A Ticker-Tape parade?"

I curse under my breath as every decision I made comes back to haunt me.

I thank Greg for the update and promise to call him when I hit Boston so we can have a beer.

I press end call just as I reach the stretch of road where I first met Garrett. On my wrist, the bracelet Felicity made me catches the light and sends prisms of purple, pink, and green over the dashboard.

My eyes flick to the rearview again, and annoyance surges through me as I see the agents tailing me like I'm a criminal.

After what I've been through, surely the Bureau owes me more than to be rushed out of town without a chance to say goodbye to the people who helped me?

And I owe Felicity more than a goodbye. I still have three pregnancy tests sitting in my bag that she won't get to take.

My foot eases off the accelerator and I start to slow down. I can't just run out of town without giving them to her. It's downright rude.

But it's more than that. A knot has wedged itself firmly in my stomach and with every passing mile, it gets worse.

I *want* to know if she's pregnant. I *want* to eat Jax's amazing vegan creations again, and I *want* to see if Levi's as good a surfing instructor as he thinks he is.

I also want to face the owner of the Fisherman's Cottage and make sure no one is duped by him again.

Even Mr. Grouchy himself, Zane is growing on me.

I need closure. If I run out of town now without so much as a goodbye to the people who selflessly helped me, there's no way I could ever show my face in Blueskin Bay again.

The finality of it slams into me and in a moment of clarity, I think about what Mike said about what my life will look like thirty years down the line.

I know his marriage is rocky, he barely sees his kids and I'm following right on his heels.

If this is how little regard the Bureau has for the people who dedicate their lives to a job that demands so much, is it any wonder he wound up so bitter?

More importantly, is that what I want for my life?

My eyes drift to the side of the road, and a lump forms in my throat when I see the two white crosses marking Garrett's parent's accident site.

Tears flood my eyes as I pass by, more slowly than when I arrived in the Bay.

I have so many questions I wanted to ask Garrett. So many things I wanted to tell him.

As much as I want to deny it, I *did* need his help. Desperately.

I'm trying so hard *not* to cry that when I slam my brakes on to avoid an object in the middle of the road, I'm not even sure what I'm seeing is real.

Behind me, the SUV swerves, tires squealing, and ends up fishtailed behind me.

I ease out of my car swiping my eyes as I take in the enormous seal sunbathing, whiskers twitching, and not yielding an inch of his road.

One of the agents behind me curses as he approaches. “What the fuck is that doing here?”

I glance at him and can barely keep a straight face as I answer. “Sunbathing.”

He glares at me. “How do we get it to move?”

This time I do laugh. Right in his face.



GARRETT

From inside my kitchen, I sip my coffee and for want of anything better to do, scan the Carey’s Creek paper for any signs my misadventures have been noticed by Jacky Wilson, the reporter who did a smear campaign on the Bay, and Felicity.

When I don’t find anything, I skim the classifieds and chuckle as I see an ad looking for a male nurse for an elderly woman in Blueskin Bay.

I pick up the phone, and call the rest home, making a call I should have done a few days ago.

The receptionist patches me through to Viola’s room who picks up immediately. “Well? When can I move back in?” she

rasps.

Even if I don't have good news to share, I'm pleased I have a distraction this morning. "We haven't made a decision yet."

She huffs down the line. "They're still trying to make me quit smoking," she grumbles. "Can you believe it? I'm nearly eighty years old? Just what in the hell is the point of me quitting now?"

I rub my neck as I think, stalling as I try to think of a way to look after her but not give her false hope.

Aside from the fact Zane and Felicity will want some privacy, it took a month to get the smell of nicotine out, and we spend considerable time and effort repainting and cleaning the place.

"This isn't my decision to make. We need to involve Nicki, and your doctor," I say.

She harrumphs down the line. "You want me to die in here? Is that it?"

I flinch, if I don't let her get her own way, that is a possibility. "No. Just trying to keep everyone happy."

"Can't keep everyone happy all the time, Garrett. You'll just make yourself miserable," she says.

I don't bother trying to tell her that's exactly what a large part of my job entails, just take a seat at the kitchen island and think. "I'll call Levi and Zane today. We'll have a vote, if they agree, I'll call Nicki," I say.

Her voice lightens instantly. “Wicked,” she says.

I chuckle and promise to call her the minute we make a decision just as I hear a car pulling up my driveway.

I place the phone back in its cradle and glance out the window and do a double-take when I see Alessandra climbing out of her rental.

My feet move before my brain has time to catch up.

I open the door and try not to sound too hopeful as I call out to her, “Did you forget something?”

She pauses, smiles, and picks up her pace so she’s right on my doorstep.

“I heard there was a job opening at the Department of Agriculture Conservation and Forestry,” she says.

My tongue seems to be glued to the roof of my mouth and my brain is too frazzled to translate what her being here might mean.

“And you thought you’d come to ask *me* about it?”

She nods. “I stopped by the station, and Zane said you were the person to ask. I was hoping you could put in a good word for me.”

Zane told her? My brother was breathing fire when he had to hand off our arrests to two goons from the Bureau.

I step back, and gesture for her to come inside. Whatever this conversation is about, I don’t want to be having it outside.

“Is anyone else going to show up at my front door?”

She tosses her head. “Zane’s taking care of any unwanted visitors so we can discuss my employment options.”

I’ll bet he is. It’s a little surprising he didn’t give me a heads-up to expect Alessandra.

“Do you know anything about wildlife?”

Her eyebrow arches. “Nope.”

I close the door. “Anything about agriculture?”

“Nope.”

“But you were hoping I’d recommend you?”

“Yup.”

I frown at her. Torn between being pleased she’s in my house and not on the road. “What are your relevant skills?”

“Well, I’m a fast learner, I work hard, I hold a gun license and I can work any hours required. Oh, and I used to work as an Investigative Specialist for the FBI. Would that be enough?”

My jaw slackens as those words sink in. “*Used to?*”

She nods and wanders into my kitchen, sniffing the coffee I was drinking before helping herself to it.

“Yup. I want a better work-life balance,” she says.

I’m not sure whether to laugh or to believe she’s actually quit but I play along just to see how far she’s willing to take this.

“The competition is fierce for employment at Conservation and Forestry.”

She drains my cup before answering. “What about other jobs in the area?”

My heart starts to thud uncomfortably. Is she really saying she’s prepared to just pick up and move here?

This is crazy. Even crazier that I’m already picturing how great it could be.

“There might be a vacancy in the police station.”

She places the coffee cup down and slowly walks over to me. “Well, I really need a firm commitment.”

With her standing within reach after I thought I’d lost her, I’m not sure how much longer I can keep this up.

“I’d be prepared to offer you a commitment, but I will need to see your credentials first.”

She undoes her top button and doesn’t stop until her black bra is showing. “How are they looking so far?”

My pulse speeds that this is happening. I want her something fierce. “I’ll need to see more,” I say.

She smiles and keeps unbuttoning them then drops her shirt on the floor. “Need anything else?”

My eyes linger on the wound at her side, and I hesitate. “I’m not sure...”

She locks eyes with me as her fingers slide to the top of her jeans. “Well, I’m sure. As a matter of fact, I think it might be prudent for me to see *your* credentials before we sign on the dotted line.”

Since she's not stopping and is unbuttoning her jeans, I slowly tug my shirt over my head.

"You need more?"

Her eyes roam over my chest and her lips part. "Definitely," she breathes.

I keep my eyes on her, gauging how freely she's moving as we both slide our jeans down, kick off our shoes and step out of them.

Either she's hiding it well, or she's not in pain as she looks me over. "I think I need to see more," she says.

I'm so scrambled, so hopeful she's here for the right reasons, I'm not sure whether to demand to know what happened or play along.

I'm dying to ask her what she thinks is going to happen after we do this just so she can put me out of my misery.

As much as I wish this was just about sex, it isn't.

I can't be falling for a woman I just met. It's not sensible, or rational and it certainly doesn't make any sense.

I don't do anything on a whim or without carefully considering the risks.

Before I can ask her if she's serious, she reaches around and unsnaps her bra.

The second her breasts hang loose, I know I'm done for. My cock stiffens under my boxers, and any reluctance I had vanishes as I hook my hand around her neck and kiss her hard.

She kisses me back until I'm not thinking about anything else but spreading her legs.

I drag her into my bedroom, lay her down on my bed, kissing every inch of her, watching her reactions just in case I'm hurting her until I'm about ready to burst.

I lie beside her, on her uninjured side, and kiss her as I slip my finger inside her panties.

She moans as my fingers find slickness, so I seek the rhythm and pressure she likes and keep kissing her until she's clinging to my neck, and all her muscles are tensing.

As her body stills her fingers slide down, and she lets out a little whimper as she strokes the length of my cock.

Her touch feels so good my voice comes out rough. "What is it? You want to stop?" I say.

She smirks at me as she looks down. "Hell, no! I was just thinking I should have brought extra-large condoms," she says.

With her hands still on me, I let out a gasping breath as I gesture to my nightstand.

She gives me a wicked grin before sliding down and pressing kisses to my chest and stomach. "I knew you were hiding some huge secret," she says.



I suck and lick him until he's begging me to stop and I'm about delirious with need.

Now we're finally doing it, I'm not risking stopping for anything, so I take the safest route and climb on top of him.

I toy with him for a while, nibbling his ear, kissing his neck, and licking his earlobe until he's wracked with shivers, and not having him inside me feels like torture.

I lean back, grab a condom, roll it down his cock, and brace myself over him as I get into position.

His hands bypass my waist, and he grips me by the hips, guiding me onto him.

As I slide him inside me, we both let out a gasp and I immediately start to rock back and forth.

I lean back and encourage him to explore my breasts while I take control of our movements.

His touch and the feel of him inside me have me creeping closer to the edge much faster than I'd expected.

My orgasm escapes in a rush, catching me off guard and making my nipples pucker as all my nerve endings ignite.

All my want, all my desire for him overtakes my body until I can barely breathe for the desire he's sparked in me.

His eyes are focused on mine, and I'm astonished by how in tune our bodies are.

It could have been messy, or awkward, but it's none of those things.

And as I rock my hips back and forth, I think I know why.

In a world of casual flings and broken promises, Garrett Reid is a beacon of hope that things like family, kindness, and loyalty still matter.

More importantly, I can trust him with my life *and* my heart.

Considering we're right in the middle of having sex, it's quite possibly the worst possible time to be thinking about how amazing he is.

My eyes get misty and he's so centered on me that he notices straight away. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

I shake my head and lean down to kiss him. "I don't think you're capable of hurting me," I say.

He doesn't look convinced, but when I start to whisper in his ear all the things I want him to do to me, including taking me from behind, he doesn't mention it again.

While he positions himself, I clamor onto all fours and moan in delight when his cock slides back inside me again.

He thrusts slowly then following my prompts, speeds until we're both gasping and in perfect union as an explosive climax shudders through us.

I collapse on my elbows, and roll carefully on my side, eyeing him as he disposes of the condom and joins me on the bed.

He looks me over and gently runs his finger down the cheek Mike slapped and winces.

"I'm sorry I took so long getting to you."

I shake my head. “Don’t apologize. Zane told me you rappelled off a cliff in the dark?”

His lip quirks up. “Zane’s been awfully chatty.”

I chuckle. “I think he was happy I asked him to go deal with the agents sent to retrieve me. I left them trying to negotiate with him.”

He laughs heartily. “Almost wish I was there too.”

I trail my finger down his chest. “I wish I’d seen you rappelling off a cliff. So much for being afraid of heights.”

His mouth tugs downward. “I’ve never been more afraid in my life.”

He turns on his side and looks me in the eye. I swallow hard as I see the depth of emotion in his eyes. If I had any doubt, I’d misread Garrett or his intent, it vanishes as he speaks.

“I wasn’t sure what I’d do to him if he hurt you,” he says.

My throat gets thick, my eyes flood with tears, and out of habit, I blink them away.

“FBI agents aren’t supposed to cry,” I say.

His eyebrow cocks. “But you aren’t one anymore. You can do whatever you want.”

His words slice through me almost as badly as Bryce’s knife did.

“Garrett?”

Worry lines form on his forehead as he looks at me. “Please don’t tell me you have something to confess?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I really did come here looking for a job.”

He chuckles. “So getting naked was just a bonus?”

I swipe his shoulder. “I’ve never done anything this impulsive before.”

He turns on his side and looks at me so tenderly that a lump forms in my throat. “Neither have I. But I never understood how my parents got married so fast before either.”

There’s a slight edge to his voice, so I tread lightly. “Married?”

His eyes roam over my face. “Too soon to be talking about marriage?”

I smile and lean in close to him, offering what I hope will be an adequate response. “Ask me again in six months, hot shot.”

EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER...

Alessandra

“You sure you’re ready?” Levi says.

I cast my eyes over the monstrosity in front of me, and nod.

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been ready since I laid eyes on it,” I say.

Levi takes a step back and grins. “Then light her up.”

I lean down, strike the match and watch in glee as the flame ignites and begins a slow burn toward its destination.

Garrett drags me back behind the safety barrier Levi and two of the members of the volunteer fire brigade erected, quietly chuckling as I watch the flames start to lick the front of the house.

“I hope I didn’t just hire a firebug,” he says.

I pull a face at him. “Nope. Just someone who likes to see justice done,” I say.

His smile doesn’t quite meet his eyes, and neither does mine.

The Bureau didn't take lightly to my resigning, or to me asking Zane to delay the two agents sent to retrieve me.

But after I handed the recording of Carver over to Garrett with a little pressure, they cut their losses and left Carver to shoulder all of the blame.

I can't say I haven't wondered what would have happened if Slouchy Sid hadn't stopped me from leaving.

But I have wondered what would have happened if I'd never met Garrett and it had been Zane who intercepted me on my way into town.

I'm not naïve enough to believe there won't be consequences. Or to be convinced this is over, but I am convinced I made the right choice in picking Garrett's team to play on.

The Blueskin Bay Police Department might be small, but what they lack in resources, they sure as hell make up for it in inventive ways to protect the people in their Bay.

Condemning the Fisherman's Cottage and organizing a controlled burning seems somewhat appropriate to celebrate my officially joining the team.

I link hands with Garrett and squeeze his fingers as I look at Levi, standing at the ready with a fire hose.

Garrett looks down at me. "You sure you're ready to be a small-town Deputy Chief? Might take you a while to acclimatize."

I grin at him and decide to show off some of my newly acquired slang. "Ayuh, Ya dubbah. Whatcha say after this we

go get a buzz on?”

Garrett chuckles then leans down so his lips graze my ear. “Long as I can take you to bed first, that sounds like wicked fun,” he says.

As I look at the remains of the shack that drove me into Garrett’s waiting arms, a smile grows on my face until I’m grinning like a maniac.

I may not have left the Bureau the way I wanted, but it was on my terms, and all things considered, I’ve *definitely* come out on top.



GARRETT

It’s not lost on me that Jax’s beach bar looks a little different than when we hold our usual family meetings.

And with good reason. Everyone’s here who needs to be. Felicity and Zane are getting married soon, Nicki is Viola’s closest relative, and after Levi told her who Viola is, and what she means to the Reid family, Alessandra wants to spend as much time getting to know the woman who helped raised me.

Now we’re all crowded around the bar, drinking beer, waiting for everyone to get settled, and for Alessandra and Felicity to quit chatting at the end of the bar.

As soon as Viola is settled in the chair Jax brought out for her, Zane clears his throat.

“I’ve installed smoke detectors,” Zane says.

When Viola just feigns ignorance, I explain. “We’re happy to renew your lease, but you’ll have to smoke outside,” I say.

She narrows her eyes. “And catch my death, you sneaky bastards you’re as bad as that pansy of a doctor,” she mutters.

Nicki groans. “Grandma! You can’t say that! It’s bad enough I’ve had to turn two male nurses away. Stop placing those ads.”

“She might need one now though,” Levi points out.

Viola motions to the bar. “Course I will. Where’s my drink? I came because I was promised a home *and* some rum.”

Jax looks to me for guidance and I nod. “Why not. We have a lot to celebrate.”

Viola sends Nicki a triumphant look. “I’m trying to find a male nurse for you too. You can interview him and get to know him. If you stopped being a party pooper, you’d see this could be an opportunity to meet a nice man,” she says.

Nicki’s eyes shift to Levi, but he’s busy making eyes at a tourist wearing a skimpy bikini.

She sighs and smiles at her grandmother. “Maybe you’re right. Hundreds of single guys in this town, and they all treat me like I’m their sister.”

Jax pours Nicki and Viola a serve of rum and Viola’s eyes light up.

He hands Alessandra a glass, but Felicity waves her hand in dismissal.

“Not for me thanks,” she says.

Alessandra glances at me, but returns to her conversation, leaving the unspoken question hanging in the air.

Zane lowers his voice so no one else but me hears.

“We’re trying,” he says.

Before I get a chance to tell him that’s great, Viola’s head swivels in our direction.

“Trying what?”

Felicity’s eyes find Zane’s and he gives her a sheepish look he’d overlooked Viola’s excellent new hearing aid.

“We’re *trying* to get pregnant. It was supposed to be a secret,” she says.

Levi whistles. “Won’t take long. Reid’s have supercharged swimmers,” he says.

As Zane growls at him, Felicity seems to accept that it’s hard to keep secrets in the Bay. Even harder to keep them in the family she’s planning on marrying into.

She sighs and looks pointedly at Nicki, the source of most gossip in the Bay and the reason Felicity’s face was splashed all over the news a few months ago.

Nicki mimes zipping her lips. “You won’t hear it from me.”

Viola jabs a finger toward Zane. “You better hurry up and marry. Wait too long and she’ll be too fat to fit a wedding dress and I’ll be in the grave.”

Felicity groans and hides her face in her hands while Zane just glares at everyone for upsetting her.

“If I had to put money on it, I’d say two months before you’re pregnant,” I say.

Jax chimes in. “Three months,” he says.

Alessandra eyes Zane. “First month. No question,” she says.

“You know something I don’t?” Zane says.

Alessandra glances at Felicity who turns scarlet. “Nope,” they say in unison.

COMING SOON!



It's about to get dangerously hot in Jax's kitchen...

The gorgeous food critic who broke Jax's heart returns to the Bay and she's not alone. An obsessed fan is hot on her heels, and he'll stop at nothing to get what he's craving...



For a full list of Lexi's books visit

www.lexihartromance.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lexi Hart is an escaped lunatic from New Zealand
masquerading as an author.

She's interviewed detectives, spent a night in a police station
and been for a ride-along in the back of a police car, all in the
name of research.

If you can track her down, you'll most likely find her watching
British comedies, quizzes, a combination of the two, or
reading mysteries.

When her slightly malfunctioning body allows, she writes
romance stories filled with twists, humor, and a whole lot of
steam.

Lexi's way too impulsive to use social media, but she loves to
share things that make her laugh, so if you want to stay in
touch be sure to subscribe to her VIP mailing list.

www.lexihartromance.com