



BY
STELLA MARIE
ALDEN

A
CASE
of
Integrity

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by

Stella Marie Alden

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Special shout-out to my new proofreaders, Kim and Lori!

You guys are awesome and I thank you ever so much!

stellamariealden@gmail.com

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for choosing to read my romance action thriller. I do love contriving ways to keep you up all night. Who needs sleep? Am I right?

Some people ask if I ever run out of ideas. My answer is, not yet. There's always another 'what-if', the basic premise to my stories.

This one starts out in Rehoboth Beach, near my new home. I was at a jazz concert, and the gentleman sitting next to me started telling me all about the local lantern tours.

With that spark, I was off and writing.

You can dive right into this book or start with the first in the series. I promise you won't get lost.

If you want to keep up with all my latest news, you can find me on facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/stellaMarieAlden>, or even better, you can receive my newsletter where I share a little piece of my everyday life. Signup:

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Thanks ever so much!

Love,

Stella

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Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden... Socrates

Don't judge a damn woman by her cover... Dean Brennan

Prologue

Sky Young AKA Ophelia Lipanski

At the sound of rapid fire weapons, I drop my silver fork, belly slide over the antique oak table, and head butt my teenage client to the Italian marble floor. As the brunette's bowl rolls across the yellow tiles, I grab her shoulders, unholster my weapon, and slap away her deer-in-the-headlights look.

“Stay down.” Crawling to the imported teak wainscoting, I put my chin to the windowsill, and gasp.

Outside, over a dozen militia wearing top-notch bulletproof vests and special-forces munition belts, race through my boss's pristine suburban front yard. *Fuck*. I should've known better than to accept this job. In my experience, a man of Tommy O'Malley's reputation would never hire a woman bodyguard.

While I take a second to contemplate the best exit strategy, my employer bursts into the room. “Safehouse. I'll lower Charlie to you.”

The heavy-set, fifty-something arms dealer raises his rifle barrel and smashes the twelve-foot, arched window. With pelts of safety glass raining down, he grabs my wrist and lowers me until my toes touch the ground. Turning, I reach both hands up and bring his seventeen-year-old to my side.

One eye on the skirmish, I lead my responsibility to the estate's multi-car garage and slide aside a steel drain cover. After the top of Charlie's head disappears, I descend halfway, clunk the metal in place, and mute the battle.

“Go.” My heart drums as I climb down the rest of the rungs, point at the tunnel, and push her in front of me.

Motion sensors detect our presence and bright lights in the six-foot pipe blind me, but I don't dare stop. A couple of football fields later, we reach the end, I punch in a key code, and ascend a flight of stairs. In a modest, two car garage, we hop into the leather seats of a bullet-proof Mercedes SUV and gasp for air.

Once the sirens pass, I start the engine and, somewhat astonished by the teen's calm demeanor, I pause. "You alright?"

"I'm fine. We should go." Reaching to the car's sun visor, she presses the automatic door opener, and I back out onto the street.

When we've passed a dozen or so multimillion-dollar estates, I hand her my cellphone. "Take my chip out and do the same to yours."

"Right." Finished, she unbuckles her belt, swivels on her knees, and gazes over her headrest. "You sure no one's following?"

"No." With all the hi-tech tracking technology out there, I can't be sure, and don't want to lie.

"Well, Dad must've pissed off someone royally. Who the hell would dare storm his castle in broad daylight?" Back in her seat, she glances over the cupholder for answers, but I got nothing.

In my humble opinion, the man should've been locked up years ago. "Your father mentioned a safehouse. Do you know where it is?"

My teenage doppelganger, nods. "We have a few. The closest is in Rehoboth Beach."

While she programs the dash's GPS, we fall into our own thoughts and about an hour later, she sighs. "I knew his last deal would come to a bad end."

My brows raise. The day Tommy hired me, he insisted, under threat of death, his vocation be kept from his daughter.

She giggles at my unasked question. “Oh, don’t worry. I won’t tell Daddy. I’m not stupid. I know all about his dealings. I also know you’re working as an informant for the FBI.”

Well, shit.

Chapter 1

Dean Brennan

My octogenarian landlady has been pulling weeds from the same spot for over an hour. A cat in human form, she lies in wait, ready to pounce. With no easy escape route in sight, I pause on the second floor landing, breathe in the salt air, and wonder if death by boredom is a real thing.

“Hello, deary. Feeling better, are we?” The heavy-set woman eases herself to standing and steps between the railings.

“Indeed I am.” Groaning silently, I give her a bright smile. The last time she blockaded me, it took thirty minutes to wriggle free.

“Helen, you’re looking especially lovely this morning.” Camera around my neck, I zip up my nylon jacket, trot to her level and make a beeline for the small opening near the goal posts.

In the brief time it takes me to descend, her huge, flowered, Hawaiian moomoo sways and blocks my way. To make matters worse, she forces an unwanted piece of paper into my hands.

“I’ve been anticipating this for weeks but can’t go because of my arthritis. If you take pictures, I won’t feel so badly about missing it.”

While I wonder what the fuck ‘it’ could be, I glance down at the writing and read aloud. “Join us for Delaware’s most popular historical lantern tour. Learn about Blackbeard the pirate who lived and-”

“Exciting right?” Her bright eyes and raised eyebrows make her countenance more like a kid than a senior citizen.

For her benefit, I feign as much enthusiasm as a grown adult can muster. “It sounds wonderful, but I can’t accept your generous gift. You should give it to your grandson.”

“Pish-posh. He’s got his nose glued to his space station.”

“Play Station?” My guess turns her bright pink lips into a grin.

“That’s what I meant. So, will you? Pretty please?”

Other than the hole in my body, I have no valid reason to refuse, so take the ticket and smile. “Sure, I’ll help you.” Only a total ass would say no.

“You better hurry, it starts at sunset, and I want images of everything.”

Of course, she does. In my ride, I set the address into my GPS, and when she’s not looking, clunk my head on the wheel. How the hell do I let myself get roped into shit like this? I should’ve said no before she thrust out her lower lip.

Twenty minutes later, I scold myself as I pull into the state park. Because of some shrink, I’m supposed to lay low to deal with my fucking feelings. Being shot sucked. It didn’t take two weeks of paid time off to figure it out, more like two seconds.

Remembering I haven’t been out in public for days, I tip down the sun visor’s mirror, smooth back my errant brown locks, and note the dark circles under my brown eyes. A sniff to my armpits later, I stride over the pavement toward the hand-written ‘tour starts here’ sign.

“Ticket please.” An elderly gent in pirate attire, complete with blunderbuss and saber, holds out his palm.

Perhaps, if I’m lucky, the tickets are non-transferrable. “Mrs. Grimwald sent me in her place. She said her arthritis is acting up and wanted me to take pictures for her. I tried to say no but-”

“Well, that is so kind of you... And you are?” The gray-bearded man lifts his lantern high and triggers a memory.

Without warning, I'm on my back in a dark alley while my partner leans all his weight into the open wound at my side.

Shit. Back in the present, sweat rolls down my sides as I try to stop my right hand from shaking. "Dean Brennan. I'm renting her upper floor for a few weeks. I'll understand if you have a waiting list and-"

"Glad you could come. If you follow the path, we're almost ready to start. It's good you wore jeans, the mosquitoes can be fierce."

Shit. Now I'm stuck. Why do The Fates insist on aligning themselves against me? I guess I can bail if it's not my thing. Regardless, a night at the beach beats staring at my four walls.

Whoa. What the what?

My cock jumps to attention as a set of long-legged twins in tight jeans saunter in front of me. My lower appendage tends not to be a randy beast, so I cut him some slack and take out my mental list of the world's least sexy items. By the time I get to adult wet wipes and beer puke, the bulge in my pants has shrunk to normal.

Meanwhile, the guide and another pirate in his sixties has beckoned everyone onto a trail. Half of our tour consists of retirees, who chat amicably. A young woman wearing a huge rock on her ring finger fake-laughs with a man fifteen years her senior. A gaggle of teenage girls snicker at the studs a few feet away studying them.

In the shadow of the nearest fir tree, the sisters twist their heads toward the entrance to the parking lot, no doubt waiting for another to join them. The older one tucks the other to her left side and keeps her right hand free, near her oversized jacket.

My ear tingles, so I meander closer and give them a polite smile.

"Nice evening." A friendly comment like mine might be construed as predatory in Manhattan, but here in lower, slower, Delaware, strangers strike up conversations all the time.

“Mmm.” The protector lowers her lids, eyes me up and down, and shoots me a fuck-off smile.

Her younger sibling, however, beams. “Hi, I’m Charlie. Don’t mind Sky. She’s always grouchy. You ever done this tour before? I have. It’s loads of fun. Did you know Blackbeard used this area as a safe harbor?”

“I had no idea.” One side of my mouth quirks up, until her chaperone steps in front of the enthusiastic girl.

“Charlie, I’m sure the man can hear it all from the guide.” Given the crowd and the almost festive atmosphere, her sharp tone is over the top, and to be honest, it pisses me off.

“She’s not bothering me. It’s my first time here and I find it all quite amusing.” I’m a fourth generation NYPD officer, not some perv.

Palms up, I flash her the magic Brennan smile, the one reserved for lost kids and confused old ladies. Immune to my charms, the woman in a t-shirt and torn jeans scowls causing me to re-evaluate my first impression of her.

With no makeup and girl-next-door braids, the brunette attempts to pass herself off as a high-schooler, but I’m guessing she’s closer to my age.

A puzzle to solve? My God, Watson, the game is afoot.

“Well, have a good night.” My face indifferent, my heart chomping at the bit, I follow the line of people across a wooden bridge.

When the moon slides out from behind a cloud, I locate my camera and capture the silver mist on the dune grasses.

“Imagine yourself on this stretch of land in seventeen-seventeen.” The tour guide points toward the lighthouse and lowers his voice to a hoarse whisper. “Long ago, fires served to light the way at night. It was easy to trick boats into thinking they had reached a town and not a rocky death.”

While he mentions the number of ships lost and recites the grisly details, I swivel around in a circle. My heart races until I spot the two missing girls by the shoreline.

Chill the fuck out, dude. This isn't Manhattan. My shoulder angel sounds an awful lot like my older brother.

To prove I'm not imagining things, I drop away from the pack, place my camera to my eye, and snap a silhouette of the two females under the full moon. Because they sense my presence or perhaps hear the nonstop click of my shutter, they swivel on their heels and lift their lanterns in my direction.

As the one called Sky raises her chin, my chest tightens with an unfamiliar and uncomfortable heat. Not having spoken more than a couple words to the nervous woman, I flick off the emotion as one might a pesky fly. Generally, my tastes run toward the sophisticated. However, at this moment, I can't remember one art gallery or quirky off-Broadway play, let alone the dates who dragged me to them.

In sneakers, Sky's stride reminds me of my military days. A bulge under her left arm tells me she's carrying. If I'm correct, she's no doubt hidden multiple weapons on her person.

Not wanting to appear like a stalker, I wave, face the other way, and catch up with the group. The moment I turn, the girls are gone.

Perhaps they got bored, but deep in my gut, I know something is wrong. Who the hell comes to a beach tour armed?

Shit, I should mind my own business but a damsel in distress is my Achilles heel. You might as well demand I stop breathing. Raising my lamp, I trace the path to the rock they were standing on, and in the thick, swirling fog, make my way toward the shore.

"Douse your light." Lit up like a ghost, the brunette packing heat leans over, switches my LEDs off, and casts us in darkness.

The oily essence of a well-maintained weapon mixes with the salty breeze as metal taps my shoulder. "Are you Tommy's man?"

“Excuse me?” Clearly, she’s mistaken me for the person she’s been waiting for, someone dangerous.

“Shit. Forget I asked.” Although the mix-up is hers, she lowers her barrel from the back of my neck and down my side.

When it hits my wound, I hiss. “A little less pressure, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Why are you following us?” She pokes harder, making me wonder if she’s worth the effort until I notice her younger shadow’s gone missing.

“I thought you might need help finding your sister.”

“Who says she’s lost?” Hand less steady, her mouth drops open as her eyes dart about the sand.

In the glow of the moon, I capture her gaze and keep my voice calm. “Either lost or she’s hiding. Which is it?”

“Neither. Go away.” In contradiction to her tone, her tongue flicks between her lips, the black centers of her eyes widen, and she tucks an errant lock of hair behind her ear.

With these obvious signs of her attraction, I calculate the risk, and lower my arms. “You’re not calling out, not turning on a light. Are you hunting her? Is she your prisoner?”

“For chrissakes, she’s my sister. Don’t make a scene, you’ll scare her. Now go, I don’t need your help.”

God, I love a puzzle. It’s almost better than sex. “Let me assist. I’ll put my flashlight on dim, and we can both search.”

The mystery woman bites the tip of her tongue and as she nods, her cellphone vibrates. Thinking fast, I bump her hand, and the device drops to the ground.

“I’m so sorry.” After I squat to pick it up, I make a production of brushing off the sand which gives my phone’s app plenty of time to make a copy.

I’m an expert at this move, but the fact she misses my sleight of hand surprises me. Clearly, she’s more worried than she lets on.

“Charlie? It’s me. Come out.” The gorgeous siren disappears into the mist and much like Odysseus must’ve felt, I follow.

A smarter man might’ve left, but as my brothers are often fond of mentioning, when I find something which interests me, I never let go. Over several pitchers of beer one night, I tried to explain. *Remember the time we rolled in poison ivy? How fucking itchy the shit was? You guys had to tie mittens onto my hands, and you handcuffed me to the kitchen table.*

Shaking my head at the memory, I track her ghostly form through the fog.

“Dean? Is that you?” A young whisper sounds from behind a group of fir trees nestled between the dunes.

Stepping toward the teen’s voice, I make sure we’re alone before answering. “It’s me. Are you safe? Do you require protection from your sister?”

She snickers. “Sky’s not my sister, she’s my bodyguard.”

Whoa, I can’t believe I bought the older one’s bullshit. My reality shifts, my head spins, and I almost lose my balance.

“Should I call the police?” Reasons a teen might need fulltime security flip through my poor brain. Witness protection? Famous film star? Billionaire’s kid?

“No cops. Absolutely not. But would you mind taking out your gun?” Not many would notice my shoulder holster under an oversized jacket. Intrigued, I pop a magazine into my Glock and safety off, aim the barrel at the ground.

“What for?”

“I saw some dude lurking around. I think he’s gone, but I would feel better knowing we can fight back.” Charlie stands, brushes the sand off her jeans, then cups her hands to her mouth. “Sky, I’m over here with the goat.”

I open my mouth to object to her insult and she starts laughing her ass off. “Chill. It means greatest of all time. You really need to get out more.”

Out of the mouth of babes...

Chapter 2

Sky Young AKA Totally Fucked

Thank God. Charlie's alive.

When the kettledrum in my ear stops, I loosen the grip on my weapon. Her smart-ass reference to Mr. Buttinsky says she's not in any immediate danger but who knows what secrets the fog holds.

As waves crash nearby and the wind howls, I grab my phone. Praying no one's nearby, I call my FBI handler, but again, my call goes straight to voice mail.

"You promised this would never happen. Where the fuck are you?" It's almost impossible to shout at someone while whispering, but I congratulate myself for trying.

Great. I pull out the other cell, the one Tommy gave me and re-re-check it for messages. The last text had two e-tickets to this damn tour and nothing else since.

Why would the arms broker ask his daughter to venture out of the safe house and fail to show? If the damn Fed would pick up, perhaps I'd have a clue.

What a cluster-fuck. With no other choice, I wing it.

My pistol forward, I inch toward Charlie's giggles, and stop behind two ghostly dark forms in the mist.

A twig snaps under my foot, the two turn their heads, and I point my weapon at the broad-shouldered, undies-melting, nosey Parker. "What part of go away did you not understand?"

He shoots me a what-the-fuck face. "I found her and you're welcome?"

His Glock now pointed toward the sand, the wanna-be hero smirks and has the audacity to wink his gorgeous brown eyes at my blushing client who winks back.

“Don’t ever hide from me again.” My voice cracks and as unwanted tears fall, I wipe them away. Dammit, she’s the little sister I always wanted and because of my incompetence, could’ve been killed, or worse. I won’t let it happen again.

Charlie cups my cheek and stares until I meet her gaze. “You were the one who said to follow my gut. When I heard someone, I hid.”

At her matter-of-factness, I slap a palm to my forehead. God, she’s so damn literal, I want to scream but instead, take a deep breath.

“You did well.” Later, I’ll explain how she put us both at risk. Right now, I need to get rid of the Sherlock Holmes wannabe. Maybe he’ll respond better to a polite but firm request.

“Thank you so much for your help. We’re fine now. You can go.” Apparently, I need acting classes or perhaps the gun in my hand diminishes my attempt at civility.

Right. Faking my best smile, I holster my weapon.

Like Mr. Clean or the Jolly Green Giant, he stands with his arms crossed and legs apart. The only thing missing is a ho-ho-ho or a bottle of spray cleaner.

I refuse to be intimidated by this man. “For the love of God, don’t you have someplace else to be?”

“Nope. You?” If this night wasn’t bad enough, his grin sends an arrow of lust to my clit.

No, no, no. Not him, not now.

“You guys, we’re missing the best part of the lantern tour.” Charlie grabs my hand and whisks me toward the dots of LEDs, now visible at the foot of the lighthouse.

“Who is this person Tommy?” The dude trots alongside with an uneven gait, not a bit out of breath. His question was meant for me but the teenager butts in.

“My dad.” A criminal’s child should know better than to give out personal information.

Throwing her a scowl, I glance over my shoulder, where he keeps pace next to my long-legged client.

“Did you see someone? Is that why you hid?” The inquisitor holds his side as if he has a cramp and his brows furrow, but he doesn’t fall behind, even when I pick up my pace.

Charlie tosses her long hair and snickers. “Other than you? Nope. If I get scared, I am to hide and keep my head down. Those are the rules.”

By the time we catch the tour, most of the attendees have returned their lanterns. After a quick lie to explain our absence, I thank our guide, and walk my young, impressionable ward back to my car.

Mr. None-of-Your-Damn-Business follows on our heels and waits nearby while I text Brownstone.

ME: NEED U 2 CALL ME NOW!

Ah fuck. How I wish I could go back in time and refuse the Fed’s offer. Hadn’t I predicted this exact scenario? Brownstone assured me I would never be alone and yet, here I am.

Driving out of the parking lot, I adjust the rearview, and sure enough, our new best friend pulls behind us. “Get under the dash. Mr. Winky-Face is following us.”

Charlie squeals and swivels in her seat. “Holy crap, can you believe it?”

I can understand her enthusiasm, but we know nothing about this man.

“He could be a serial killer.” I press down on the accelerator, glance in the mirror, and when the SUV keeps pace, my heart races.

“Don’t worry. He’s a white hat.” To rely on Charlie’s almost supernatural ability to judge people would be pure

madness. We could both end up dead.

I'd like to think the guy on my bumper is one of the good guys, so why is he following us? The stakes are too high to trust him implicitly, so I call my employer and surprise, surprise, no one picks up.

Using the skills my dad taught me, I run a red light, screech around a corner and swing into a church parking lot. Once I'm sure I lost our sexy buddy, I race to the safe house's private drive, enter the security code, and the gate clunks behind us. After I heave out a sigh of relief, I rush us inside the building, lock the door and pour myself a shot of Tommy's best bourbon.

Who sent us the tour tickets? Why didn't they show up? Charlie's dad wouldn't've given the burner number to just anyone. Are we compromised?

Should I stay or should I go now? While the tune from The Clash rattles around in my brain, Charlie grabs the bottle, takes a gulp, and grins. "You were so fucking awesome. Do you think I could learn how to be a bodyguard?"

Picturing Tommy's reaction to her career choice, I let out a guffaw. "I don't think your father would approve."

"In a few years, he won't be the boss of me." She sighs, parts the curtains an inch, and asks, "Where did you go to school? Perhaps you could write me a recommendation?"

And get a Bachelor's degree in what? Protection Sciences? Chuckling to myself, I mask my amusement and answer honestly. Kids need to know some things can't be learned in a classroom.

"My dad was a Navy SEAL. Whenever he was on leave, we'd go camping in the wilderness. He taught me everything." *And I miss him every damn minute.*

As always, thoughts of him bring the worst day of my life to mind, the time my aunt told him I had ADD. Although it wasn't my fault, I still feel like I let him down.

"Do you think we should call my dad?" While Charlie's question is a valid one, I've already tried repeatedly.

“What do *you* think?”

She frowns. “The last time I broke protocol, he locked me in the basement for a week.”

“Well, I think we’re safe here.” Before I can knock on wood, she hisses.

“Sky, listen. There’s a guy in a dark sedan outside our gates.”

“Shit, close the curtains and stay down.” I grab my phone, open the security app, and scroll until I get to the camera facing the street.

At first, the stranger seems lost. Then the fucking gate opens. He either got the code from Tommy or he’s a predator about to kill us.

Where’s a hero when you need him?

Chapter 3

Dean

Headlights off, I tail the two young females until a security gate clunks closed near their back bumper. Nerves tingling, I drive around the block and park behind the Ford which followed at a distance.

Eyes on the iron fence, and one foot on the pavement, I call my brother, Drac. “You busy?”

“For you, baby bro? Never.” No time to respond to his slight, I send him images of the sisters and text him the sedan’s license plate.

“Can you run the number and facial-reco the women?” Inhaling well-oiled leather, I slip my weapon from its holster, and click off the safety.

“Hold on a minute. Aren’t you on PTO?” His question sounds more like an accusation but like before, I let it slide.

“Can’t you please do this for me once?” *How long until the guy sitting in the car in front notices me, or worse, goes after the girls? Is he the reason the teen hid at the tour?*

“Yeah, give me a second. While we wait, tell me how you’re doing.” His keys clack in the background and I sigh.

Since getting shot, he and my three other brothers refuse to believe I am not a basket case. “Mommy, I’m fine. And tell all the other broody hens to back off. The bullet barely grazed me.”

“Dino, you freaked out in the ambulance.” His use of my childhood nickname strikes its mark and my shoulders ease away from my ears.

Eyes still on the car in front, I ditch the sarcasm, and explain what happened that day. “The paramedics pumped me

up on opiates after I told them not to.”

“They said your flashback was intense.”

“So you and everyone else have said at least a hundred times, but I’m fucking excellent. What more do I need? An affidavit from Jesus H. Christ?”

“That would help. Notarized with a heavenly stamp, if you wouldn’t mind.” While he jokes around, the curtains inside the house flutter.

The stalker, still in his car, turns his head and makes a call. It doesn’t take a degree in criminal justice to tell his clock is counting down.

Inching my door open further, I exit my vehicle, and crawl to the hedges lining the sidewalk. “Are you helping or not?”

“Relax dude. The car belongs to a rental company. The driver gave them a fake ID and used a shell corporation’s credit card. Wanna tell me what the fuck you’re up to?”

“Not particularly. What about the girls? Anything on them?” Creeping toward the four-door’s right back tire, I lower the volume and place the cellphone closer to my ear.

“The teen has no social media footprint. Odd for someone her age. The older one has all new Facebook, Insta, and TikTok accounts. Oh yeah, despite their uncanny similarities, the two are not related.”

An insult comes to mind, and a grin spreads over my face. “I thought you were some super IT genius. That’s the best you can do, bro?”

“I didn’t say I was done. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I got the impression you were in some kind of hurry.”

Before I can answer, the moon pops out from behind a cloud and reflects on my perp’s pistol barrel. With adrenaline rushing through my veins, I grab my weapon and brace for a run.

“Gotta go. Nitey-nite.” Breaking the connection, I tailgate the car in front of me into the yard, and pray my instincts are right when the armed man exits his vehicle.

“Police. Drop your gun and raise your hands. Do it.” As I suspected, the guy has no business being there and bolts.

My wound reopens, I give chase and lose him at a six-foot wooden fence. If I was home, I’d call for backup. Instead, like a fucking puppy, I return to the girls’ porch with my tail between my legs.

“Don’t move.” The oldest points a pistol to my chest and because I’ve reached my monthly quota of bullets, I freeze.

Ten fingers out, I put up my hands. “I’m going to lower my weapon and put it down real slow-like. Okay?”

After she nods, I bend at the waist, place my pistol on the ground, and gaze over at hers. “How about you do the same?”

“How about you shut the fuck up. What the hell are you doing out here?” Arms straight, feet braced, I find no fault in her form.

In spite of, or because of my precarious situation, my cock jumps to attention. Perhaps I do need my head examined.

“That man followed you from the beach, had a weapon, and entered your key code. I confronted him and he ran off. If it walks like a duck and quacks...”

She rolls her eyes. “What if I wanted to talk to said mallard?”

“Do you always chit-chat with a gun aimed at a person’s heart?” When I glower at the Glock in her hand, she lowers it below my belly button.

“I might. What business is it of yours?” The intense fire in her brown eyes, I find dangerous and attractive.

Clearly, my near-death experience tainted my judgement because I have this incredible, nonsensical urge to kiss her. What I wouldn’t give to delve deep and solve her mysteries. My jeans, already tight behind the fly, become more painful as she bites down on her lower lip.

What are you hiding? “Let me call the police. I’m sure the locals can sort this out.” The instant the phrase leaves my mouth, she scowls and points her weapon back at my chest.

“You have two choices. Leave, or I shoot you and claim you were an intruder.”

“Seriously?” For a moment, I consider flashing my badge, but getting shot sucks big-time.

Our eyes meet, and I use all my training to make her understand I’m trying to help. “Before I go, tell me. Are you two in trouble?”

Unwavering, she holds my gaze. “Our father has many enemies. He’s counting on me to keep her safe.”

“You’re lying. Why?” Despite my attempts to appear nonthreatening, her eyes widen, and she gasps.

“Who the hell are you?” When she backs into the doorframe, I take a deep breath, lock onto her beautiful brown irises, and lower my butt to my heels.

“Someone you can trust.” Once my fingers latch onto the weapon, I flip the safety on, and hold it forth. “Go ahead. Take it.”

She snatches it from my open palm, our forearms brush together, and a bolt of lust shoots between us. The dark centers on her gorgeous chocolate orbs grow larger, her mouth forms into a perfect O, then her cool façade slips back in place.

“As much as I would love to shoot you, the ensuing chaos would draw attention. Just go, please. And forget you ever met us.”

“Whatever you wish, princess.” Careful not to disturb the prints she left on my weapon, I slip it in my jacket pocket next to a smooth plastic pen.

Taking a risk, I grab her wrist, and scribble on her palm. “In case you change your mind, this is my number.”

Chapter 4

Sky

I am so fucked. In my humble opinion, people walk around with a weapon for three reasons. They're criminals, good guys, or scared shitless. The way-too perceptive Mr. Buttinsky has an authoritative air way beyond his years. What if the FBI sent him to check up on me? Could this assignment be a test to see how I handle pressure?

Hmm, perhaps he's CIA. Brownstone said they always stick their noses where they don't belong. Holy fuck, what if he's one of Tommy's evil chameleon competitors?

Whoever he is, he needs to vacate my premises.

Now.

Resisting the urge to spit on my hand and rub the ink off on my jeans, I smile super-super-sweet. "Listen, I'm a professional and don't need or want your help."

Charlie, who I told specifically to stay hidden, jumps up behind me. "She's also an awesome tutor and plays a mean game of chess."

Dean Brennan, if that's his real name, reaches over my shoulder and tugs a lock of my client's hair. "Hey kiddo, can I ask why you don't have an Insta account? TikTok?"

"My dad won't let me. He's uber controlling." Her cagey answer sends a warmth of pride into my chest. If the wrong people get wind of Tommy O'Malley's daughter on the lam, things will get far fuglier than they are now.

The insistent, annoying man quirks up one side of his mouth, a panty-wetting move he's no doubt practiced in front of the mirror. "Before I leave, I need to have your real names, in case I'm questioned by the police."

“Sky Young. Google me. I run my own security business.” While heat pools between my legs, I press my thighs together, and will away my body’s response to his musky scent.

The dark-haired man rasps a palm over the sexy stubble on his jaw and he shakes his head. “You mean the phony website? It took me about thirty seconds to figure out the sham.”

Fuck. The Feds assured me my cover was solid. His keen insight suggests I ought to assess him further.

My gaze narrows with my fiercest scowl, but the cursed man grins, and leans in closer. “So? Who are you?”

My weapon in my pocket, I click off the safety, and point in his direction. “Sorry. Above your paygrade. C’mon Charlie. Time to leave. And I swear to God, mister, if you follow, I will shoot you.”

His cocky grin sends a zing straight to the nether-lips who haven’t voiced their opinion about sex for months, perhaps years. Oh, hell to the abso-fucking-lutely not. No way I’m going to be attracted to this, this, nosey Parker.

“Enough talk. Nice meeting you. Sayonara, auf wiedersehen, arrivederci, buh-bye.” My gut clenches when he makes no indication of departing.

What the fuck should I do next? Decision made, I make a fist, punch a pressure point on his neck, and he drops.

“Charlie, help me drag him to the bathroom.” Once I’m sure his wrists are securely tie-wrapped behind the john, I slap his face until he moans.

“What the hell?” He has the audacity to sound angry.

The guy gave me no choice. This dude is way too much of a boy scout to be mixed up with Tommy.

“Sorry.” Kicking his gun under the sink, I place a knife near his foot. Eventually, he’ll be able to free himself, but by then, we’ll be gone.

“See you soon.” My teenage client leans over, kisses his cheek, and stands.

Bouncing up and down, she grabs my arm, and pulls me out the door. “Holy crapola. If I’d known being on the run was so much fun, I’d have done it years ago.”

“It’s not a game, hun. Your father’s enemies want you dead, or worse. Grab your knapsack. Thanks to Inspector Clouseau, here, we have no idea if the guy who came to the door was friend or foe.”

“Sky, I’m not your enemy, dammit. Do not do this.” As the handsome do-gooder struggles to snap his plastic binds, I pick up my go-bag and follow my charge out the back door to the garage.

After a glance in the rearview mirror confirms we’ve passed the gated communities, I check the GPS, and sigh. “Pennsyl-tucky, here we come.”

Charlie responds to my grin by frowning. “We should stop at home. I bet Daddy’s done with the sale and the threat is over.”

The kid knows better than to ask, but I cut her some slack. It’s easy to forget she’s still in high school.

“Sorry.” One eyebrow raised, I drive deeper into the countryside. One headlight appears behind us, and I don’t think much of it. The second motorcycle puts me on edge. When the next four zoom into view, I lower my foot to the floor and shout above the roar of the engines.

“Get below the dash.”

Charlie glances out back. “Oh shit. Automatic rifles.”

“Stay the fuck down.” My hand reaches to her head and as I push, a blast hits the back window.

Thank God for bulletproof vehicles, but holy forking shit-balls. My left back tire explodes, the SUV pulls to the side, and I knock the biker alongside us into the ditch. Swerving to the right, I lose another tire, and then, two more.

Glancing down at the slowing speedometer, I recall the maximum speed for run-flat tires is fifty miles per hour and I’m doing seventy.

“Look out!” My passenger grabs the wheel.

Fuck me. A giant tractor blocks the road. I slam on the brakes, the world spins, we dip, fly, and land hard. As corn stalks attack us from all sides, we race forward, and jerk to a stop. Once I catch my breath, I grab the knife under my seat, and stab the airbags.

As air whooshes out, I turn to the wide-eyed girl.
“Whatever happens, do not leave this vehicle.”

Chapter 5

Dean

Wrists bound behind a toilet, face inches from the porcelain bowl, I pray my brothers never get wind of this moment. If so, I'll never hear the end of it.

Using my teeth and the edge of the vanity, I open the pocketknife Charlie snuck into my hand as she kissed my cheek. God bless her. At least one of the two women has some horse sense.

After I cut through the plastic ties, I open my copy of Sky's GPS and find their location. Once I confirm the intruder from earlier is not lying in wait, I race out the door, hop in my car, and follow the signal.

Barreling through country roads, I slow at a four-way stop, and pull my right earlobe. The inner tunnel started to tingle at the beach and now the urge to scratch has become unbearable. The two women are in deep shit. My Itchy Ear has spoken.

Gated communities fly past in a blur. A few stores follow, then nothing but corn. Horror movies, starting with *Freddy*, *Children of the Corn*, and *A Field of Screams* all come to mind when the dot on my cellphone's screen freezes in place.

Shit. Multiple automatic weapons fire, my foot stomps on the gas, and as I roll down my window, the sound echoes off a nearby barn. Heart now pounding, I switch my lights off, reach the last curve, and glide to a stop. Counting six bikers, I crawl on my belly in the space between the stalks and gasp.

They have Charlie and Sky pinned down in the middle of the field.

One of the riders lowers his weapon and shouts toward the road. "The boss said to keep her alive."

“Which her?” As a leather-faced oldster straddles his hog and tugs on his waist-length beard, a younger one strides over the fallen corn until they’re face to face.

“I don’t know, pops. Guess we bring them both back and let her decide.”

The senior club member spits near the other’s boots. “And how do you suggest we pry them out? A can opener?”

Leaving the two geniuses to argue, I creep deeper into the thick vegetation toward the vehicle and create a plan to take out the four on the road and the two in the field.

One mistake and my brothers will be burying me in pieces.

A deep breath later, I fire eight rounds in quick succession, two in each center of mass. With them down, I bolt through the rows of corn to the idiots trying to crowbar open the driver’s side door.

As they stare at the bloody mess, I shout behind their backs. “Police. Hands up.”

They must’ve missed that day in kindergarten. Neither follows directions well, so I drop them with two more bullets. Following protocol, I kick their weapons clear, and after, check for pulses.

“This one’s still alive.” Sky, who I didn’t detect exiting the vehicle, squats beside the SUV, near one of those who tried to kill her.

“Who sent you?” The female badass waits fifteen seconds before sticking her index finger into his bullet wound.

She wiggles it until he screams, then lowers her face to his. “You tell me who hired you and I’ll call an ambulance. You don’t...”

She shrugs, but he doesn’t answer, so I lower onto my heels beside them. “If you want your brethren to bury you, how about you tell us where your clubhouse is at. No one will know you snitched.”

“Church’s thrift shop. Say Snake sent you.” Coughing up blood, his eyes become glassy, and one shiver later, he exhales his last breath.

Fuck, what a waste. Six lives gone by my hand. Could I have done anything different and had a better outcome?

As my mind replays the events of the evening, Sky stands and stares at the carnage.

After helping Charlie out of the bulletproof Mercedes, she cups my face. “Where the hell did you learn to shoot like that?”

“Let’s say I come from a competitive family.” Shaking my head, I pick up my phone, but when I start to dial nine-one-one, she slaps it out of my hands.

“No. You can’t. Not until we find out who hired them.” She doesn’t appear insane, but she has a few screws loose if she thinks I’m going to leave here without explaining what went down to the authorities.

“Why in God’s name would I risk jailtime?”

“If I say I’m working undercover for the FBI, is that reason enough?”

Studying her face, I find no signs of deception, and whistle through my teeth. “What about Charlie? We should bring her home, first.”

The spunky kid grins as if she’d spent the evening at the movies, instead of almost being killed by a motorcycle gang. “Don’t worry. I’ll hide in the back. I do this all the time.”

Chapter 6

Sky

Chauffeuring us back the way we came, my reticent hero makes a call. “Yo, Drac. Find out what you can about motorcycle clubs near Lewes.”

“Why? Your fingers broken?”

At the distorted chuckle in the car’s front speakers, the handsome younger brother rolls his brown eyes. “Sky and Charlie are listening in, so try not to be a complete asshat, and yes, it is important. Life and death, okay? And before you say it, I understand I’ll owe you one forever, and...”

While the two banter, I put four and four together. Same last name plus computer-whiz equals the brainiac who saved us from the apocalyptic internet incident. *Holy shit*. If I’m right, the fingers flying over a keyboard belong to the most talented hacker on planet earth, Colby Brennan.

“You’re supposed to be on vacation, baby bro, recovering from a gunshot wound.” The older sibling’s revelation causes my jaw to drop, but Dean doesn’t miss a beat.

“Hey, everyone has their own definition of fun. I promise to read you in as soon as I know more.” The gorgeous man glances over at me, daring me to say something. Far be it for me to comment on catching a bullet.

The background clicking stops followed by a rapid succession of meows. “Sorry about the noise. Felis thinks he’s hungry... Yess... I found them. The club has about two dozen ex-con members. They all have thick rap sheets. You don’t want to mess with them.”

“Who’s in charge of these lovely debutantes?” Dean grins, peers out at the road, and when he winks my way, I wonder if I’ve finally met my match, a cannon looser than myself.

“A guy named Spider. Dino, I’m not kidding. I’ll text their location but before you go, take a deep breath, and whatever you’re about to do, don’t.” The warning sends a chill down my spine, but the hottie beside me laughs it off.

“Copy that, mommy number four.” After he hangs up, I recall the scene in the cornfield and have second thoughts of my own.

Perhaps we should pay heed to the genius. As I open my mouth to suggest we turn around, the man with nine lives minus one taps my arm. “So, Mata Hari, we recently killed a half dozen bikers. Where’re we going next?”

“To Disney World?” My lame joke earns me a chuckle.

Then, he types an address into his car’s GPS. “When we get there, stay in the car.”

His bossiness makes me bristle. Even my Navy SEAL dad knew better than to use that condescending tone. “So, let me get this straight. You’re going to walk in there, all by yourself, and politely ask who paid them to kill me and Charlie? That’s not a plan, it’s suicide.”

“They have your image. They’re going to recognize you, princess.”

We argue until Dean parks in front of a dilapidated farmhouse surrounded by a sea of junk. Well-defined abs on display, he slips his weapon into his waistband as Charlie climbs over the back seat and hides under a blanket.

“You sure about this? Don’t you want to contact your handler, first?” The trust he has in me sends pangs of guilt rushing through my veins.

“Ah, no. He often leaves me to my own devices.” *Yeah, that’s stretching the truth a bit.* I should’ve told him I haven’t been able to reach my guy. Now, it’s too late.

“Listen, my brothers have friends in the JTTF. I can ask them to intervene.”

“No. My contact made it clear I was only to speak to him.” *He also might’ve mentioned how if I fuck up his mission, I’ll*

be selling burgers and french fries the rest of my life.

“Okay, Agent Young. FBI trumps out-of-state cop. You can run this op.” His fingers spread over my lower back as he leads me to the door and our eyes meet. If we were in a bedroom, I’d grab the back of his head, pull his lips to mine, and kiss the living b’jesus out of him.

Instead, I nod, press the paper bag full of phones to my chest, and follow him into the back of the store. Six sets of eyes lift and stare. At the back wall, three members swivel away from the cement-block-plywood bar. Behind them, industrial shelves hold a few bottles of cheap booze while a white refrigerator covered in greasy fingerprints whines.

“Police.” Dean flashes a badge in one hand, holding his weapon in the other. “We need a word with Spider.”

Two grizzly, gray-beards snicker by the pool table. The one in a red-checkered shirt sinks a striped ball into the back corner pocket, leans on his stick, and raises his brows. “Don’t know anyone by that name.”

I empty the sack on the makeshift bar and the cellphones clink and clatter. “We left your friends in a cornfield. These belonged to them.”

Well, at least we got their attention. Five heads turn toward one wearing an eye patch who we can now assume is their leader. The biker’s knife scar runs down his cheek, and from his sneer and the AK pointed at our bellies, I would guess he means to kill us.

No one blinks or moves. Even the fat belly bent over the pool table remains frozen as Spider sucks air through his teeth.

“You two got a death wish?”

Face grim, hand steady, Dean aims his Glock at the biker’s heart. “Not so much. We don’t need more trouble. Give me the name of who hired you to go after the women.”

“Six of us, two of you. Odds are in our favor.” As the president shifts on his feet, a click sounds from an open window.

The deafening blast happens so fast and so loud, for a moment, I wonder if someone lobbed a grenade.

Spider puts a hand to his bloody ear while the others search for a shooter but she's outside and holding the hair-trigger AK like she was born with it. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Cursing, the boss motions for his men to drop their weapons and glares at the girl. "You got balls, kid."

"Name please." At her sweet smile, the tatted felon belly-laughs.

"Mark Snyder, whatever that's worth to ya. Now get the fuck out of my clubhouse."

With the barrel of Charlie's weapon resting on the windowsill, Dean and I back out of the building. Once we're clear, Dean hurries the teen into the vehicle leaving me to stab twelve motorcycle tires.

Chapter 7

Dean Brennan

As I drive away from the club, my knuckles turn white and my teeth clench. While Sky's plan worked, I have a tough time believing the FBI would sanction using a teenage kid to watch your six. In fact, when I mull over her story, I wonder if the gorgeous brunette works for the Feds at all. Perhaps, she has her own agenda, noticed my attraction to her, and has played me for a rube. Well, if she is a Fed, she won't mind me calling Manhattan's Joint Terrorism Task Force.

"The JTTF owes me a favor." After I make my decree, I turn my head toward her, but she doesn't bat an eyelash.

"Go ahead." Tone neutral, her long lashes lift to reveal her unwavering gaze.

"What about your handler?" Thank God, for the road, which forces my eyes back on point and breaks the spell she has on me.

"He's been unreachable for over two days." For a moment, her whisper doesn't register, but when it does, my brain explodes.

Holy fucking crap, I am way out of my depth. My bullets will be found in those bikers, and I'll be looking at life. Both fists clenched, I call my brother, Adrian, and brace for the fallout.

"This better be good, pissy-pants." Ade's gravelly voice, added to the nickname, tells me all I have to know about his bullshit-o-meter's tolerance.

In these situations, my end of the conversation needs to stay short and precise. "I want you to bring O'Brien on board."

“Because?” His terse tone grates on my nerves. Sure, it’s a huge ask, but he doesn’t need to be an asshole about it.

“Long story.” I hesitate and use the time to pray he’ll bail me out without a long lecture.

“Dude, you’re the one who woke me up in the middle of the fucking night. Spill.”

“Didn’t Drac fill you in?” In all fairness, it’d be easier if I didn’t have to start from the get-go.

“No. And don’t tell me you dragged him into one of your messes.” His wife says something in the background, and his voice softens as he tells her to go back to sleep.

Hoping Essy’s calm disposition rubs off on him, I ’fess up. “Okay, I won’t say it out loud, but I may have asked him for a little help.”

“Fuck. Out with it, Dino.”

My eyebrows raise at Sky and once she nods, I inhale. “On a sidenote, you should remember you were the one who suggested I chill out at the shore.”

“Oh God, hold on, I can see I’m going to need coffee.” The bed squeaks, his feet pad across his hardwood floor, and after a cupboard door taps shut, his breath returns to the phone.

While the machine hisses, I retrace my eventful night. “My landlady gave me tickets to a lantern tour on the beach and insisted I take pictures for her. When I got there, a teenage girl went missing, and I joined in the search.”

As I congratulate myself on my clever spin, the teen, who I assumed was asleep in the back, pops her head up between the seats. “Hi, Dean’s brother. This is Charlie and I wasn’t lost, I was hiding. You see, Sky’s my bodyguard. By the way, her real name is Ophelia Lipanski. She helped me escape from one of my dad’s clients. They got pissed off because he reneged on a nuclear weapons deal.”

“Jesus.” I pull to the side of the road so I can pay attention. “Are you hearing this Ade?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Glaring at Sky, or whatever the fuck we should call her, I swivel in my seat so I can speak with the girl. Her starry-eyed gaze tells me she's got a crush on me. I hesitate to use her feelings to my advantage, but if what she says is true, we need answers fast.

“Can you back up a little, kiddo? First, who's your father?”

“Tommy O'Malley.” Her chin juts out as she speaks the infamous arms dealer's name.

Holy fuck, this night keeps getting better and better. “So, he hired Sky, I mean Ophelia here, to be your bodyguard. Is that right?”

“Yes, because we're almost identical twins.” The teenager taps the other woman on the shoulder. “Please don't be mad. It was all his idea, and I had no say in his decision. I think you're amazing.”

Good God, the arms broker brought in Ophelia to be her decoy. As the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, I ask the teen the million-dollar question, “Did your father sell someone nuclear weapons?”

She shakes her head, no. “He was going to, but when he learned they wanted to use them in the states, he wouldn't go through with the deal. Besides, the missiles are so old, they're falling apart.”

Adrian curses, and his words are clipped and dangerous. “Okay, Miss Lipanski. Who the fuck is your FBI contact? I'm going to conference him in.”

“You think I haven't tried to reach him? He's not picking up and even if he did, he forbade me from involving anyone else. Just speaking to you could be considered an act of treason.”

“Fine. You have an hour to fix this. Otherwise, I start making calls, including the president, if I have to.”

After he hangs up, Sky, AKA Ophelia, AKA Lia, glances at me. “Your big brother doesn't actually know the president, does he?”

The only answer she deserves is my stink eye.

Thanks to her, I'm a wanted man.

Chapter 8

Sky

His sharp jaw pulsing and his mouth grim, the youngest of the famous Brennan brood has driven for fifty-three minutes and not said a word. You'd think his sullen anger would make him less appealing, but oh no, not so. For some godforsaken reason, I want him more than ever.

After placing another call to Brownstone, I wrap my arms around my legs and imagine my cheek against my driver's broad naked chest with his strong palms cupping my butt cheeks. His thick lips crash down on mine, his tongue thrusts into my mouth, and his fingers rub into my heat until... Jesus, thoughts of his cock inside me almost make me come.

"Can you please stop at the next gas station? I need to pee." *And relieve my aching clit.*

"Okay, but then, you start talking." A few miles later, he pulls into a parking lot in the middle of nowhere. The door handle under the stick figure woman doesn't turn so I waltz into the convenience store and ask the missing-tooth manager for a key.

Expecting to be skeeved out, I'm surprised at the bathroom's cleanliness. Back against the tiles, I unzip my pants, reach between my slick folds, and picture Dean's hands on me. The blip of an orgasm later, I finish using the facilities, and call my Fed contact. When someone picks up, I almost drop the phone in the toilet bowl.

"Hello. Is this Lia?" The female voice causes my arm hairs to stand on end. *Who the fuck is she and who told her my nickname?*

Instructed to trust no one, I ignore her question. "Where the hell is Brownstone?"

“You will report to the nearest FBI office and bring Charlie.” Her command makes me snicker.

I’m not handing myself over to just anybody. “Who are you?”

“Check the news and ditch your burner. I’m hanging up now.”

“Wait. For God’s sake, I need help.” My plea goes to dead air and liquid wells in the corners of my eyes, but the daughter of a SEAL never allows tears to fall.

Fuck. Browser open, I scroll and find the local NBC affiliate and hit play. *Pending further investigation, six deceased bikers are assumed to be victims of an ongoing drug war, and not a threat to public safety.*

How long before they match Dean’s gun to the crime is anyone’s guess. My heart races and I gasp at the next video.

David Brownstone’s body washed up in Henlopen State Park and anyone seeing Sky Young should call the FBI immediately.

No, no, no. I haven’t set eyes on the man for weeks. I can’t be a person of interest. In the mirror, my pale complexion turns green. Added to the dark lines under my eyes and the knots in my hair, I’m ready to compete in the Miss Zombie America contest.

Not wanting Brennan to suspect anything, I splash water on my face, run fingers through my tangles, and walk out the door straight into Charlie.

Legs pinched together, she races past me. “Guard the door please?”

“Sure.” As I lean against the entry, my eyes wander toward the hottie.

When his gaze lifts to mine, electricity zaps across the pavement, my tits go hard, and Franken-nub comes to life. Perhaps, once this is over, we can jump into bed, have a one-night nasty, and be done with it.

A flush later, we hand back the key, and walk to the alpha male, leaning on his Ford with his sexy forearms crossed over his chest.

Before I can tell him about the call, he grabs me by the arm and puts me in the driver's seat. "Charlie, hop in right next to her, k?"

"What's wrong?"

As the teen glances between us, both adults lie in unison, "Nothing."

Gun out, Dean jumps in behind me and sends goosebumps all over my body as he whispers in my ear. "No funny business, or I turn you both in right now. Did you kill the guy the cops found in the bay?"

No doubt, he called his genius hacker sibling while I was in the john, and at this point, is better informed than me. I can't believe he's even asking.

"What? Lordy, no. Never. He was my contact, and I haven't seen nor heard from him in days. Pinkie-swear."

After all we've been through, how dare he accuse me of murder. I raise my little finger, then flip him the bird.

He grabs my wrist. "Is your mission to find a missing nuclear device?"

As I ponder a treason-less answer that won't land me in jail. Charlie unbuckles her belt, and swivels on her knees. "Actually, there's three, but they're not lost. My dad knows where all three are located."

In my rearview mirror, the man holding a gun on me shakes his head. "Do either of you know who killed the Fed?"

"Nope. No idea." My head twists at Charlie who plops back down in her seat, pouts, and crosses her arms.

"Brownstone was a complete ass. He wanted Sky to sleep with my dad, but my step-witch caught wind."

"Who the hell told you this story?" The road requires my attention, otherwise my eyes would roll into my forehead. I do,

however, venture a glance at Mount Vesuvius in the back seat whose head is about to explode.

The brilliant kid misses the tense atmosphere in the car and continues to prattle as if talking about the weather. “Want to hear something else? My father was supposed to sell the nukes to a middleman who assured him the buyer was overseas. When he learned the broker was working for the ORA, he stopped the deal. Wanna know more?”

Dean sighs, “Not sure I do kid, but go ahead.”

Chapter 9

Dean

How an arms dealer could sire a child lacking verbal filters blows my mind. The Fates show no favorites, that's for damn sure. Holstering my weapon, I try to think, but Sky makes it hard, so to speak. My cock has his own agenda which has nothing to do with saving the world from a nuclear disaster.

The swollen state of my poor appendage can only be blamed on her. She thought I wasn't watching but hell, how could I not notice how she squirmed and rubbed between her legs. When she asked me to stop for a bathroom break, I knew what she needed and wished I could help but now is not the time.

Soon, baby.

Hidden in the dark, back seat of my SUV, I unzip my fly and relieve the pressure. This frees more oxygen to the brain. No doubt, God is laughing his ass off because never, in recorded history, has there been a more unlikely trio of heroes.

“Ladies, I can't decide on our next steps, until you let me in on what happened before we met. Let's start with you, Ophelia.”

“Please, call me Lia or Sky. Unlike Hamlet's girlfriend, I'm not insane, nor would I consider suicide for want of the love of a self-absorbed asshole.”

No doubt, the barb was intended for me, but I slept through most of English Lit, and her joke falls flat. Hoping for a truce, especially from Shakespeare, my fingers reach around the headrest and massage her tight shoulders. One satisfied moan and instead of the seductor, I become the one seduced.

Perhaps I should try a different tack. “Listen, I'm sorry I didn't believe you, but you have to admit, you've been lying

since I arrived here.”

“Only because Brownstone insisted.” Her loyalty, while admirable, may be misplaced.

Flies, honey, and vinegar in mind, I begin anew. “Sky, tell me how you met your handler.”

As my digits work their magic, her neck muscles loosen, and she sighs. “I’d been working for Tommy for over a year when a men-in-black-dude sat next to me in a bar. He claimed to be a recruiter for the FBI which should’ve been my first warning. You see, most law enforcement agencies don’t offer employment to people who have ADD.”

Brows raised in the rearview mirror, she glances off the highway. Although her admission surprises me, I don’t comment. Clearly the Feds did their homework and used her deepest desire against her.

The blinker clicks, she moves into the fast lane, and stares at the white dotted line in the road. “The next day, the same suited stranger upped the ante and claimed he could guarantee me a cushy job if I agreed to be his informant. Of course, I declined. After he mentioned nukes and swore all I had to do was help find their location, I caved. Piece of cake, right? Before I could start my assignment, armed men attacked Tommy’s estate. We left under a barrage of bullets and waited at the Rehoboth safe house for over a week. Later, I received a message in the form of tour tickets on my burner. You’ve seen the rest, firsthand.”

As her story digests, I turn toward the insightful teen. “Anything you want to add?”

Closing her eyes, Charlie purses her lips for almost a minute, then adds, “Now that you mention it, I did see the letters O R A on the mercenaries’ shirts.”

Ah fuck. My jaw drops, I scroll through my photos, and hold up the screen. “Did it look like this?”

“Uh-huh. Who are they?” Brows furrowed, the girl glances up at me.

At first, I can't believe the teenager never heard of them. Then, I recall what she said about having limited access to social media and give her the abridged version. "The Only Remaining Americans. They have one agenda, to bring down the government and start over. The constitution, they say, is the problem. Without it, we wouldn't be arguing over first amendment rights and gun laws."

A master at the game of intrigue, I play out possible scenarios in my head and come to one conclusion. "We need to get Charlie someplace safe."

"Charlie is sitting right here and has perfect hearing." The kid deserves to understand my reasoning.

"You are your father's weakest link. The only reason they would've risked storming your house is to use you as leverage and force your dad's hand." Once my words sink in, her stubborn chin retracts and cheeks red, she nods.

"Mmm. You're probably right."

"It's only for a day or two." Eyes on the road, Sky reaches over the cupholder to squeeze the teen's bicep, then flicks her gaze toward me. "Where do you suggest we take her?"

"Ever been to New York City?" I wink at the kid, and as a smile expands over her face, I ring my nocturnal brother.

"Whazzup?" Despite the hour, I'm not surprised he answers on the first ring.

"I'm in a bit of a jam." To admit I need help does not come easy and I brace for the fallout.

"So, what else is new?" Normally, his jibe would roll off my back, but I haven't had any sleep and am in no mood for brotherly bullshit.

"Come off it. When was the last time I asked for a favor?"

"The time we bailed you out of jail?" Showing no mercy, he snickers and my patience snaps.

"Holy shit. You're dredging up my freshman year in college? Seriously. If you can't do it, I'll find another way."

The clacking keys stop, and he inhales sharply. “Does this have something to do with the nukes?”

“Yeah. The ORA are the ones who attacked O’Malley’s estate.” I know I have his full attention because he whistles through his teeth.

“And this is your idea of a vacation?”

“First of all, it wasn’t a damn holiday, it was forced time off. And secondly, I’m having a grand ol’ time. The bodyguard did say the FBI is involved. Can you check?”

“Copy that. Where are you?” His use of military speech tells me he understands the severity of my situation and my anger subsides.

“Not too far from Wilmington. We’ll meet at the old Cherry Hill Diner and do the exchange there. How soon can you round up everyone?”

“To be sure, let’s say two hours. Okay?”

“Yeah. Come armed and stay invisible.”

“Understood, baby bro. We have your six.” His words make my throat tight and my eyes sting.

“I’m sorry, Drac. You know I wouldn’t’ve gotten you involved unless I had no other options.”

A deep sigh ensues. “It’s what we do, Dino. Stay safe and we’ll see you in a few.”

Once we hang up, the gorgeous woman behind the wheel pokes Charlie’s left arm and motions to a purse under the glove holder. “We need to call your father. Can you put the chip back in?”

At Sky’s question, I wonder what planet I’ve landed on. “You *do* realize he’ll be able to track us, right?”

“Duh, but by the time he can triangulate our position, we’ll be long gone.” Her logic makes sense, but I don’t like it.

One eye on the road, she pushes a button and puts the cellphone to her ear. “It’s me... I know... but I couldn’t stay there... Huh? ... What did you expect? The guy had a gun...”

Well, he should've said he was working for you, or you could've told me he was coming. ...Charlie's safe... I don't know, but the cops said it was gang related... Brownstone? No idea who he is. Tommy, I got this. She's fine, I swear. Give me a couple days to make sure. I'll call you as soon as we get there. Yeah, just a sec."

The bodyguard hands the device to the teenager who rolls her eyes. "Daddy, I'm fine... Uh-huh... yes... I will... I won't... right... okay... Daaaaad, next year, I'll be in college. Are you going to have someone follow me around to all my classes? I mean it. I'm fine. Love you, too. Bye."

Chapter 10

Sky

On the road, Charlie begins to snore and Dean's lips brush against my left ear. "What will Tommy do if he finds out we took his daughter to Manhattan?"

"That's why I called him. If he's not worried about her, he won't send his men to bring her home." Sounding unconvinced, I recheck the rearview mirror.

As far as I can tell, we're not being tailed. When I lean back, calloused digits rub my tight neck. "You mentioned ADD. You don't seem hyper."

He traces the front V of my shirt, my tits harden, and I arch for more. "ADD, no H, and I take Adderall."

"Still?" His left hand disappears for a moment, then slips between my seat and the door.

The minute he squeezes my thigh, hot liquid spurts from my center, my clit swells, and my panties dampen.

"It's not something you grow out of." *Although for years, I prayed I would.*

His fingers slide under my bra and pinch a nipple. "How did you learn all your mad combat skills?"

On the edge of orgasm, my mouth dry, I struggle to keep the car inside the lines. "Before I was diagnosed, my father wanted me to become the first female Navy SEAL. After I was diagnosed, he gave up trying. I tried to prove to him I could function without medication but failed my first semester of college."

I've kept my deepest sorrows to myself for years, but in this surreal moment, driving in the dark, the time seems right.

“And that’s why you jumped at Brownstone’s job offer.”
The ploy seems so obvious, it makes my stomach acids churn.

“I was such a fool. He played me, didn’t he?”

“We’ll probably never know.” Brennan’s short beard tickles my cheek and as he opens my waistband, I gasp.

“What are you doing?” Glancing over at the sleeping teen, I cover the gap with my jacket.

“If you have to ask, I must be doing it wrong. Should I stop?” His warm chuckle sends a spike of desire down my spine.

“No, but it is your turn to drive.” Pulling to the curb, we meet at the bumper and lock lips.

Too soon, headlights shine in the distance and I moan. “We better go.”

Back in the car, I untuck Dean’s shirt and slide my palms across the bumps of his abs.

“Tell me more about your brothers.” As I unzip his fly, he captures my gaze in the rearview mirror, then returns those gorgeous brown eyes to the road.

“Well, let’s see. Dan was the one who found a ton of money in the subway system and Drac saved us from the internet apocalypse.”

“What about the other two? Batman and Robin?”

He snickers, slides out of his coat, and covers his lap.
“They wish. Adrian is the oldest, a broody mother hen. Jasper’s almost as bad. They’re both detectives and think they know everything.”

“So, you, the youngest has something to prove.” Finding his cock, I squeeze gently, and tease until he moves my hand away.

“Jeesh, babe. I can’t. We’re nearly there.” He exits the highway in Cherry Hill and comes to a stop behind a diner where we scope out the situation. Except for an occasional car, the town seems sound asleep.

Dean climbs out from the driver's side and when he stretches, I moan. My God, he's fit and full of muscles, but he's a cop and not for me. A female bodyguard with a disability cannot be fussy about jobs. Despite all that's happened, working for a criminal has paid all my bills, and in that respect, a blessing.

As I check my weapon, Charlie stirs. "Are we here?"

"Yeah, but we're way early. Might as well sleep for a bit more."

Once her lids shut and her breath becomes steady, I join Dean, now leaning against the restaurant.

Eyes on mine, he uses his thumb and forefinger to pinch my chin, then devours my mouth. Having suffered tortuous hours of sexual frustration, I cup his ass, pull him close, spread my thighs, and grind my need over his hard want.

"Fuck me, you feel good." Tilting his head, he slides his tongue into my open lips, and as he digs his fingertips into my scalp, I unfold his hard length.

Legs around his waist, I lower onto his tip and moan.

"Hey, get a room you guys," Charlie shouts from the car.

"Dammit." Face red, the hot cop turns and tucks himself in while I curse myself out from A to Z.

Asswipe, bonkers, careless, delinquent, empty-headed, and feeble-minded...

By the time I get to grossly negligent, the girl's voice calls out again. "Dean, are those your brothers?"

The man who's stolen all my brain cells, jumps in our vehicle, grabs his camera, and curses. "Shit, it's not them."

He puts the lens to my eye. "Do you recognize them?"

"Yeah, I think the one getting out of the truck is Tommy's right hand man." After I glance at Charlie, she nods.

"It's Bear. Let me go talk to him."

“Wait.” Dean thrusts out his arm to block her and points to another line of SUV’s barreling down the highway. “There’s more.”

My eyes widen at the gunfight about to take place. “Can I assume those are not your brothers, either?”

“They are not.” Face grim, he tugs us behind the diner.

Seconds later, a dozen men in green fatigues pile out of their armored vehicles on the other side of the street. As their ORA badges become clear, my resolve strengthens.

No fucking way, assholes. You’ll have to get through me to get Charlie and that is not happening.

Bullets from their automatic weapons ping the diner’s metal wall and my cop growls. “I guess O’Malley’s guys didn’t get the memo.”

“Thank God. Otherwise, we’d be dead.” The mercenaries far outnumber us, but with Tommy’s crew, we have a fighting chance.

“Get in the car, both of you.”

Once we’re all in, Dean jumps into the driver’s seat, bounces over the grass, and parks in front of an apartment building where he puts his phone to his ear. “Yo, bro. World War Three has started. What’s your ETA? ...Better make it three.”

When an ORA vehicle heads toward us, I grab Charlie’s upper arm, drag her inside, across the lobby, and into the elevator cab.

The doors close, I punch the red stop button, and my heart races. “Change clothes with me. Don’t argue. Just do it. And take off all your jewelry, everything. Your father must’ve put a tracker on you.”

As her thoughts race to catch up, her jaw drops. “Check my back. There’s a scar on my shoulder. The doctor said I was nuts, but I always thought I had a piece of metal lodged under the skin.”

Finger pressed on the white scar, I take out my Swiss Army knife. “Shit. This is going to hurt.”

“Do it. I trust you.” With her eyes locked on mine, I slice the scar lengthwise.

Then, using the tool’s tweezers, I pull the miniature tracker and hold it out so she can see.

“Quick. Step on it.” Her advice would make sense, except for what I have in mind.

As I button her shirt and zip up her jeans, Dean pounds on the front of the elevator. “My brothers are here. Charlie, to me. Now!”

The doors slide open, and I push the girl into Brennan’s arms. Certain she’s safe, I race out of the building, fly down the grassy hill past the diner, and stop in the middle of the road with my hands held high.

“I’m giving myself up. Don’t shoot.”

Chapter 11

Dean Brennan

Gun raised, I hold my breath, but neither group of armed men appear interested in the SUV racing down Route 38 with the escaping teenager.

Strange, but hey, sometimes the white hats do catch a break.

“Okay, Sky, let’s go.” Swiveling on my heel, my inner ear itches as I stare at the empty spot where she stood but a moment ago.

Fuck. I dash back into the lobby and when I can’t find her, rush outside toward the diner and gasp.

Oh hell, no. What does Blunder Woman think she’s doing? She walks diagonally across the intersection, arms up in surrender.

For chrissake. Jumping in my vehicle, I speed over the grass into the parking lot, but I’m too damn late. To her right, O’Malley’s men hide behind a drive-through bank. Sky, however, veers to the Hummers lined up beside a firehouse.

Only God can tell what the ORA will do to her.

Jesus, Lord have mercy. A masked gunman grabs my brave woman’s bicep so hard, she screams over the sirens growling louder.

Babe, I’m coming. My teeth grind and my fists clench as she’s shoved into the back seat. After the mercenaries race off, Tommy’s Keystone Cops close the gap, but I keep my distance. About a mile down the road, the ORA blocks the road, the arms dealer’s men engage, and the Hummer with my woman disappears.

“Dammit.” I pound on the steering wheel and call Adrian.
“The terrorists have Sky.”

“I know. Brilliant plan, bro. Everyone was completely fooled.”

“Huh?” *Why does he sound so fucking cheerful?* The scene in front of the diner plays out in my mind’s eye and in a flash, I understand. Always the protector, Lipanski put herself in harm’s way for that kid. The bodyguard knew I’d never agree and kept me in the dark.

While I curse my stupidity, Charlie pipes up in the background. “Don’t be mad, Dean. This is all my fault. Sky figured out I had a tracker under my skin, removed it, then put it in her pocket. My father’s men will follow her. She’ll be fine.”

Holy shit. This whole time, O’Malley had his daughter’s location? Was he using her as bait? And how does this bode for Sky?

As I search my maps app for an alternate route around the Hummers, Jasper says, “She’s going to need stitches. Give me the first aid kit.”

Eventually, Adrian remembers I’m still on the phone. “So, what’s the plan for retrieving your lady friend?”

My dead silence says all he needs to know.

“Ah crap. Don’t worry. Drac put a drone in the air and has eyes on her vehicle. After we hang up, I’ll have him forward the link to your phone. We’ve also reached out to the Feds. You should hear from them soon.”

“Careful. Ophelia thought Tommy had a paid informer inside The Bureau. Tell them to research an agent named Brownstone. I believed their relationship to be... unusual.” The fact he insisted she only speak with him rubbed me the wrong way, but I don’t say so out loud.

While we talk, the ORA stop shooting, enter their vehicles and drive off. If not for my siblings, I’d have no idea where they’ve taken Sky.

“Thank you, all of you.” When my throat grows tight, Jasper laughs.

“We’ve always got your six, baby brother.”

Huh. This time the childish moniker doesn’t piss me off. “Copy that.”

Back on the road, following the drone, my phone rings and I pick up. “Yeah?”

“Brennan? It’s Special Agent Colin O’Brien.”

Finally. I heave out a sigh of relief. “Did my brothers fill you in?”

“Yes. As reckless as Sky’s move was, she put us in an excellent position to find the missing weapons. We’ve got everyone trying to verify your intel, but crossing lines of jurisdiction takes time. However, after saving the internet, the president thinks your brother Drac walks on water and I’m sure we’ll soon have all the resources we need.”

“Thanks, but if you don’t mind me asking, how the fuck did we lose three nuclear missiles?”

Chapter 12

Sky

With half their vehicles fighting off Tommy's thugs, the mercenaries searched me, found Charlie's tracker, and smashed it. After covering my head and binding my limbs, the driver made two left turns and one right. Since then, the vehicle's velocity has remained consistent, so it's safe to assume we're on a highway.

Three-thousand-six-hundred Mississippis and still no rescue. For over an hour, my captor's Kevlar vests have dug into my shoulders. Bruised, I pull in my arms, but the Goliaths on either side of me steal my space.

Recalling I'm supposed to be a teenager, I stop counting and whine, "Why can't I talk to my father?"

One gorilla grunts, and a few equally stimulating conversations later, I give up. Instead, I use sounds to try and pinpoint my location. However, the roar of the engine and the hum of tires on pavement mask any clues.

Four-thousand-and-thirty-two seconds later, the vehicle stops. Bound, nylon over my head, I squint at the five gray blobs arguing outside the car.

"Enough. Do it." The terrorist-in-charge points at me, then one of his flunkies returns to the back seat.

At his evil laugh, I scoot away, and kick out. If I'm going to die, I'll go down fighting. With a hand clamped around my foot, he drags my ass toward him, and flashes a huge knife.

Oh shit. Cold steel brushes against my calves, I brace for the cut, and exhale as my ankle bindings snap. Before I can take my next breath, I'm pulled out of the car by my hair. My scream quiets the crickets and frogs, leaving nothing but the crunch of army boots on gravel.

Shoving my hands forward, I walk toward the only thing I can see through the fabric, a grainy porch light. When the giant pulls too hard, I howl, stumble, and fall to the ground. Knees wet, I rise, inhaling mud, manure, and hay.

“Move it.” After the asshole drags me up three hollow wooden steps, I cross the ten-foot room, am pushed down a hall, and land on a soft, but urine-soaked surface.

As soon as the door latches, I make two fists, and thrust my arms down on either side of my thigh. Two painful attempts later, broken ties fall to the floor.

Thanks, Dad.

Not knowing how long I have before the mercenaries return, I tug off the balaclava and rub my blistered skin in the dim light. The room has two boarded-up windows, a doorless closet, and a stained mattress. Deep cracks line the walls over four-inch plank flooring.

By now, Tommy knows his daughter has been taken by terrorists. How long before he comes looking for Charlie? Or does he already know she escaped with the Brennans?

A phone rings in the other room and one of the kidnappers answers. “Hello, Tommy, my friend... No need for obscenities... I see... Well, I beg to differ. We have your girl and are willing to exchange her for the items you owe us. Unfortunately for you, the price has increased.”

The man chuckles and no longer muted, O’Malley swears. “I want proof of life.”

Fuck. The moment my boss hears my voice, he’ll know I’m not his daughter. While he and I get along quite well, I’m worth more to him dead than alive.

“Hold on.” His boots clomp on the floor and grow louder.

Bracing beside the door, I bend my knees. When the door cracks open, my foot connects with the guy’s balls.

“Owww, Jesus.” While he grips his cojones, I grab his gun, slip the knife from his sheath, and toss it in the corner.

“Hands up.” Back to the entrance, I loosen my grip and pretend to be unaware of the man about to snatch the pistol out of my hands.

Once I let go, the safety clicks, I close my eyes, and...

“For chrissake, stop you idiots.” Phone to his ear, the leader enters the room. “Your offspring is alive enough to grab a weapon and unman one of my best warriors. I think this is the only proof you will get today. The next evidence will be a finger, one at a time, until you give us what we agreed upon.”

The boss hangs up, retrieves a long blade from his belt’s sheath, and sticks the point near my eye. “Do it again, little lady, and I will gut you.”

Acting contrite, I allow them to lead me back into the bedroom where they double-tie-wrap my arms and legs. After their voices fade, I snicker and stuff Mr. Smashed-Balls’s knife under the mattress. On the floor now, I scootch to the gap under the door, and listen.

“Mack. Why not let me kill her?” The man I kneed in the groin whines like a little girl.

“Because, stupid, we need to trade her for the nukes.” The big boss pauses near my door, then adds, “Give O’Malley an hour. If he doesn’t give us a location, put her finger in a box and messenger it to him.”

The door handle turns and before I can roll away, wood smacks me in the nose.

While I blink the stars away, a Charles Manson type twists his huge handlebar mustache and stares down at me.

“Listening at the door? How clever. If you’re so smart, you know I can’t possibly let you live.”

My head bobs and I swallow hard. “Can I at least have a last meal? Steak and potatoes? A Big Mac and a coke? Buffalo wings with blue cheese?”

His laugh doesn’t reach his soulless eyes. “Brave, I like that. Not at all like the spoiled brat I expected. But out here in the sticks, we have no Door Dash. What else would you like?”

“Knowledge. I know my father reneged on your deal, but I never learned why.”

Mack chuckles and twists the long ends of his facial hair. “I believe he found out our intent and lost his spine. The only way to a new world order is to wipe out the old.”

“No one will survive a nuclear winter.”

“Lies, made up by the elite. In a few years, scientists will figure out how to clean it up.”

My God, the man is delusional. “I suppose you’re right. I mean, they lied about global warming.”

“Exactly my dear. And the missiles I bought are no doubt old. At best, one might destroy a city, but that’s why we purchased three.” *What a moron.* The government disposes of old weapons for a reason. The fuel is old, and the electronics are ancient.

“Excellent idea. Redundancy is always a wise plan.”

“Too bad I must kill you, but if you cooperate, I will kill you mid-orgasm.” He tugs up on his jeans and I hold back my gag reflex until he shuts the door.

Hissing out my breath, I fall on the mattress, kick off my shoes, and use my toes to retrieve the knife. It’s been years since I practiced sawing through binds behind my back and unlike riding a bike, does not come easy. When I finally free myself, the crickets have slowed their tune. The sun will be coming up soon.

The tip of the blade near the strike plate, I push the lock lever into the socket and crack open the door. Arms crossed over his chest in a kitchen chair, one dude sleeps. Down the hall, Mack snores on a mattress, his laptop at his side. The second bedroom has a guy asleep on a cot, but the last ORA member must be outside.

Fuck. The ancient wood creaks under foot and Mack shouts. While I turn, he raises his long knife in the air. Before he can strike, I jump down and slide across the floor. Hooking one foot behind his leg, I stomp my heel and snap his kneecap.

Then, I race into the kitchen, grab Sleeping Beauty's gun, and start firing.

Behind me, a pistol cocks and I raise my weapon.

Dammit. I'm dead.

"Jesus, babe, I almost shot you." Dean lowers his weapon.

Chapter 13

A few minutes earlier...

Dean

The day we met, Tommy's kid claimed she had no online presence and I pray she's right. Otherwise, the ORA's going to realize they have the wrong woman and when they do, Sky's as good as dead.

The drone that followed the Hummers to a farmhouse, now circles overhead and projects heat signatures. Parked out of sight, I time how long it takes the guard to circle the farm. On the next pass, I sneak behind the building's overgrown shrubberies and listen below a pair of boarded-up windows.

"If you're so smart, you know I can't possibly let you live." I'm guessing the voice belongs to Mack Snyderon, the ORA leader.

Sky makes a snarky comment about a last meal, and I swallow hard. My God, her mouth is going to get her killed.

Once I've wiped away my relief, I text my brothers for an ETA. A few seconds later, my butt vibrates, and I lift the screen to my face. O'Brien says the FBI's at least two hours out.

Shit. Having no other choice, the moon lowers, and I make myself comfortable. Soon after it disappears, the activity inside slows, and snores replace conversations. About an hour before dawn, a younger man pauses at the front door and motions another over. While the two light up their cigarettes, I inch closer on knees and elbows.

The wider awake of the two, coughs and spits a few feet to the left of my position. "Are you okay with lighting up DC, Philly *and* New York? Aren't you worried the radiation will spread?"

“Nah. My family is all out west. You?” The fortyish man who’s been circling the farmhouse sucks in nicotine.

As he slowly exhales, his replacement shakes his head. “Ohio. But I keep thinking about Japan in World War II.”

“Listen kid, the government is trying to scare you. Mack would tell us if it was a problem.” His cult-like faith scares the piss out of me. It’s like watching the idiot teenagers in an apocalyptic movie but much, much worse.

After the barely-adult one scratches his thin beard, he grinds what’s left of his cancer stick into the ground. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just, you know... all our life we’ve heard how nukes would end life as we know it.”

The older merely scoffs. “You can’t believe their bullshit. Politicians lie all the time.”

Holy fucking shit. They’re talking about setting off nuclear weapons in our own damn U.S. of A. The devastation would send us back to the stone age.

I text Colin.

Me: DC, NY, and Philly are the targets

Still behind the bushes, I slow my heart and creep closer to the conversation flowing through the open door.

“Do it now. Go get a finger from the bitch and drop it off at his fucking doorstep.”

Ah, hell. I shoot the two outside the front door, the one in the kitchen, and sprint down the hall. Gun out, I take aim at the one person still standing and when I realize who it is, lower my weapon.

“Jesus, babe, I almost shot you.”

Chapter 14

Sky

Holy shit, I killed a man. Did he have kids? A wife? My gaze lifts to the badass cop, and I freeze under his heated stare.

“Ophelia, you’re in shock. Lower your weapon.” Palms down, Dean steps forward.

Pointing my gun to the ground, he unwraps my index finger from the trigger. Then, with my head to his chest, he lowers us to the smelly mattress.

“Ridiculous.” Sure, I’m shaking, but the temperature in the house dropped fifty degrees. My trembling is unrelated to the river of blood running down the hallway.

“You here, babe?” The man who saved my life empties the magazine and places the pistol beside us.

Meanwhile my dad sounds in my head. *A Navy SEAL shows no emotion.*

“I’m fine, but Mack got away. For a second, I thought you were him. Shit. There may be more in the woods. We need to check it out.” As I push to stand, he tugs me back onto his lap.

“No. They’re all dead except for the one in the barn. You stay. I’ll be right back.” Standing, the man sheds his jacket, places it over my shoulders, and kisses my forehead.

His kind demeanor and woodsy scent make it hard to think straight, but somehow, I manage to snatch a pants leg. “How can you be so sure?”

“Drac’s drone has been circling overhead for hours.” At his maddening smirk, a few more of my brain cells fire.

Urged up by his rough fingertip, my chin lifts. “Wait. You’ve been out there all night? What took you so long?”

“Well, you were the one running the op. I wasn’t sure you wanted help.” His intense stare tells me he’s serious.

Jeesh. No one’s ever put so much trust in me.

My throat tightens, my eyes sting, and I force a smile. “Everything was cool until they insisted on a finger. I-I’m r- rather fond of all t-ten.”

His mouth inches toward mine and after closing the distance, I slip my hand behind his neck. The kiss tastes so amazing, I take it deeper. Groaning, he thrusts his tongue in and out. When he cups my butt cheeks, my tits harden. I need skin, but as I lift his shirt over his head a car engine roars to life.

“Shit.” Dean jumps up, unholsters his weapon, and rushes to the door.

Before he can open it, I hold him back. “Mack can wait. I think I know how to find the nukes.”

“Go on.” Raising his brows, he races to the window and curses at the disappearing motorcycle.

“Why not let Charlie convince her dad to do the right thing?”

On cue, the burner phone on the kitchen table rings and I pick up. “Hello?”

“Who the fuck is this?” The dulcet tones of Tommy’s negotiator now gone, I glance over at Dean, and hit the speaker icon.

“This is Sky. And who may I say is calling?”

“Where’s the bloke I spoke to earlier?”

“I’m afraid he’s otherwise occupied.” Sounding half-operator and half-automated-phone-call, I wink at the man rolling his eyes beside me.

“Where’s Charlie?” The negotiator has no sense of humor, so I match his irritated mood.

“Long story. Go fetch your boss. I want to talk with him, not his mouthpiece.”

A moment of mute follows, then the arms dealer gets on the line. “Sky? Where the fuck is my daughter?”

“She’s safe and if you play ball, I’ll conference her in.”

“Whatever they’re paying you, I’ll triple it.” At Tommy’s insinuation, I bristle.

I would never work for the ORA or betray Charlie’s trust.
“It’s not about the money, sir. Hold on.”

Hand held out, I turn. Once Dean passes his phone to me, I place the two devices facing each other.

The girl speaks first. “Daddy? Please, let the Feds have the nukes. The terrorists want to blow up the whole East Coast. This is not the future I want to live in.”

“I’ll have to discuss it with Fran.”

“Are you fucking serious? I’m never coming home. Not until you give back the weapons. This is my world too, and I don’t want you or her fucking it up.”

“Honey, give me a few to straighten things out. I’ll call you back.” After he hangs up, my jaw drops.

Clearly, I misjudged my employer, as did his daughter.

Francine’s the ringmaster. The rest are her clowns.

Chapter 15

Dean

A farmhouse full of dead bodies and we're still no closer to finding the nukes.

Shit. Keeping my disappointment to myself, I lift my cell to my ear. "Charlie, you did well. Your father will come around. I'm sure of it. Hand the phone over to my brother, if you would."

"Which one?" The tease in her tone tells me they're listening in.

"The smartest." Snickering while my siblings argue in the background, I pull Sky out of the bedroom.

Her hand in mine, I help her step over the deceased terrorist and lead her into the kitchen where two more men lie lifeless, eyes vacant.

Unlike earlier, she stares into space and ignores the gore. "Since when does an arms dealer ask anyone for permission?"

"Sorry, what now?" Outside, I trot her by the guards who only minutes ago enjoyed their last cigarette.

"O'Malley said he needed to check with *her*, first. That's nuts." The brunette's beautiful mouth puckers and not for the first time, my mind wanders to what it might do in the bedroom.

Clearly, I need more caffeine. "And who is *her*?"

"My boss's third wife, Francine Baturina. Fran." The Russian name gives me pause.

Remembering my brothers, I raise my phone higher. "Are you guys getting this?"

Drac speaks up first. "Good copy. Ophelia, what more can you tell me about Tommy's current spouse?"

The bodyguard-slash-Mahta Hari closes her eyes. “Jeez. I only met her once or twice. Brunette. Bitch. About forty. Evil stepmother...”

“Got it. Talk soon.”

Knowing my brother’s about to absent-mindedly hang up, I quickly barge in. “Wait. How long before the Feds get here? We have a bit of a mess to clean up.”

“Right, sorry. I’m handing the phone to Adrian. Buh-bye.” The computer whiz says something to my older bro’ who gets on the call.

“O’Brien should be pulling in any second now. I’ll have Drac text you a safe place to stay. I called in a favor. Say nothing to the FBI until our lawyer arrives. Ping me when you can.”

“Copy that. Later, dude. And thanks.” Hearing sirens, I take Sky’s hand, raise it in the air with mine, and outside, drop to my knees.

By the time the Feds finish their interrogations, the sun is directly overhead. Exhausted, I drive toward the room my hacker brother reserved. We all agreed Ophelia shouldn’t be left alone, but I haven’t yet had time to explain our sleeping accommodations.

While I instruct my cock to stand down, the manager hands us a key in the dark paneled lobby. “Here you go Mr. and Mrs. Baker.”

One eyebrow raised, the bodyguard leads the way to room one-fifteen and nods at the highway-facing front door. “Cement block building? Excellent choice.”

Color me impressed. Ignoring the dirty bedspread and stained carpet, she walks to the bathroom. “Gotta use the facilities, okay?”

“Sure.” The fact she hasn’t mentioned the one and only bed surprises me, but it shouldn’t.

A second later her smiling face pops up. “We can crawl out the back window, if needed. This place is perfect. Text Drac

two thumbs up.”

Chuckling, I shake my head, no. “His ego’s plenty inflated without me adding to it. Besides, he would never believe it was me and would send SWAT to see what happened to us.”

I turn and gasp because she parades out of the bathroom, naked.

Holy fuck. My dick happy-dances and my brain shuts down from complete lack of oxygen.

“Ah...” *Suave, Dino, my man, very suave.*

The gorgeous woman takes no notice of my temporary loss of communication skills. Instead, she sashays to where I stand like a large-mouth bass.

Beautiful pert breasts, curves, and long legs. Hell, my eyes don’t know where to feast and my palms remain glued to my side. I haven’t been so affected since Ginny Perrault kissed me in ninth grade biology class.

“You sure?” Before I engage, she needs to say it out loud. Otherwise, there’s a cold shower with my name engraved on it.

“The better question is, are you?” Cupping my cheeks, she steps between my thighs, and walks me backwards until my butt hits the door.

Fucking A. Our lips meet, my hands slide up her smooth back and stop at her neck. Thumbs holding her chin in place, I take control, and devour her. My tongue presses on her teeth, she opens for me, and as we tangle, she untucks my shirt. Needing skin against skin, I tug my cotton shirt over my head, and hug her close.

Sky rubs her hard nipples across my chest. More animal than human, I growl and grab her ass. Moaning, her legs wrap around my waist.

“God, I want me deep inside you.” I race her to the mattress and drop her down.

My hands at her underarms, I pull her up the bed, and when she straightens her legs, I straddle her.

Her pulse pounds while I suck her neck, her collar bone, and down her front. Reaching a nipple, I lick the pink flesh until she moans.

Next time, I'll worship at the altar of these two beautiful globes, but right now my painfully hard cock takes the lead. Disrobing, I drop to the floor, spread her legs, and gasp at the beauty of her glistening clit. The tip of my tongue flicks over her nub and her honey flavored sweetness sends another streak of desire to my groin.

Her butt lifts off the bed and pre-cum leaks from my enlarged penis. Never has a gorgeous woman affected me so. This fact should scare me out of my fucking gourd but I'm already in too deep.

"Don't stop." While her head thrashes back and forth, I lap up her juices.

Then, as she's about to come, I slow it down.

"No, no, no." Her whimpers might be the death of me.

"Oh, butterfly, I got you, don't worry." I kiss up her body, nibble her ear, and swirl my index finger around her opening. "Look at me."

At my command, her chocolate eyes flutter. "Please. Touch me, Dean."

"Show me how you like it." My hand pulls her fingers down her body and together, we heighten her delight.

"Yessss." Moaning, she swells, her pelvis arches, and my cock weeps at the scene unfolding in front of me.

"Let it go, sweetheart." Me pleasuring her is the most erotic moment of my life.

She screams her release, bucks, and in a moment of sanity, I locate a condom in my wallet.

Finished rolling it down, I thrust deep into her orgasmic bliss, give no quarter, and piston her into a higher plane. While her whole body quakes, I grind into her sweet spot repeatedly, and her legs clamp around me.

This time, when she goes off, my balls fill, my back tingles, and fluids gush out my sensitive tip. Roaring, I empty fully, collapse, and roll her on top of me.

Relaxed for the first time in days, I take care of the rubber, then sleep.

Sometime later, the ring of my cellphone brings me back to the world of the living.

“Drac?” I move out from under my lover and pick up the device.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

My head on the pillow, I stare up at the ceiling, and smirk. “No. I’m asleep and you’re my worst nightmare.”

“Well played, bro, but it could be true.” He chuckles and my sex-fogged brain clears at his warning.

“Why? What have you learned?”

“Your ORA buddy Mack, the one who got away, escaped from an institution. The guy’s as unstable as they come.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” My mind replays some of the conversations I heard outside the farmhouse and not for the first time, lament I didn’t go after him.

“Tommy’s wife, Fran, has been in close contact with him.” This bombshell sets off my internal alarms.

“Hold on.” I put the cell on speaker and jostle the beautiful woman in my bed. “Sweetheart, wake up.”

“Huh?” Dark hair mussed, plump lips swollen, she’s my favorite wet dream come to life.

If not for a nuclear crisis, I’d hang up on my brother, and fuck her into next week.

Instead, I place the phone near both our ears. “Drac, say again, so Ophelia can listen in.”

My brother slows down his tempo and ups his volume. “Tommy’s wife made multiple calls to Mack, the ORA leader, and is a close friend of the Russian president.”

Chapter 16

Sky

“Well, that sucks.” Once I untangle Dean’s limbs from mine, we sit with the phone between us on the blanket and share a worried glance.

At least Drac’s call helped us avoid that awkward moment of what to say after an incredible night of orgasmic paradise. Rubbing my eyes at the ass-crack of dawn, a sheet-ghost tents under my lover’s navel.

The spook’s owner smirks at my stare while his brother rambles on. “And there’s more. The Feds found the gun that killed Brownstone. Ophelia’s fingerprints are all over it.”

“Jeesh. Who the hell accuses someone of murder before sunup?” I flick off the blankets, pad naked to the counter and sigh at the piece of crap masquerading as a coffee maker.

“Sorry. Thought you’d want to know.” No doubt, he’s been up all night researching which means I’m a total bitch.

“Don’t apologize. I should come with a warning, grumpy until caffeinated.” In an attempt to become more human, I unwrap a plastic Styrofoam cup and pour six ounces of water into the miniature machine.

When the phone I took from the farmhouse rings and flashes an unknown callerID, I roll my eyes.

Dammit. It’s not even light out. “Hello?”

“I want to talk to Charlie.” At Tommy’s voice, Dean jumps out of bed and grabs his own cellphone.

My God, he has incredible abs. Too bad it’d never work out between us, except perhaps, in a new Netflix series.

Finished gawking at my naked lover, my focus turns to the arms dealer. “Okay, boss. Give me a moment to get your

daughter on the line. I'm putting you on mute."

"Hey, Charlie, here's Sky." Dean, a step ahead of me, hands me his device, out of which, my teenage client gushes.

"OMG, New York is lit. You guys must come shopping with me, then go to a show and-"

"Another time, Charlene." I hate to interrupt her passion, but every second counts. "Listen, I have your dad on another phone. We need you to convince him to tell us where the missiles are at. Can you do that?"

"I can try." Her tone sounds less than enthusiastic but for now, she's our best bet.

"Okay. We're taking him off mute." My gaze flicks to Dean who nods and pushes the mic button.

"Daddy, can you hear me?" A smart kid, she sing-songs in the way children do.

Played by a pro, her father reacts accordingly. "Pumpkin, are you safe, unharmed?"

"Never better. I've been to 5th Avenue, Harry Potter Broadway, and Central Park and-" Clearing my throat cuts her off. Otherwise, we could be here forever.

Her rambling done, I lean over the burner and infuse command into my tone. "Okay Tommy. We did as you asked, and you have a pretty good idea of where your daughter is. We need the nukes' locations. Now."

"Daddy, please. I like it here. If the ORA blows up the East Coast, we'll have to move to Moscow and it's positively antiquated. I swear, if you support the terrorists, I will never speak to you again, I mean it. You will be dead to me, forever."

Her father sighs. "I once heard about a warehouse in Middletown, PA. I'm not admitting to anything. Call me, Charlie."

"I will. Don't be mad. I love you." His daughter hisses out her breath, waits for the dial tone, then sounds through the speaker. "Was I okay?"

“Yes. Thank you. Now, I must ask, do you want to go home?” As Dean waits for her answer, he grabs my coffee, drinks half, and makes a face.

After some silence, she speaks to someone in the background, and comes back online. “I’d like to stay in Manhattan and visit NYU, if that’s alright with the Brennans. My father needs time to cool off and umm, Dean? The biggest and scariest of your brothers wants to talk to you.”

“You should’ve waited for the Feds.” Adrian is not only bossy, but he jumps to conclusions.

Balking at his unstated and unfair accusation, I grab the phone. “Hey, Tommy called us, not the other way around.”

“And he had your number, how?” The New York detective has clearly had more than a few ounces of weak coffee, an unfair advantage.

Not one to give up on a fight, I carry on. “It’s not my fault the FBI missed the burner.”

For someone who spent most of the night having the best sex of her life, I congratulate myself on my cleverness.

Without hesitation, Sir Boss-a-lot throws the next punch. “Because it was already in your pocket when they arrived. Am I right?”

“Ah...maybe.” Embarrassed by my lame comeback, my face heats, but Dean winks.

Snickering, he grabs the phone. “We’ll let you know the moment we arrive in Middletown. I assume you’ll call O’Brien and smooth things over?”

“You will wait for him before taking any action.” Apparently, he’s not used to hearing the word, no.

As Dean’s new sidekick, I am honor bound to back him up. “Tommy’s men know me and won’t hurt me. We’ll be able to get more intel if we leave the Feds out if it.”

The two men argue until I get tired of the noise and step into the shower. Eyes closed, I shampoo my hair and...

“Eeek.” My lids pop open as cold hands lift me by the waist.

Chuckling, my naked cop sets me down, my back to his front. His fingers slide up my chest, stop at my breasts, and knead the flesh.

“Mmm. So soft.” Rubbing his hard length between my gluteus maximus, he kisses the super-sensitive spot behind my right ear and nibbles my lobe.

“Oh God.” A bolt of desire strikes my clit and I spread my legs.

“You are so sweet.” Dean pumps the soap dispenser and kneels.

Cheek to my calf muscle, he lifts my heel and massages between my toes. Good lord, I had no idea my feet were so sensitive. I moan and my nub swells as his thumbs dig into the arch.

Finished with my other foot, his teeth nip up the back of my leg and pause at the curve of my ass. “Bend over and place your palms on the tiles.”

Once I comply, he slides his hand between my thighs, opens me fully, and licks my length.

“Dean...” My balance lost, I grab the towel rack when his tongue flattens on the nerve endings.

His hands on my hip, he stands and places his eager tip at my entrance.

“Please.” I back against him and ache for my release but he’s in control.

“Find it, butterfly. Take your pleasure on my finger.”

Brain cells detonating, I buck at the brink of heaven, but I’m too wound up to jump off the edge. A sudden slap to my butt blasts me into oblivion.

“Yessss.” Fireworks go off behind my eyelids and my legs buckle, but his magic hand never stops.

He continues to pleasure me as he slides his full length into my hot dripping core. Slow at first, water splashes, my boobs bounce, and our bodies slap. Soon, he jackhammers inside me. Then, his thigh muscles tighten and he pistons so deep, I gasp.

“Fuuuuck.” Mount Vesuvius explodes.

After emptying inside me, Dean presses me flat against the tiles under the shower head, and time stands still. If not for the water running cold, we’d probably never leave. Shivering, I turn and meet his gaze. His expression mirrors my own, a mix of shock, tenderness, and a feeling that heretofore, shall not be named.

Neither of us able to speak, we finish cleaning ourselves, dress, and hop in the car.

How can everything stay the same and yet be so incredibly different?

Chapter 17

Dean

On the thruway, Ophelia flips through radio stations until she finds *Once in a Lifetime* by Talking Heads.

Mostly out of tune, she sings along, and I smile. “So, I’m guessing you like the eighties.”

“Yeah. My father was a fan. Not disco, though. Never disco.” Her twinkling laugh reminds me of Dad’s old jukebox at The Train Station.

“Same with my father.” Picturing him behind the bar, giving me and my brothers shit, I ignore the stab in my chest.

Dad, sure wish you were here.

“When did he pass?” Eyes soft, she squeezes my knee, and as she kisses my cheek, a strange ball of heat forms around my heart and grows.

No woman has ever made me feel so fucking vulnerable. It’s damn disconcerting.

I shrug off the memory of the day he died and bury the touchy-feely bullshit. “He had a brain hemorrhage twelve years ago last December. He was there one day and gone the next.”

Lips pursed, she nods. “Mine died in Afghanistan. SEALs was his whole life. It was how he wanted to go.”

Her bitterness surprises me. For all her bravado, Sky clearly wished to be higher up in his priorities. While I admire the man for his dedication and courage, a part of me hurts for the little girl, who by gender alone, could never measure up.

“He did his best and gave his all.” Someday I’ll say more, but for now, a simple platitude will need to suffice.

Eyes shiny, the military kid juts out her chin. “Agreed. What about your mom?”

“Died giving me birth. My brothers brought me up.” Giving a voice to the taboo subject feels traitorous, like I’d aired a dirty family secret.

Sky catches my gaze and lifts her hand to caress my chin. “I’m so sorry. I’m sure she would’ve adored you, unlike mine, who didn’t bother to stick around. My father’s parents raised me. They were very strict, but sweet. However, when my dad was on leave, the entire world stopped so we could be together. He took me everywhere, from West Virginia to Yellowstone. I know it sounds weird, but he taught me how to be a SEAL. I wanted so badly to carry on his legacy, but it wasn’t meant to be.”

“You would’ve made an excellent addition to their team.” I glance away from the white dotted line long enough to catch her sad smile.

“Except for the ADD.”

“Even with. Your super-focus makes you extraordinary, especially in bed.” Trying to lighten the moment, I wink, and her cheeks burn bright red.

“Speaking of... I umm... enjoyed last night.”

I snicker. “Enjoyed? People enjoy a movie or a chocolate chip cookie.”

“Okay, smartass, how would you describe our foray under the sheets?” Her eyebrows raise in challenge.

“Fucktacular?”

“Hold that thought.” She snatches my pinging phone, reads the text, and frowns. “Drac sent coordinates. We’re to pick up gear, go to a warehouse, and meet up with the FBI.”

Soon, we pass the *Welcome to Middletown* sign. In the distance, four huge cement towers loom in the distance, as if standing guard over the town.

Pointing, she thumbs her phone for a moment, then hisses. “Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant. Do you think it’s a

coincidence?”

“With the ORA, who knows.” I drive in silence for a few more miles until the map app announces we have arrived.

After texting Drac. I park outside an automatic gate. A few minutes later the doors roll open.

“Ready?” I look to Sky who nods and holds forth the Geiger counter.

After I circle the mile long chain-link fence around the huge warehouse, she shows me the output. “Is the meter broken?”

I shake my head, no. “Fucking Tommy. He lied. The nukes aren’t here.”

Chapter 18

Sky

Inside the hangar gates, Dean paces by his SUV and talks on the phone. According to his brother, the FBI is near.

Before I can steal the keys and make a quick escape, a SWAT truck roars up the drive. The tank-like vehicle screeches to a stop, the back doors slam open, and a dozen armed men in hazmat suits file out.

When a black sedan stops behind them, and an unknown man hops out, Dean's gaze softens on me. "Ready?"

No other choice, I swallow hard, and nod. "Let's do this."

"Don't worry." Hand to my lower back, my lover walks me toward a US Federal Agent who takes this moment to remove his sunglasses.

The stranger sticks his shades in his pocket and I half-expect him to retrieve a silver stick. Instead of erasing my memories, piercing blue eyes study me, as if I were some alien dressed in human skin.

Done with me, he smiles at my sidekick, slaps him on the back, and pumps his outstretched arm. "Fucking Brennans. Always in trouble."

No heads up, Dean pushes me in front of him. "Special Agent Colin O'Brien? Meet Ophelia, the bodyguard I told you about."

"It's Sky." Scowling, I shake hands and greet the stranger's steely stare with one of my own.

The pissing contest might never have ended, if not for our mutual friend raising the Geiger counter. "We circled the whole hangar and not a blip."

“What?” Mr. Blue-Eyes presses his comm unit deeper into his ear, and frowns at us. “You’re right. My team found no sign of radiation. Miss Lipanski, I’m sorry, but I need to take you in for questioning.”

“You can’t. I told you. She’s working undercover.” My cop slides an arm around my waist as the other officer raises his brows.

“Actually, she’s not.”

Ah crap. A part of me has known something was off since the lantern tour. “What about Agent Brownstone?”

“He worked for your boss, Tommy O’Malley.” His words strike home and as my heart races, my brain tries to catch up.

What the actual fuck? “But he showed me his FBI credentials and insisted I join his investigation or else.” While my reality pivots on its axis, the G-man softens his tone.

“ID’s are easy enough to fake.” After he shares a pitying glance at Dean, I sense he’s telling the truth, and my head explodes.

“Oh my God. Why would he do that?”

“Well, it’s only a working theory, but we think Tommy set you up for Brownstone’s murder, so you’d have no options but to work for him permanently. You’re a top notch bodyguard and you could be his daughter’s twin. He didn’t want to let you go.”

“I swear, I had no idea.” Knees weak, I lean back against the warm metal of the SUV.

“Nobody’s blaming- Get down!” Brennan shoves me flat as two new armored vehicles roar up the long driveway, aiming right at us.

“They’re not ours.” O’Brien reaches for his gun and Dean herds me into his car.

“I got her, you drive.” The FBI agent throws himself over my body and seconds later the engine starts.

Halfway down to the road, a thunderous explosion sends us into the air. We land hard, my teeth clunk, and gravity shifts ninety degrees.

“Move.” Colin struggles to untangle his arm.

“I’m trying.” Upside down, blood rushes to my head.

The moment I’m free, glass shatters near my feet. As hands grab for my ankles, I kick like mad until an iron grip clenches around my calves. Tucked beside me, the Fed’s gun pokes into my ribs, but my body blocks his shot.

“H-help.” Both my arms clutch the headrest to my chest, but the man tugging me is too strong.

I’m dragged straight up and out the window. Vertical again, they push me past the underside of Dean’s flaming vehicle, resting on its side.

Hell no. If I get in the terrorists’ SUV, I’m dead meat.

Nose cartilage cracks as I snap back my elbow. Another man howls when my knee smashes his balls. Free for a second, I scramble on all fours but am captured. After I’m thrust into the back seat, we roar away, and cold sharp steel lays against my neck.

The man riding shotgun yanks out his phone, takes my picture, and wipes the blood from his face. “Where’s Charlie?”

“Safe.” I’m not telling these assholes anything.

While Jack The Knife breaks the skin near my jugular, the driver glances in the rearview mirror, and I gasp.

I know him. “Holy shit. You’re not the ORA, you’re Tommy’s men.”

“I told you we needed masks.” The blade at my throat lowers, I say a quick prayer, and thrust two fingers down my gullet.

After I puke all over the back seat, the man with the nosebleed, gags, and hands the thug sitting beside me, a hypodermic.

A pinch in the arm, all goes black, and I wake tied to a chair alongside a red Lamborghini. As multiple copies of my boss and his wife dance around the room in front of me, I blink fast.

Mrs. Arms Dealer speaks first. “Where is my daughter?”

“Safe.” Mostly by habit. I jut out my chin and too late, realize my mistake.

Tommy’s arm coils, he makes a fist, and punches my face. I must pass out because the next thing I know, a man dumps a pail of frigid water over my head.

“You turned my daughter against me.” The angry father pinches my jaw which throbs like a motherfucker.

“Nooo.... Charlie loves you, more than anything. We gave her a choice and she wanted to stay in New York.” Shivering, my teeth chatter, but at least the room no longer spins.

“You took out her tracker. I will have to kill you now.”

“Sir, your teenager has a mind of her own. She didn’t want the nukes going off in her backyard.”

“Ridiculous. They’re so old, the only thing they’re used for is dirty bombs. Small radius. No biggie. Any daughter of mine would know this fact.”

Holy shit, but Francine did not. Turning her head from her husband, her mouth drops open, and her bright red face contorts.

“You finish this unpleasant business, dah-link.” After a peck on the cheek, her high heels clack over the cement, and she rushes out of the garage.

Watching her go, Tommy’s eyes narrow and a few seconds later, he motions for his man to follow. Clearly, he’s not as love-struck as I thought.

Once the rest leave, he grabs his cell, and thrusts an image in front of my face. Two bullet holes pierce Dean’s handsome forehead.

Oh God, no. Crying inside, I show no weakness. “Get a new graphic artist, boss. The touchup is lame. A sixth-grader could do better.”

The punch to my stomach is the worst yet but focusing on the blinding physical pain is better than the hurt in my heart.

Dean is dead and it's all my fault.

Chapter 19

Dean

As the abduction replays over and over in my head, I pace the police department's war room.

After the blast, I regained awareness and aimed between my feet, but had no clean shot. Next, armed men pulled Sky out the window. While I scrambled to stand, they tossed her in the back seat and drove away. Choosing to save our sorry asses, rather than the woman who needed help most, the SWAT team pulled us from the flaming mess. We barely reached a safe distance before the gas tank exploded. A few minutes later, we cleared the wreckage, but my woman was gone.

Back in the present, my heavy lids lift. "I can't believe there's no trace of her."

O'Brien, looking more tired than I feel, hands me another coffee. "We did everything we could."

"No. When those bastards raced up the pavement, I should've run toward the armored truck, not away from it."

Pursing his lips, the FBI agent swirls the brown sludge. "We've been over this. Yours was the right call for such a fucked up situation."

"Should anything happen to her..." My knuckles still raw, I punch the wall and make a new hole next to the last one.

"Sure hope you know how to spackle." Clucking his tongue, Colin walks back to the temporary cube and leaves me alone.

Nothing else to do, I Facetime Drac. "It's been over nine hours. Haven't you found anything?"

Tucked away in his Manhattan apartment, my brother glances up from his keyboard and sighs. “Asking me every five minutes doesn’t make me faster. Like I said before, I believe the abductors transferred your woman to another vehicle. Maybe a rental or a stolen car. Who knows? Go away and let me work.”

Dammit. I shut down the meeting and call Adrian. “What’s your ETA?”

“We’re outside. Coming in now.” He hangs up, a burner phone rings and the whole room goes quiet.

Holy crap. This is it. After the technician clicks a button and nods, I say hello.

“I want my daughter back.” Tommy’s voice sounds through the tinny speaker.

Then, a text message pings, I hit download, and groan at the jpg. Chin to chest, covered in bruises, my beautiful Sky sits tied to a chair in nothing but underwear.

“You motherfucker.” When anger wells up inside me, Colin presses mute and shoots me a fierce scowl.

“If you want her back, calm the fuck down.”

Nodding, I pull my shit together, swallow hard, and press the green icon. “Charlie doesn’t want to come home and I can’t make her.”

“Unfortunate.” O’Malley pauses. “So, I guess you do not want the nuclear devices’ whereabouts?”

Fists clenched, I pitch my voice to sound nonchalant. “Listen. The experts say the nukes are so old, they’re worth diddly-squat. Why not let the Feds have them. Your kid will be so tickled, she’ll fly into Daddy’s arms.”

“I would need some assurances from your friends in the US government.”

Colin catches my gaze, and once he nods his consent, I continue. “They’re willing to negotiate. So, where are they?”

“Make sure your brothers drive safely, and their wives, too. The world’s a dangerous place.”

“Agreed. All the more reason to make your daughter aware of what you did to her best friend.”

A minute of silence follows. “I would prefer you didn’t.”

“Yeah, and I’d prefer you gave us back Ms. Lipanski.”

“Apologies. My man was a bit overzealous and the woman’s already dead.” He sends an image, I open it, and my fucking heart stops.

Oh God, no. It can’t be. Throat thick, unable to speak, I hand the phone back to O’Brien.

Adrian, who just entered the room, says in my ear, “Chill out, the dude’s bluffing.”

But what if he’s not? With all the oxygen in the room depleted, I rush past the doors and gasp in the outside air. A torrential rainfall soaks me to the bone and the wind whips, but nothing penetrates the pain in my chest.

I failed her. I messed up. Walking to the side of the building, my ass drops to my heels, I cover my face, and weep.

After a while, Jasper finds me, lifts me into a hug, and pounds my back. “Don’t you dare give up. O’Malley’s an expert negotiator. The asshole only wanted to throw you off your game.”

Nodding, I wipe my sleeve across my face, sniff, and spit. “Does Drac have eyes on her?”

“No, but he’s working on the photo Tommy sent you. It would seem the arms dealer screwed up. The pic contains a bit of bumper belonging to a Lamborghini.”

“No shit.” My hope soars and yet, at the same time, I dread what we might find.

“Yeah, bro. We have her.” Jasper punches my arm and catches my gaze. “There’s just one other thing you should know.”

My held breath releases. “What’s that?”

Grabbing my arm, he rushes me back inside. “Drac found a satellite image of the nukes being hijacked. O’Malley doesn’t have the missiles anymore, the ORA does. That’s why he couldn’t give you the location. The FBI recovered two of the vehicles, but one is still missing. I have more. Want the good news or the bad?”

“Whatever. Let it rip.” Inside now, I drip on the carpet and a young female cop hands me a towel.

After I dry off, I hand it to my brother who does the same. “Our teenage Houdini stowed away in our trunk. Charlie’s here and shared the location of her home’s secret escape tunnel.”

Chapter 20

Ophelia

I wake tied up to a chair. My head throbs, my ribs bite into my insides, and my right leg aches. Alone, wet, dressed only in my undies, I shiver.

After I jump my seat closer to a bright red toolbox, a side door slams, and the evil stepmother stands in front of me. “Where is Charlie?”

“I told you all. I have no idea.” Other than knowing Tommy’s daughter is in Manhattan under the care of the Brennan brothers, I speak the truth.

“Your accomplices are dead, and terrorists have nuclear missiles. Stupid girl. What a waste.” Her thick Russian accent reminds me she is the real enemy.

My eyes water but I won’t give her the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Jaw set, I focus on my mission. Once I’m free, I’ll find the nukes, avenge Dean’s death, and kill this bitch if she gets in my way.

“Why am I still alive, Francine?” My voice steady, I hold her gaze.

The first to break eye contact, she glances around the room as if expecting someone to barge in on us any minute. “I need girl.”

My mind wanders to all the conversations I had with Charlie about this woman. “But why? You don’t even like her.”

“None of your business. You tell me where she is, and I will kill you quickly. No more torture.”

What would the teen have that she wants? I think for a second and smile. The kid’s a huge snoop. She must’ve

overheard something she shouldn't've.

“Charlie told me all about you.” My smirk reopens my cracked lip, but I don't care.

Francine's pursed mouth and red face make the pain worth my while. Whatever my young friend gleaned, it has this woman on the verge of madness.

“The little cunt. Who else knows?” Leaning over my chair, she digs her claws into my hands, but the tight bindings have numbed them.

“The FBI, for one.”

“Fuck!” She punches me in the stomach with her fist.

Nothing to lose, I laugh. “This is priceless. Your husband killed the only people who can locate Charlie for you.”

“So, the brothers do still have her.” Her triumphant grin means I've said too much, but so did she by using the present tense.

“The Brennans are still alive.”

The Russian spy shrugs. “Not your rookie, but the older ones, yes. *Das vedanya*, chickie.”

While I'm tempted to give up hope, I can't. The bitch is a liar and if my cop's older siblings are alive, so is he. They'd never let anything happen to their precious baby bro.

As she leaves and the door slams shut, I pray I'm right.

Chapter 21

Dean

While Drac's drone flies over the O'Malley estate, those of us in the Middletown police station stare at the monitor wall. On one screen, Tommy's wife stomps out of a multi-car garage and screams into her phone.

The woman I'm falling for has to be alive. Who else could make the Russian bitch so angry? *Stay strong, butterfly, I'm coming for you.*

Charlie steps forward and points at a small white building hidden behind six foot pines, over a block away from her father's huge home. "The tunnel ends there."

The teen moves her finger to the right, and the picture shifts. "This metal plate slides aside, and a ladder descends to an old sewer line. Me and Sky escaped through here when the ORA attacked us."

"Thank you." I give her a hug, her eyes water, and she nods.

"She's the first real friend I've ever had. Please save her." This kid is so brilliant, it's easy to forget she's not an adult.

"We got this. You hang tight." Letting her go, I turn to O'Brien and grab Adrian's keys. "You with us?"

The Fed nods. "Let's roll. I've got a jet waiting on the tarmac."

"You sure I can't come?" Charlie's brows rise, then furrow as I shake my head no.

"Not this time." My palms shoot out before she can argue more. "Listen, my brother Drac needs you in case something goes south. You can help him navigate the house, the guards, your dad, stepmother... You hearing me? No hiding in trunks, taking an Uber, etcetera, etcetera..."

“Yeah, yeah, understood.” Crossing her arms, she frowns and plops down on a chair.

Convinced she’ll play ball, I join the rest outside. Once we’re in the air, O’Brien introduces us to his crew.

When a suit-and-tie argues about us being there, Colin shuts him down. “We’re talking nuclear winter. You really want to squabble over jurisdiction?”

Less than an hour later, our team parks down the street near the building Charlie pointed out.

After another operative enters a key code, we shut off the power to the tunnel, and walk single file underground toward where I pray we’ll find Sky. Reaching the ladder, I rush to the front, climb the stairs, and slide the plate off the hole.

With no guards about, I race to the garage’s back door, turn the handle, and pull. “It’s locked.”

“Copy that.” While Drac confers with Charlie in my earpiece, the rest of the team catches up and waits beside me.

Soon, I’m able to crack open the door.

“Hold.” An agent threads a camera through the opening and seconds later, nods.

“Clear.” As the word echoes in the cavernous building, I sprint to the red Lamborghini.

Oh fuck, no. Eyes closed, my sweet lover’s slumped in a chair, supported by her bindings. *Please God, let her be alive.*

While I cut her free, Adrian presses a finger to her neck and gives me a curt nod. “Her heartbeat is strong.”

“Dean?” When her brown eyes flutter open, I swallow hard at the most beautiful sight I have ever seen.

With no time for explanations, I swing her over my shoulder, and duck under the rising accordion door. In the driveway, our extraction SUV screeches to a stop. Armed men rush out of the house, a bullet whizzes by my head, and I drop Sky in the back seat. Turning, I take aim, fire, and as I race away, fist pump the air.

“We have her. I repeat, operation is a success.” At O’Brien’s confirmation, the entire team cheers in my comm unit.

Chapter 22

Sky

An engine roars, tires squeal, and bullets ping. In a metal spaceship, I thrash my limbs and struggle to lift my eyelids. If I've been abducted by aliens, I'm sure as hell going to get a glimpse of the little gray guys.

"Butterfly, stop. It's me." Dean's voice pierces through my foggy dream, a few synapses fire, and one eye opens.

Ignoring his grimace, I lock onto his concerned gaze.
"Where am I?"

"You were kidnapped, and we rescued you. Is anything broken?" His manly scent of leather and musk act as an aphrodisiac, or perhaps it's the needle in my arm.

"You have the sexiest lips." With my index finger at his mouth, he kisses my bruised knuckles, and cups my cheek.
"Sky? Are. You. Hurt?"

"Umm. I don't think so." My abs throb and the interior of the vehicle rotates, but other than that, I'm perfectly fine.

Yay me. Fingers and toes wiggle, so I move my shoulders and limbs. Encouraged, I venture my palm over my face and gasp at the golf-ball-sized bump on my jaw.

Crap. "I'm sure I look worse than I feel."

He should be focused on the bullets pinging us from behind. They could be men in black and have memory eraser thingies. While I speak, the driver turns so fast, two wheels of the hovercraft leave the ground and gravity thrusts me into his arms.

"You're safe now." His outlandish claim would make me smile if my lip wasn't split.

"You think so?"

“Ninety-nine percent certain.” He chuckles and as the other three aliens in the vehicle do the same, I swear to God, their eyes grow huge and their heads more bulbous.

Rats. Before I pass out, I need to tell the extraterrestrials something important but damn if I can remember what it is.

“Francine.” Throat dry, I hack up a lung until water is brought to my lips.

After I swallow, the one other human in the car, besides me, lowers his scruffy face and pats my cheek. “The Russian? What about her?”

“She’s the puppet master.” I wish I could explain better, but my brain cells are all out of whack. These extraterrestrial drugs are strong. “Talk to Charlie. She has the goods on her.”

The being to our left, who used to be Jasper, presses on his ear and speaks into his chest. “Drac, ask the kid what she knows about her stepmother.”

A few seconds later, the alien shakes his head and taps my hero’s elbow. “She said, and I quote, ‘Everything.’”

I recall how Tommy had her followed and add my two cents. “O’Malley doesn’t trust the bitch.”

“Then why marry the woman? He’s one of the most successful arms dealers on the planet and can do as he pleases.” At Dean’s frustrated tone, Adrian, our driver, growls from the front seat.

“Charlie wants to say something. Go ahead, kid.”

Her voice sounds through the SUV’s speakers. “My father may have thought he was using her, but it was the other way around. Once I found out, I had to step in.”

“Help me. None of this makes sense. Tommy sold nukes to the ORA. Is that right?” I pray that much is true.

My young friend answers. “Correct. Dad knew the weapons were old and unstable. Their use would be limited to dirty bombs. Because I learned they would be used in the US, I begged him to renege, and he did. At the same time, Francine was working with the terrorists. She promised her Russian pals

the deal had gone through. She must've freaked and told Mack where to find the missiles and me."

"Ahhh, so both your father and your stepmother wanted you back, but for different reasons." It all makes sense, if I don't think too hard. "But why didn't Tommy knock her off? If I was an all-powerful, rich arms dealer, that's what I would do."

My lover holds my hands and kisses the top of my head. "Keep your friends close and your enemies-"

"Under you with your cock inside them." This insightful witticism is muttered by Dan, sitting on the other side of me.

"At least tell me you found all the radioactive weapons." As I glance between the little gray men, all their brows furrow in the same manner.

The one closest shakes his head. "Sorry, butterfly. The Feds rounded up the ORA and got them to talk but one truck is still missing."

"We need to find it."

"Not *we*, babe. *You* are going to the hospital." He can't be serious, but one look tells me he is.

I press a fingertip to his nose. *Boop*. "And have Tommy's thugs kidnap me again? Better yet, the domestic terrorists. Wait, maybe it'll be Francine? Nope, no thank you."

While I scowl, my Brennan looks to the others to back him up, but they all divert their eyes. I guess they all agree with me because not long after, Adrian drops us off in front of a two-story motel.

"Stay safe. We'll be in touch." Once he drives away, Dean checks in at the desk, walks us to our room, and points at the lumpy mattress. "Sit and get naked."

"Really? No foreplay?" My smirk makes him snort out his nose.

"I need to see your injuries."

“Not the best pickup line, but I’ve heard worse.” Sliding out of my filthy clothes, I bite my tongue to hold back my moans. Every muscle in my body hurts.

“Dear God.” Eyes moist, he stares at all my bruises, and opens a first aid kit, no doubt given to him by one of his alien pals.

“I’m lucky. They could’ve done a lot more damage. The man chosen to beat me has a crush on me and pulled his punches.” My palm reaches out to cup Dean’s soft beard.

His jaw ticks, he nods, and my finger captures his tear. Dumbstruck, I lift my gaze from his lips to the fathomless depths of his brown irises. No one has ever cried for me, and the small drop of water shatters my world.

After he inspects my bruises, his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Shower. Okay?”

Still speechless, I nod and follow him into the bathroom. When the spray runs warm, he strips off his clothes and helps me step over the tub’s rim.

Leaning back into his firm chest, my thoughts drift back to the Russian’s lie. “I’m so glad you’re not dead.”

“Me too, but why would you think that?” He reaches behind the curtain and grabs a bar of soap.

As the wrapping paper floats to the floor, a little sob escapes me. “Francine told me you died, but I couldn’t believe her. If anything happened to you. I, er... care about you... a lot.”

He creates foamy white lather, slides his hands around my front, and whispers in my ear. “I do too.”

“Wait. You care about you, too? That’s rather narcissistic, don’t you think?” My stupid joke falls flat.

“Don’t make light. You know what I mean.” His slick palms pause at my collar bone, lower to my nipples, then caress down my sides to my hips.

Because of the drugs or perhaps the near-death experience, I turn in his arms, grab the back of his head, and bring his eyes

to mine. “I’m falling hard and have no idea what to do about it.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” The tip of his tongue brushes over my breast, his cock bounces to life and he groans. “God, when I saw you slumped over in that chair, I was so afraid we arrived too late.”

My hand wraps around his desire. “Tied up in the garage, the only thing that kept me from giving up was knowing you were coming to save me, and you did.”

His eyes darken as he kisses my forehead under the spray of water. “I’m so sorry it took so long to find you.”

“You saved me, that’s what counts.” I squeeze, he moans and the side of his hand glides between my upper thighs.

My eyes roll and I grind against him. “Make love to me.”

“Take a deep breath, butterfly. We have all night.” His lips brush over mine so sweetly, my knees go weak, and I nod.

After the drain gurgles and swallows the ugliness of the last few days, we step out of the tub. With my body tingling from all his touches, I wrap my legs around his waist and clamp my hands behind his back.

He hisses, snatches a bath towel, and walks me to the king sized bed. “Feet down.”

“Yes sir.” Once my toes touch the floor, he buffs me dry until my tits harden and my clit swells.

Unable to endure more foreplay, I snatch the terry cloth and return the favor. When I get to his cock, I kiss the tip and kneel to worship it some more.

“Me first.” Dean pulls me up, places my butt on the mattress, and tosses my legs over his shoulder.

“Is this position okay? Does anything hurt?” His sweet concern kindles my desire.

My nub blossoms, my heart thumps, and I spread wide. “Perfect.”

Chapter 23

Dean

Damn, no woman has ever made me lose control like Ophelia. She shudders, gasps, and I almost come.

Lids heavy, heels at my back, she lifts onto her elbows and stares through her knees. “Your turn.”

“Next time, butterfly. Sleep now.” Placing a soft kiss on her inner thigh and her pussy, I duck between her legs.

Faster than I thought possible, she scoots to the end of the bed. “But my hands still work.”

As she wraps her fingers around my hard want and licks my tip, blood rushes below the belt, leaving no oxygen for higher brain functions.

A zombie, I freeze with my palms on top of her head while gentle kisses from her injured lips make my heart thump. When she lets go of me, I figure the torture is over and let out a groan, but she’s not done, she’s simply changing positions.

Twisting, she lowers onto all fours, and smiles seductively over her shoulder. “Please, I want you inside of me now.”

“Nope. No condom.” Only an asshole would make love to an injured woman in pain.

“On the pill. Clean. Tested.” She’d try the patience of a saint, which I am not.

Thoughts of riding her bareback shatter my gentlemanly resolve. “Me too... not the pill part, obviously.”

As she giggles, I slap my hand to my face. Clearly, I have lost my ever-lovin’ mind. Lord have mercy, I can’t say no. “You tell me if anything hurts. Promise?”

“Stop talking.” With her juices dripping down her leg, I place my smaller head at her entrance.

Clutching the back of my thighs, she pulls me deep and bucks.

“Slow down, dammit.” Determined to make this last, I grab her hips, but she’s having none of it.

Her mission is to drive me wild. While she pushes back, all my nerves migrate to the tip of my cock. Mindless, except for release, I piston inside her. Faster, and harder, she flies me to where no man has gone before.

“Together, butterfly.” Reaching around her front, I press her blast-off button, and she screams my name.

“Ophelia, fuuuuck meee.” My back tightens and my balls fill.

Lord almighty, pure heavenly bliss spreads throughout my body. As juices of life pour out of me, her orgasmic shudders milk me dry.

A billion light years away, we collapse on the bed.

Sometime later, we time travel back to reality and I lift my weight off her. “Well, if that wasn’t a life-affirming event, I’m not sure what is.”

“More like life-changing.” The bodyguard wiggles with me still inside her. “Care to try for round two?”

I’m about to explain how she needs some sleep and place some ice on her injuries when my phone rings.

Stretching long, I tap the green icon. “Adrian? Whazzup?”

“Charlie’s gone.”

Do I want to ask how the hell two NYPD detectives and a bartender lost this kid? No matter, there’ll be plenty of time to bust their chops, later.

Lightning fast fingers clack in the background, stop, and Drac adds his two cents. “Their lobby cameras show her leaving the building about an hour ago.”

He pauses. “And there she is in the parking lot. Charlene stole a ‘22 Black Forester... checking traffic cams now... She went to a warehouse, south of Middletown... Give me a moment, tapping into the cloud... Hah, I found her. The darn kid’s driving away in an eighteen-wheeler... Oh, no fucking way.”

Based on his tone, I brace myself for the worst. “Out with it.”

“Our teenager drove off in one of the nuke-toting semis.”

Adrenaline races through my veins, understanding sets in, and I search for my clothes.

“Can you get a bead on her?” Zipping up, I toss Sky’s undies at her, and place the phone on speaker.

“I’m trying but we’re talking sixty miles in any direction. We need my drone in the air.”

“On it.” As Adrian and Drac discuss the best place to launch the miniature plane, my lover and I head outside.

Then, I remember we were dropped off and have no ride. “Holy crap. We don’t have a car.”

“No problem.” My sneaky operative runs around the lot, testing door handles until she finds one unlocked.

“Give me your phone.” Head under the dash, she holds out her hand, and after I give it to her, she downloads an app.

Soon, the BMW roars to life and I wonder what my captain would say if he could see me now. “Stealing a car? What the actual fuck, Liv?”

“Well, it’s not like we can call an Uber.”

She jumps into the driver’s seat, but I yank her out and glare. “I’m driving.”

“Fine.” Grumbling about bossy cops, she scampers around the front.

While the thief buckles up, I capture her gaze over the cupholder. “Where the hell did you learn to hotwire a car?”

“My dad.” Out of breath, cheeks pink, she shrugs and when she grins, I shake my head.

Born the son of a cop, I clearly had huge gaps in my education.

Once I’m sure we’re not followed, I raise my Android between us. “Drac, did you find her yet?”

“He’s working on it.” Cars drown out Adrian’s voice, so I crank up my volume in time to hear him say, “...FBI is standing by.”

As I swerve onto the turnpike ramp, my passenger steadies one hand against the glovebox. “Did Charlie leave a note?”

“Hold on. Dan? You there?”

A few minutes later, my other sibling joins our conversation. “Yeah. I’m looking now.”

Papers shuffle, drawers open and shut, then he bellows, “I found it. Listen up. She says, *I know where the missing truck is and I’m going to take it someplace safe*. Sky, does this mean anything to you?”

Chapter 24

Sky

Nothing to lose, I Google *nuclear waste facilities* and the town of Canonsburg, PA pops up. I relay the information to the team and soon, Brennan and I race west on I-78 in pursuit of a tractor trailer. When the license plate comes into view, Dean drives onto the curb alongside the vehicle and honks his horn.

A wild-eyed Charlie rolls down the window, cups her mouth, and shouts, “The truck is driving itself.”

We make her repeat the phrase a couple more times before explaining her situation to the others.

“I was afraid of this. An AI device has control.” How the hell Dean’s geeky brother remains so calm is beyond my ken. Perhaps he’s not human either.

“No way.”

In the middle of my mini-meltdown, Cole Brennan sighs. “AI-controlled trucks have been around for some years now. Companies are waiting for the laws to catch up with technology.”

The truck swerves about in the heavier traffic, and Deans curses. “Can you tap into the software?”

“Yes, but it might take me a few.” At his reluctant tone, my driver scoffs.

“C’mon man. You saved the whole fucking internet. Breaking into a small trucking company shouldn’t be so hard.” Teasing while driving, Dean shoots between a Subaru and a two door coupe.

“I’m already inside their cloud but taking control of the truck’s a bit more complex. Shut up and let me do what I do.”

Waiting for the genius to perform his miracles, my young friend leans out the semi's window and screams for help.

"Dammit, Dean, get us closer, I need to talk to her."

"Can we access her Citizen's Band radio?" Brows furrowed, knuckles white, he follows the nuclear bomb on wheels as I look it up on the internet.

Soon, I download an app on my cellphone and broadcast over the airwaves. "Charlie, pick up your mic."

A few frequencies later, the SUV's speakers squeal, and the teen's scared voice blasts out at full volume. "Sky, it's me. Can you stop the truck?"

"Drac is working on it. Over."

When the diesel engine coughs and her vehicle accelerates, she squeaks. "I'm not going to make it. I'm going to jump."

"No. Don't. We're almost to you." I glance over at Dean.

Sweat running off his forehead, he shakes his head, no.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, I'm going to plow into someone any second." As she screams, I swallow hard, tap the man driving and pray.

"She's losing it. You need to get me onboard."

"What? Are you nuts?" Mouth grim, his eyes stay glued to the road, but I know I can do this.

"Please. Just this once, trust me." Determined, I clutch the passenger side door handle, and inch out. While I envision jumping, he speeds up until our BMW's a foot from the cab's step.

"Babe. I love you. Don't screw this up." *Holy crap. It's a hell of a time for him to drop the L word.*

"I got this and right back atcha." Turning from him, I focus on the grab handle inches from my fingers, then shout, "Now, Charlie, now. Open the door."

As it swings free, I leap over the racing pavement and clamp onto the metal bar with both hands. My feet slip out

from under me, and I fear I may fall until the teen snatches my waistband. After she tugs me inside, I fall on top of her. Panting, we simply stare because it's amazing I'm not roadkill.

“Holy shit, Wonder Woman. You did it.” She hugs me.

Shaking, I snatch the CB microphone and press the red button. “I'm in. Over.”

Dean and the rest cheer until Drac breaks it up. “I have a guy from the manufacturer on the line. He's going to walk us through the disabling process. There's a display in front of you. Punch the manual tab.”

Rolling her eyes, Charlie grabs the mic. “Jesus God Almighty. You think I didn't try already? We're locked out.”

“Unplug the panel from the dash.”

“I tried that, too. Who is this bozo helping you?”

The dead silence isn't what I would call encouraging. I feel like I called tech support and got the offshore rep who asks if I tried rebooting.

“Where are the master electronics?” I expected him to say beneath my seat, or in the sleeping compartment.

Instead, he says, “Under the hood.”

“Fuck.” Dean echoes my sentiment. “Hang on babe, the State Police are going to close the highway and put down spikes.”

“What if the semi turns over?”

Nobody answers.

Chapter 25

Dean

While Amish buggies, horses, and farmland race by, Bluetooth sends O'Brien's voice booming through the stolen Beemer's speakers. "We've closed the road. Spikes deployed. Without tires, the truck will have to stop."

I never should've let her board the freaking deathtrap.
"Babe, talk to me. Are you there?" Her cellphone at my ear, I wait until she finishes talking to Drac.

When they're done, she snickers. "Me and Charlie jumped out and stopped for a burger, fries, and a shake."

"Excellent. Save some for me." Lordy, I'm so proud of her, my chest puffs out. Ophelia's one hell of a brave woman.

"If you two would shut up for a minute, you might like to know I've managed to slow the damn truck down." To others, Drac may sound pissed off, but I can tell he's smiling.

The women in the cab cheer, and O'Brien jumps onto the airwaves. "Tighten your seat belts and if you have cushions, put them between you and the dash. Aim the steering wheel uphill on impact if you can. You have two minutes."

"Good copy. Over." After my lover responds, we drive by a roadblock.

Picturing videos I've seen of wobbling eighteen wheelers, I pray the radioactive components in the back are secure.

Overhead a helicopter hovers and a female voice counts down.

Adrian, who hasn't said a word for miles, clears his throat. "Bro, you need to add more braking distance from the semi."

Like hell I will. "Copy that, Mom."

Now, it's only me behind an out of control truck and the dotted white line.

“Three... Two... One...”

Pop-pop-pop. Excruciatingly loud explosions make my ears ring. As chunks of rubber thunk down on my windshield, I slam on my brakes and spin the wheel toward the meridian.

Meanwhile, the truck's momentum moves it forward on its rims. Sparks fly, the cab tilts and hangs in the air. A heartbeat later, it lands upright, plows into a hill, and fucking stops.

Ignoring the helicopter about to land, I hop out and sprint to the cab's open door. Charlie jumps out first, followed by Sky. I hug them both then drag my woman to my mouth.

Once we unlock lips, I cup her gorgeous cheeks and capture those brown eyes. “Lia, swear to me you'll never, ever, do anything so foolish again.”

She holds up three fingers. “Under no circumstances, will I jump on an AI-controlled truck with nuclear missiles.”

Laughing, we kiss, then metal snaps. The sides of the container clang to the ground and we jump. This is some James Bond shit, except it's real.

“Jesus H. Christ. Are you guys seeing this?” My heart fucking stops as the missile launcher comes to life, and the damn thing aims at the sky.

Green bulbs pulse, some numbers light up on a panel, and when they start to count down, I almost piss myself.

Chapter 26

Sky

“Run!” Dean grabs my hand, I take Charlie’s, and we sprint down the empty road to a group of cruisers with their flashers on.

About halfway to the police cars, my hero lets go, and swivels on his heel. He races back to the damn truck, and shouts over his shoulder. “I’m going to stop this cluster-fuck.”

Pushing my client into the arms of a state trooper, I take off toward my idiot partner.

When I reach his side, he speaks into the cell glued to his ear. “Take your time, it’s not like I’m standing in front of an armed nuclear warhead or anything.”

While jets tear a white hole in the blue sky, the wanna-be martyr meets my gaze. “Jesus, no. Get out of here.”

On the display, the timer reads sixty seconds, fifty-nine...

“I love you and I’m not leaving you.” Shaking, I hold out my hand for his phone and after locking his eyes to mine, he nods.

“Sixteen digits and hit enter. Ready?” As some guy doles out the numbers, Dean puts in the code and...

Oh crap. The countdown didn’t stop. My jaw drops and my heart stops as electronics sizzle followed by a white puff of smoke.

Thirty, twenty-nine...

“Tell my brothers I love them.” Eyes bright, my lover holds me to his chest. “See you on the other side, butterfly.”

Dammit, I meet my perfect guy and now this? What the actual fuck?

“You stupid piece of shit!” Breaking away, I thrust kick my heel at the electronics and the screen goes black.

We both stare transfixed for a second, then Dean lifts the phone to his mouth. “Tell the planes to stand down. The timer stopped. I repeat, the missile is disarmed.”

My cop snaps a pic, hits send, and an eternity later, the sky clears. Soon, the helicopter lands, and officials race to our side. The whole time, I don’t dare breathe or even look at the disabled panel.

Chapter 27

Dean

Later, we sit in a diner, and the president of the United States of America calls us from the White House. “Thank you for your service. You two deserve a medal, but the public can never know what transpired here.”

“Yes, sir.” Responding in unison, Sky and I chat with him for a moment more and when we hang up, my brother in New York calls us from his man cave.

“The truth this time. How did you really stop the countdown?”

“Jeesh. Give me the phone.” Rolling her eyes, Sky puts her lips to my device. “I swear on the Holy Bible, I kicked the shit out of it.”

While the rest of my siblings sitting in our booth laugh, Colin leaves his FBI group and joins our celebration. “We found the Russian who took control of the truck.”

Unimpressed, Drac sniffs. “Who modified the trucks? Who changed the access codes? If we can’t locate those perps, it could happen again.”

“Thanks for the offer, oh wise one. My team will be reaching out later today.” Shaking his head, the Fed hands my phone back to me and once he sits, Sky catches his eye.

“Yo? Am I still a person of interest in Brownstone’s murder?” Her knees bounce and as she takes a sip of coffee, his blue eyes narrow.

After all she’s gone through, if he thinks I’m going to let him arrest her, he better think again. “No, you’re off the hook. Charlie sent proof. Tommy hired an assassin to kill

Brownstone, whose real name, by the way, was Brad Schmidt.”

“Speaking of my client? Where is she?” Reaching to the mammoth plate in the center of the table, Sky snatches a buffalo wing, dips it in blue cheese, then takes a bite

“Witness protection.” Colin’s head tilts and his acerbic tone implies he won’t say more which is okay by me. There’s nothing I want more than to take my woman home and make love to her.

Smiling, I reach an arm around her shoulder and squeeze. “I think you deserve a vacation in Manhattan.”

Her frown makes me wonder if she’s having second thoughts about the whole being in love thing.

“What’s wrong, babe?” When I gaze into her brown eyes, the corners of her mouth sink further.

The french fry becomes her pointer stick. “I was just thinking. Tommy owes me a lot of back pay and now, I’m never going to see a penny of it.”

Relieved her concerns are not about me, I lean back in my chair as O’Brien snatches one of our fried calamari. Before he pops it into his mouth, he holds it in the air and catches everyone’s attention.

“Speaking of... While we were busy trying to prevent world war three, the arms dealer escaped on his private jet.”

“Seriously? Tell me you at least arrested his wife.” Her question gets answered by a quick shake of the FBI agent’s head.

“But you don’t need worry. She’ll be following in the same path as others who have failed.”

“Poisoning would be far too kind.” Sky scowls. “So would getting blown up in her private jet. Or both.”

Chuckling, I kiss her pursed lips. “Babe, she’s done for. Let it go.”

Chapter 28

Sky

A few weeks later

Grinning ear to ear, my half-naked lover enters his kitchen and presses me against the countertop. The man kisses me so thoroughly, it takes a moment to realize he's started a conversation.

"...an appointment with the FBI tomorrow, if you'd like." His brown eyes hold so much hope, I'm dying to say yes, but I'll be bored in less than a week.

"We've talked about this, hun." *Me behind a desk? I'd rather be beaten to death by a lantern holding porch gnome.*

"You should stay here and be my sexy paid escort." While my hot stud waggles his brows and flicks a Groucho Marx cigar, I snicker.

God, I wish it were so easy. "Dean, we barely know each other."

At my sad smile, his forehead wrinkles and his voice lowers to a growl. "The hell we don't. We've explored every inch of each other's bodies. I know how wet you are as I enter you and your sweet screams when you come."

Those dark bedroom eyes almost make me give in, but what if we break up? I would prefer to remain friends. "Babe, we agreed to slow down and start over. I promise, once life returns to normal, and if you still love me, I'll move in with you."

As I cup his cheek, he diverts his eyes and takes a step back. "Patten Securities is looking for a female bodyguard."

His petulant tone makes no sense. Their firm is based in Manhattan and would be the perfect gig.

“Are you saying you arranged a job interview?” My heart races and I hold my breath.

“No.” After he dashes my hopes, he shoots me a lop-sided smile. “But you do have work, starting next week, if you’d like.”

“Wow. That’s awesome. Thank you, I think?” When I hug him to me, I can’t help but wonder why he doesn’t return my enthusiastic embrace.

“There’s one thing you should know. You’ll be gone until Christmas.”

Ah, so that’s the catch. I capture his eyes. “I’ll come home every weekend?”

“No. We’ll be lucky to see each other at all.” He sounds like he lost his best friend which is so unfair.

“Would you prefer I *not* take the job?” My head tilts and he shrugs.

“Do you want it?” *For chrissakes, why mention it if he’s against it?*

“Are you asking me to choose between my career and you?”

“Am I?” His brows raise.

Where the hell is this attitude coming from? “Are you going to continue to answer my questions with one of your own?”

“Are you?”

“No, for fuck’s sake.” *What just happened?* This fight is exactly why we need some time apart.

Working for Patten is the opportunity of a lifetime and I’m going to take it. If we’re meant to be and he really loves me, he’ll wait.

Chapter 29

Dean

In the bustling new concourse of LaGuardia airport, I stand under the atrium trees and intertwine my fingers with Sky's. Soon enough, she'll disappear beyond the security gate and leave me, perhaps forever.

Reading my mind, she squeezes my hand. "I'll be back before you know it."

But will she? Saving the world from a nuclear winter was difficult. Building a life together should've been way easier. What the fuck did I do wrong? We're in love, dammit. Why the hell is she leaving me?

Swallowing hard, I kiss her one last time, walk under a huge snowflake-like sculpture, and make my way to the parking lot. In my condo, zombie-like, I dress in blues, and drive to work. At the first stoplight, I think about blocking her number, so she'll have to do her break-up in person.

While I consider this and other childish tactics, my phone rings, but I don't pick up. I can't talk to anyone right now. I'm too damn fucking lost.

In the precinct for the first time in weeks, I report to my sarge who directs me to my captain's office. Beside him, O'Brien and the FBI director stand and shake my hand like I'm some kind of celebrity.

"We'll speak more on this, son." After my boss's boss leaves me and the Feds alone, I spend the better part of the day giving a verbal account of the nuclear attack.

I leave out the parts of our sleeping together but judging by their sly glances, our relationship is no secret.

Standing now, I yawn, stretch, and eye the two men. “Now that we’re about finished, did you find the Russian and her lapdog?”

Colin frowns and shakes his head. “Tommy left on his private jet before we could stop him, but my sources say Francine’s as good as dead.”

I nod. “And Charlie?”

His brows raise. “No longer your concern. The kid gave up a lot to help us and will be well taken care of.”

“How about Mack, the head of the terrorists? Did you arrest him?”

“He’s our top priority.”

“That’s a no, then?” Jeesh. I know it’s only been a couple days, but I expected more progress.

The director frowns, glances at his subordinate, then nods. “Excellent segue. We’ve spoken to the commissioner and he’s rubber stamped your transfer to the JTTF. You in?”

A no-brainer, I nod. “Yes, absolutely. When do I start?”

“We have some paperwork to fill out, but how does two weeks sound?”

“Perfect. Thank you, sir.” As I start to rise, a firm hand rests on my shoulder.

“We’re all waiting for your written report. Every detail matters. Use this office and upload it here.” He drops a card on the desk in front of me.

The rest of the day I focus on my keyboard and try not to think of Sky. Sometime around lunch, an email from the FBI arrives in my inbox. It contains details of my employment, including a visit to their shrink and a physical. Finally, after a long call to my union rep, I drive home, park in my garage, and wander over to The Train Station.

I should be thrilled at my new job, but all I can do is think of a dull life without my Ophelia. A few beers in, Dan walks over and leans on his elbows behind the bar.

“Have you called her?”

“Why? She made her choice. She doesn’t want me.”
Gulping back my beer, I point for another, and Daniel cuffs my head.

“Dude, she found an awesome gig and took it. What’s your problem?”

“She should’ve tried harder to find one near me.”

“Or you could’ve taken a leave of absence to follow her? You still could.” His laser-beam, holier-than-thou gaze makes me squirm.

He’s going for a knockout in round one, but I’m not done punching. “Give up *my* career to follow her around the world so she can babysit celebrities?”

“So, you believe she should quit her career for you?”
Dan’s eyes pierce mine and I’m down for the count.

God, I hate it when he’s right. “Is it too much to want a woman who wants me?” I throw some bills on the bar, head home, and pour from the bottle that doesn’t include listening to a fucking know-it-all, older-brother, bartender-shrink.

Sometime during my drunken stupor, my phone pings, I glance at the caller ID and almost delete it.

Sky: Miss you like mad.

I wait for the longest time before responding. If I text back, it means I’m agreeing to a long-distance relationship. Hell, I’m not sure what I want but I crave her snarky comments, her smile, and the way she cries out my name once I’m deep inside her.

Me: What’s your first day off?

Sky: Wednesday

Me: I’ll be there and send you my flight deets

Sky: You don't have to

Me: Try and stop me

Happier than I've been in days, I request time off, book a round trip ticket, and sleep better than I have in weeks.

Hours later, my beaming lover jumps up and down in the LAX terminal, and waves at me in the passenger area. "Dean. Over here."

"Butterfly." Dodging and ducking, I race across the waiting room, swing her in circles, and kiss her until a guard tells us we're blocking the path.

Hand in hand, we laugh and the resentment which had been holding my heart in shackles breaks away. Dan was right. I was a total jerk. Me and Sky are stupidly and hopelessly in love. Nothing else matters.

Upon passing a changing station, she tugs me inside and locks the door. After I drop my knapsack, her mouth claims mine and she presses my body against the door. In the most heated kiss of my life, her frantic fingers tear off my jacket, untuck my shirt and unlatch my pants.

By the time she pulls out my cock, I've slipped her top and sports bra over her head. With her flowy skirt at her waist, I slip aside her string thong, and dip into her smoldering core.

It's only been days, but it feels like weeks. Growling in her ear, I inhale her pheromone-filled scent, and meld my body to hers. No longer able to breathe, I nip her earlobes, kiss down her front, and suck on a nipple.

Once I have a pert, matching set, I lift her butt and swing her toward a sink. Her legs wrap over my hips and her ankles lock at my lower back. Groaning, I place my swollen tip at her entrance, then gasp.

"Oh, God, I missed you." My pelvis tilts back and I groan as I push inside her sweet, tight, sheath. She's my drug, my redemption, my everything.

Thrusting deep, our bones grind and I whisper, “I’m sorry I was such an ass.”

She puts a toe down on the linoleum, spreads wider, and pants. “Don’t be. We needed to know it was the real thing.”

“Is this real enough for you butterfly?” I piston, hold her close, and her eyes roll.

“Ah, ah... Perfect.” Short nails dig into the back of my neck, and she arches up.

High on one another, we dance and as our waves of passion grow to a tsunami, I pray the vanity holds.

“Babe.” Both her hips in my hand, I piston inside of her. Each thrust brings us higher.

As she crests, screams, and shudders, I join her and together we crash onto the heavenly shore.

Later, we find a hotel and have sex all day. We only pause to clean and order room service. In the shower, I finally admit my lack of faith.

“I thought we were through, babe.”

“Why would you think that? I love you.” Eyes bright, lips swollen from my kisses, she searches my eyes.

I keep my gaze glued to hers, so she understands how damn much I need her. “I was broken when you left me.”

“I didn’t leave you, Dean, I took a job... for a few short months. Tommy didn’t pay me. I was on the verge of losing everything.” Her soft hands cup my cheeks and hold me so I can’t look away.

“I want to take care of you.” *Isn’t that what a man does? Am I wrong?*

“Ditto.” Her one word cuts through all my macho bullshit, my world tilts and everything becomes clear. “I’m an idiot, right?”

“A sweet idiot who I love beyond all reason.”

“I love you too, Lia.” We dance the horizontal mambo some more, I sleep on the red eye home, and back in New York, my face hurts from grinning.

Chapter 30

Sky

“Happy Thanksgiving.” Inside the Train Station I place a bottle of Dom Perignon in Danni’s hand as her husband, owner, and bartender, takes my coat.

After kissing too many cheeks to count, I sip on a glass of wine, and lean against the bar. The Brennan’s extended family includes homeless folks from the neighborhood. The brothers have pushed square tables together to make five long rectangles. Sterno cans warm a buffet-style meal in front of the beer taps. Soon corks pop, everyone cheers, and the line for food grows out the door.

Adrian, our comic emcee, introduces me to his girlfriend, Essy, who I learn is a famous street artist. Halfway through my second flute of bubbly, Dean rushes to my side and hugs me to his navy JTTF jacket.

“Sorry I’m late.” Leaning over, his cold nose bumps mine and his holstered weapon digs into my chest, while we share a heated kiss.

Multiple cat-calls later, the newly-minted agent lifts my hand, we take a dramatic bow, and grab two plates.

As our bartender carves the turkey, my lover introduces me to the famous Drac who has his arm around a petite blond. I learn she is equally lethal on the internet. Jasper, who helped Charlie out, sits across from us, arm around his woman, but then Azi shares videos of her potty-mouthed African Grey.

“Fuck, dammit, dammit.” Elvis, her parrot, is freaking hysterical.

I never learned to follow more than one conversation at a time, but it’s fun to try, especially fortified by champagne.

Now that all the food is gone, and we're nearly comatose, our host closes the bar. We waddle down the street to the Brennan building and on the ground floor, the group splits up. Some watch the football game on the giant-screen TV, and the rest of us talk, serve pie, and drink at the kitchenette countertop.

Soon, Danni plops down on a stool next to me and spreads her arms to encompass the lobby. "This whole space used to be a printing shop. After Dan bought it, he converted it into condos and gave one to every brother. We all live here, now."

For a moment, a pang of loss hits my chest. If my dad hadn't died or if my mom hadn't left us, perhaps I'd have a family, too.

"It's wonderful you all have each other." Smiling, I hide my sadness but not well enough.

She pulls me into a warm hug. "Now, now, you're one of us, too. I hope you won't think I'm butting in, but a couple of private detectives who own a fast-growing business contacted me, looking for help." She hands me their card. "No pressure."

"Suds and Sam?" My face scrunches up. The name doesn't exactly exude professionalism.

"Talk to them." Tilting her head, she raises her brows.

Knowing not to shoot a gift horse, I open my wallet and slide in the cardboard. "Okay, I will and thank you."

As I'm hanging my purse behind my chair, the doorway explodes, and we all drop to the floor.

"Isn't this cozy?" Tommy O'Malley waltzes in and points his automatic rifle.

Heart thumping like mad, I grab a knife, slip inside the bathroom, and call nine-one-one. Once I rattle off our situation, I push the door ajar, and gasp. In front of the TV, a thug pats down my new family and disarms them.

"Where's your bitch?" My former employer holds a weapon to my man's head, and I decide to take action.

“Sky’s in LA, working.” Fists clenched, my brave hero keeps his eyes glued to the arms dealer.

“Boss, let’s kill them and go.” The gunman shifts his eyes from the door to the hostages, and back again, while Tommy struts around the lobby.

He checks the backs of furniture and opens closets.
“OOOOpheeeeliaaaa. Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Jesus. The infamous gun runner has lost his fucking marbles. I flush the toilet, run water, and wait behind the door. A few seconds later, as I expected, a thug enters, and I slice his throat. Lowering his body to the floor, I snatch his AK, put it to my chest, and burst into the room,

“Brennans, get down!” When my inner-Rambo lets loose, I mow down Tommy with his unsuspecting men.

Motherfucker. Do not mess with the daughter of a Navy SEAL on her first real Thanksgiving.

Chapter 31

Dean

As I finger the jewelry box in my pocket, my siblings and their wives gather around the Christmas tree in the family room. Half a year ago, I asked my heart to stay, and she said no.

This time, I have a ring, we've talked every day for months, and we're certain we want a life together. The only thing missing is for me to ask her to marry me.

Rehearsing my inadequate words, sweat rolls down my back. What if I screw it up? Will she say no? Give me another chance?

In the center of the room by the tree, Dan opens a gift from his spouse and Adrian's wife sidles up to me. "Calm down. You look like you're about to puke."

After we read my brother's new t-shirt, ADULT DAYCARE DIRECTOR AKA BARTENDER, I whisper in her ear. "If you're trying to make me feel better, you suck at it."

Essy grabs the speech from my hand, rolls her eyes, and crumples up the paper. "Relax, I have it on the best authority, Ophelia's going to say yes... Unless you recite this."

I can't believe they asked her outright, but knowing my sisters-in-law, anything is possible. "No way we're letting you fuck this up, especially since Lia saved our butts on Thanksgiving."

My co-conspirator pulls me to the coffee maker, refills my mug, and winks at her man. At her signal, my brothers snicker and drag Sky outside while the women circle around me.

"Stop, one at a time." I point at Essy. "You go first."

“You’ll need to get down on one knee.”

She nods and because the rest glare at me, I feel the need to defend myself. “I’m not a complete idiot. Wren, what do you say?”

The most intelligent of them softens her gaze on Drac. “It’s simple. Tell her you’ll love her forever.”

“And promise to never, ever be bossy.” Azi, the parrot owner, giggles, knowing well she’s asking the impossible.

“Okay I’ve had enough. Thank you. I’ll take it from here.” I start to walk away but, oh, no. They’re not done, not by a longshot.

They push me toward the front door where Dan hands me my keys. “Take her into the tunnel. Trust me.”

A second later, my other three siblings bring my blushing bodyguard to my side who asks, “Do you know what they’re up to?”

“Not a clue but if we want any peace on earth, we should probably do what they say.” Taking her hand, I lead her down the stairs into the garage.

When I unlock the door, we both stop to stare at the hundreds of twinkling lights, rivaling Rockefeller Center.

“Holy shit.” Jaw open, eyes bulging, Sky steps on the cotton batting and approaches the life-sized toy train containing pre-WWII shoppers inside, worthy of Currier and Ives.

Transfixed, she stares, and I kneel on the fake snow to hold forth the diamond. “Ophelia, I-”

“Yes, yes, and yes.” She tackles me to the soft white stuff, grabs the ring, and slips it on her finger. Eyes bright, red lips smiling, she straddles my waist, and leans over to kiss me.

Once we break for air, I snort out loud. “Don’t you want to hear my proposal?”

“Sure, go ahead, but you don’t have to, unless you want to.” Judging from the sparkle in her eyes, the wives warned

her of my feeble attempts to wax poetic.

“Ah... Perhaps I’ll bring it out on our fiftieth wedding anniversary. We’ll eat stale frozen cake and laugh at how lame I used to be.” I was trying to make her smile. Instead, tears well and drip down her face.

Cupping her cheeks, I catch her gaze. “What is it, butterfly? What did I say?”

“Did you mean it? Growing old with me?” She sniffs and after I hand her a tissue, I picture us surrounded by dozens of grandkids.

“Uh-huh. I do.” Throat tight, her hand in mine, I rush her up the back stairs to my condo.

There, she tugs off her crimson sweater and kicks off black jeans. My mouth watering, I strip to my HO-HO-HO boxers.

Holy Christmas. Sexy Mrs. Santa undies? The gorgeous package makes my head light, and I can’t wait to unwrap her.

My eager palms ache to rediscover every inch of her soft skin. Hers do the same and soon, we fall onto the mattress. Once I unclasp the fur and lace bra, I suck her nipples through the fabric.

As her tits point and she moans, I bite the word *naughty* on her panties, and pull them off. My penis is so hard, it hurts. I focus on my favorite place, the button between her lush, swollen lips.

As I tease her clit, she tugs my hair. Returning to her mouth, I emulate Act II using my tongue and she wraps her fingers around my length.

“Babe.” I need our love-making to last, but it won’t if she continues to stroke me like that.

“That’s fiancé-babe, to you, mister.” She kisses down my neck, my chest, and when she pauses at my navel, my appendage swells.

A kiss and a pump later, she licks her favorite lollipop. Her breath warms my tip and as it reaches for her, she laps until I pull her away. There is no way I am climaxing anywhere but

deep inside her. Toe to the comforter, I swivel her onto her back, and take control.

“Bossy much?” Now the sexy imp nips my lip, but I grin and lower to the floor.

“Only during sex, Ms. Ophelia.” Done playing, I spread her legs, and once I press my tongue flat against her blossom, her heels dig into my shoulders.

She arches, freezes, and screams. As she shudders, I scoot up, place my tip at her entrance, and thrust until bone meets bone.

“Oh God.” Her pelvis tilts, her nails bite into my back, and while she locks her ankles behind my calves, I take her higher.

My control frayed, the bed jumps and slides across the room. At her encouraging pleas, I piston inside of her, hyper-focused on her body. The last note of her finale takes me to the brink, and I come so intensely, my heart grows three sizes larger.

Sometime later we float back to the land of the living, and her soft hand cups my chin. “Merry Christmas.”

“I love you so friggin’ much, my almost Mrs. Brennan.”

“Who says I’m taking your name?” Despite her mischievous grin, I feign to believe her.

A lifetime of answering questions with questions makes me chuckle. “Don’t you want it?”

“Are you asking or telling?” She is so damn cute when she snickers through her nose.

Lordy, I love this woman. I drive her crazy, and right before she climaxes again, I make her promise to take my surname. “Otherwise, I’m calling our first daughter, Nancy.”

“Nancy Lipanski? You wouldn’t dare.” As she pants on the cliff of an orgasm, I show no mercy and tease her higher.

“Mrs. Brennan-to-be, some things are not up for discussion.”

“Okay, please, babe. I was kidding.”

“Mmm.” I turn my finger inside her and after she comes and shouts, I thrust deep. Joined, I slowly build up the heat.

Sweating, our bodies slap, we gain momentum, and reach our high. Floating back to reality, I remember we left everyone downstairs, then laugh to myself.

My brothers will understand.

The End

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Stella

DANGEROUS CODE

Chapter 1

Jenna Jones

I dash out of Port Authority and claim the last hand-hold on the downtown bus. The brakes hiss, we lurch forward, and suddenly my earbuds mute.

“Terrorist alert.” Jason, the male voice of my online artificial intelligence breaks through my playlist.

Don't freak out, Jones. It's probably just a bug. I let go of the metal loop and check my iPhone as the program flashes a red alert on a black background.

Jason speaks, “It is 85 percent likely there is a bomb on this vehicle.”

With the bus hitting every pothole, it takes a few tries for my thumb to find the dropdown. Then a license of a clean-cut brown man pops up. I think I saw him in the terminal. To be sure, I use the handholds like monkey bars and jostle to the rear. My fellow commuters give way begrudgingly.

There he is. And he's got a green gym bag on his lap. Oh my God. I'm on a bus with a friggin' terrorist.

Taking a deep breath, I stream video to Jason's downtown servers. I have to alert New York's Joint Terrorism Task Force but without revealing Jason.

Me: Call JTTF, explain what's happening. Do not reveal your identity.

Jason: Done.

In the bus's side window, my wide-eyed reflection gawks back, pale Irish skin tinted green. And instead of a successful

entrepreneur, I see a woman biting down on her lower lip like a scared teenager. Yeah, I want off this death trap. Who wouldn't? One small push on the stop bar and I'd be free. But how could I leave this bus filled with innocent people?

My fists clench and newly manicured nails dig into my palms. It's one thing to test out a program while sitting in my office, it's another to use it for real. I'm not even sure how this beta version works outside the simulated environment.

As our bus rumbles down Eighth Avenue, sunshine breaks through the clouds, and storefronts glow amber and gold. New Yorkers hurry along the sidewalk with coffee cups in one hand and large bags slung over their shoulders. What would they do if they knew a bomb was driving by?

Run. Just like you should be doing.

Suddenly, I have an idea.

Me: Run 911.sh

Jason: Done.

Me: Run NYC traffic program

Jason: Done.

I have lots of scripts pre-written in case of emergency, but I always pictured a war room filled with monitors, cops and analysts. These programs were never supposed to be executed by me. Chills run up and down my spine as I hold my breath, waiting and watching out the window.

Finally, we slow and then stop. Thank God. Maybe I've bought us some time. While I hesitate, one of New York's finest blasts a whistle, another shouts angry expletives, and yet another directs a white Cadillac out of the intersection.

And we're off again.

The best gridlock ever, gone in an instant.

Dammit. The bus engine grumbles, the vehicle jerks, and again I'm forced to grab onto a metal loop to keep from tumbling.

Now what? Exhaling, I play out a couple scenarios in my head, but none end well.

Jason: JTTF is advising you to stand by.

As I wonder how much Jason revealed, a sip from my water bottle chases down the bile in the back of my throat. If the wrong people find out about Jason, I am so screwed.

Then we pull over so two shoppers can get on. One's in peach and the other wears a beige polo. Carrying Nordstrom bags, they hold hands as they walk to the back of the bus and head right for where my suspect is sitting.

Standing on my toes, my mouth drops open. This can't be happening.

Beige-shirt motions that he wants bomber-guy to slide over, arguing over a non-existent seat. There really isn't any space to sit down and of all people, why choose him? Moaning, I scrunch my eyes shut when the suspect stands and his green canvas bag falls off his lap in slo-mo.

I brace for the searing blast wondering if there really is a heavenly doorway with brilliant white light.

There's a clunk. I wait. Then nothing.

Finally, a male voice shouts from up front, "NYPD. Everyone remain seated!"

I peek one eye open, stunned to be alive. Behind me, beige-shirt digs his knee into the center of the suspect's back and cuffs him. Then peach shirt joins him and pushes the would-be bomber out the back door. A third officer, dressed like an alien bug in thick black armor enters, grabs the green bag, and disappears.

Game over. The passengers applaud.

“Please. Screeeeeej... yeeeeechch... seats.” The front cop blares inarticulate instructions over the bus’s intercom.

Right. Will do. No problemo.

Seconds later, emergency vehicles scream down the street. Rotating lights flash around the bus’s interior creating a disco-effect. Eventually we’re allowed out and that’s good because I really have to pee.

When my feet hit the sidewalk, I consider dropping to my knees and kissing the pavement but that would be weird, even for me. I can’t believe that I not only survived a would-be terrorist attack, but my program saved all these people.

Yay me!

Then all of us are ushered into a cliché of an Italian restaurant with wall-sized murals of the Coliseum. Another wall is covered in four-by-six photos signed by movie-stars, most of whom I don’t recognize. Behind me and out the front window, two armored officers carry a big metal box toward a white truck with blue NYPD letters.

That’s when my stomach turns traitor. Hot all over, I drop onto my knees with my forehead on the carpet. And I still got to pee.

A concerned dark face with dread locks and high cheekbones squats to my level. “Hey lady, you okay?”

I shake my head but that’s a lie. In reality, the awfulness of what could’ve just happened loops endlessly behind my eyelids. Instead of walking away without a scratch, I imagine searing heat burning my face as my skin crisps and blackens.

It’s not pretty.

“Right over d’ere, officer. Got off dee bus and den she just set down.” The Jamaican man sounds light-years away.

When I open my eyes, I assume this is the afterlife, otherwise the chances of seeing Colin O’Brien are maybe a hundred zillion to one.

When he squats with his nose inches away, it’s clear he doesn’t recognize me. That’s not all that weird considering the

work I've had done. He, however, hasn't changed a bit. He's still got those dreamy baby-blues and jet-black lashes.

His dark brows crease as he hones in on me. "Miss? Should I call a medic?"

"No. I'm fine. Just a headache." That sounds a lot better than I'm about to have one seriously debilitating panic attack.

Colin, the man who's been my vibrator's fantasy on occasion, holds out his hand. "Let's see what I can do for that while we wait for a paramedic. Okay?"

He applies pressure into the webbed area between my thumb and forefinger using some kind of acupressure. Then I close my eyes because I can't handle his intense stare. Just his presence makes my panties melt. Yes, my panic is gone but only to be replaced by pure, unadulterated lust.

"Better?" His headache cure is pretty near nirvana but when he helps me to stand, the room spins, and his large hands shoot to my waist.

I swear to God electricity sparks, and I squirm as liquid pools between my legs. That never happens.

"Maybe you could walk me to the lady's room?" *Really? That's it? Tell him who you are.*

I can't. The reflection in the bathroom mirror serves to remind me that I lost sixty pounds, straightened my teeth, and bought a new nose since last we met. It's not all that strange that he doesn't recognize me and maybe it's better this way. When I exit, I'm surprised to see him leaning against the wall, appraising me from head to toe.

I'm pretty sure he likes what he sees. Now's the time to tell him who I am so of course, I don't. Do I really want him to connect me with that sad, ugly, fat girl?

"Are you able to get in line now, miss?"

"Sure. Ah... Thank you."

Colin turns on a dime and strides his way-too-fine-ass to the front of my queue. Then he fires off a short set of questions to each passenger which is good because I need time

to rehearse. I'm in deep doo-doo. I'd just used my most guarded secret to hack into New York City's network. Someone's bound to notice.

You think?

One by one, each person is ushered out the door and onto an idling bus. Minutes tick by slowly into almost an hour. Dammit. I'm going to miss my first meeting. I text Jason to reschedule.

Then it's my turn. Steely-blues bore into my face and Colin's espresso-breath warms my face. "Feeling better?"

I nod.

"State your name and address."

"Meh-uh, Jenna Jones." I can't believe my voice cracked and I almost answered with my given name. I haven't gone by Megan McCarthy since I was eighteen.

"Jones, you say?" With raised eyebrows, he scribbles on a small wire-bound pad that's so low tech, I can't help but smirk.

He's not smiling. "Address?"

I rub the goose bumps off my arms. "Twenty-Five South Maple, Ridgewood, New Jersey."

A drop of sweat drips down the side of my face and I swipe it away with the back of my hand. It's really hot in here.

"And did you call 911?" He leans in, staring without blinking.

"No." Hey, to be precise, Jason called. I just executed my program.

His eyes narrow, the creases around his mouth deepen, and he shoots off a high pitched whistle.

When another officer jumps to take his place, Colin walks me down a hallway, hand at my back. "Please, this way miss."

I'm up a creek without a rowboat.

Chapter 2

Megan McCarthy

Fat Camp, 17 years ago.

New England mornings are friggin' cold, even in early August. Shivering like mad in the ugliest bathing suit on the face of the planet, I snap a picture of the long black snake held by a camp counselor. He pulled it out of what is loosely referred to as the swimming pool.

I'm not going into that water. Not ever again. What if that thing was a water moccasin? I could die.

If that isn't bad enough, the pine forest is filled with mosquitoes, bees, and poison ivy. And now, because of my behavior, I have to stand in front of everyone while Terry-the-Skinny-Bitch, lectures me on how swimming reduces weight.

I'd rather be dead.

Suddenly, the dreamy lifeguard, Colin O'Brien, jumps off his chair, puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder and walks me away from the pool.

A true gentleman, he holds open the gate for me. "Go. Tell the nurse you don't feel so good. I'll back you up."

Maybe I won't die a virgin after all. I shoot him my best smile but he's already climbing back up onto his chair, paying me no mind.

Who'm I kidding?

Wandering to the infirmary, I dig into my knapsack and retrieve my second-to-the-last Reese's Cup. After that humiliation, I *so* deserve this but then, no more. All I'll have left for the next two weeks are Snickers and Twix. Those I'll try to eat more slowly.

Miss Susan, the nurse, doesn't give me any grief about my chocolate. She asks me about home, but I don't like to talk about my mom. Instead, I tell her about my latest computer program and even though she doesn't understand a word, I feel a whole lot better.

She listens and smiles when I try to explain stuff. Like for instance, how when I converse with kids my age, they stare like I'm speaking French, which I'm fluent in, but that's beside the point. I'd much rather talk to adults. First of all, they generally don't make fun of me. And secondly, any grown up that I bother with has a decent vocabulary.

After swim class, Miss Susan sends me back to my cabin. Skinny-Bitch-Terry gives me a nasty look but shuts up. I hope she got in trouble for being so mean. The counselors aren't supposed to make us feel uncomfortable about our bodies. I read it on their website. But then again, like the pool, nothing else here is true.

Seventeen more days to go. I make an 'X' in my laptop's calendar.

We're supposed to write emails home, but I'd had mine saved onto my desktop months ago. I know what my mom wants to hear. Even if I told her how much I hate it here, she wouldn't let me come home. She only cares that I lose weight. I'm an embarrassment. That's what she told me before I left. That and how I need some self-control.

If this place wasn't such a rip-off, I could drop a few pounds. We're supposed to be learning a healthy lifestyle, but the meals are full of cheap starches which only make me hungrier. What they serve is no good for teens.

I know what I'm supposed to eat. I just can't do it here.

I escape the claustrophobic room by telling Terry that I need to use the outhouse. Then I wander off to spy on the boys, especially Colin O'Brien. He's so hot, it should be illegal. As I hide behind a huge oak, he leads the boys in some kind of martial arts.

When a twig snaps under my foot, I try to run but he catches up with me. Rats. I'm going to be in big trouble again. My heart races.

He squats so we can talk eye to eye. "You're not supposed to be here, are you?"

Another thing that I really like about him is that even all sweaty, he smells really good. That might explain why my brain freezes and I blurt out like a complete nerd, "Can I join you guys?"

"Sure, if you want." A dimple cuts into one side of his face and he cocks his head, trying to get into my thoughts.

When a couple boys start to protest, he shoots them this severe frown. Then like magic, they all shut-up.

"Umm. I probably should go. Terry doesn't know where I am." There's nothing more I want to do than spend time with Colin O'Brien but I'm already on probation.

"Hold on. I'll tell her you're with us." After a few moments on his walkie, he smiles. "All set. Put your shoes over there and join us on the grass."

Now I'm sorry I didn't stay with the girls because I don't want the boys to notice I can barely reach my calves, let alone touch my toes. But once we start, they don't pay me any mind. They're worse than me. One boy shoots me a shy smile and I return it.

After about an hour, I'm tired, but I feel different. "Can I come back? This sure beats Pilates."

"Okay by me." Colin grins as he laces up his sneakers. "I'll square it away for you."

I head back to my cabin knowing I'll totally love him forever.

Chapter 3

Detective Colin O'Brien

Present day

I walk the pretty Miss Jones through the swinging doors and into the banquet room where giant baby-bottles float over pink linens. For a split second my thoughts wander to my ex-wife. I wish her the best with that jerk she screwed. Then I pull out a couple chairs reminding myself how good women are at lying and cheating.

I point to where I want my suspect to sit.

Ghostly pale, she perches on the edge of her seat, clutching it with white knuckles. This interrogation should be a piece of cake. She's been squirming and sweating for over an hour. Good thing too, because I need to put this terrorist incident to bed.

Sitting down in front of her, I scoot forward knee-to-knee and flash her a reassuring smile. "No need to worry, Miss Jones. Just explain to me in your own words what you saw."

Instead of spilling secrets, her eyes get glassy, and her expression goes blank. Dammit. Did she swallow some kind of poison pill? She gave no outward signs of suicide. How did I miss that?

I open her mouth and drag a finger around to make sure it's empty. Narcolepsy? Then after feeling a strong pulse at her neck, I breathe easier. That is until I spy the small cord running from her glasses to an expensive earpiece.

I was right. She's either law enforcement or a terrorist. I slip the gadget off her head and click my radio to call for an ambulance.

"Give me those." She grabs the headset and scoots her chair back which screeches against the linoleum. Then her eyes flit back and forth between the two exits as if she's plotting her escape.

“Please ma’am, stay seated.” I hold open a palm in front of her face until she hands back the electronics. “Explain these, if you will, Ms. Jones.”

She’s got top-of-the-line gear, complete with expensive camera and military grade earpiece. “It’s Doctor Jones. And I don’t know anything about that bomber.”

“I never said there was a bomber.” There it was. Her first mistake. I’ll Mirandize her, get a full confession, and still have time for a beer.

“I’m not an idiot, Colin. I saw the bomb squad unit.” The tops of her cheeks brighten when she realizes that she said my first name.

How does she know me? Something about her is vaguely familiar but I can’t place it. Those deep green eyes... that high, girlish voice.

Before I can ask, the banquet door swings open, bangs against the back wall, and Special Agent John Drew struts across the dance floor like a peacock in heat.

Unbelievable. What a complete ass-hat.

“Back off, O’Brien. She’s way above your security clearance.” He grabs a chair, eyes on Miss Jones. If he sat any closer, she’d be on his lap.

Picking nonexistent lint off the sleeve of his Italian suit, he rests his eyes ever-so-softly on my suspect and puts an arm over the back of her chair. “Jenna, I just heard. Is there anything I can do for you?”

His voice is laced with honey and eyes creased with phony concern. The only thing missing is a lollipop and a Band-Aid for her boo-boo.

“No thank you. Releasing me will be sufficient but I’d like to be updated now that I’m not a *suspect*.” She glares my way, triumphant-like, with eyebrows raised.

I’m certain I’ve seen that look before. But where? The name Jenna Jones doesn’t ring any bells or conjure any ghosts.

While I ponder, Drew slaps a fist into his palm, figuring he hit a grand slam in the bottom of ninth. “There *was* a bomb in the canvas bag. Your program was spot on. Kudos.”

Then his face skews, making him appear more confused than usual. “When did you launch the beta version?”

“It’s been out there for a while.” She shrugs with her gaze lowered to the floor, a classic tell. The woman is obviously lying and Drew doesn’t have a clue.

I need to break up this little repartee before I throw up. “Please stay seated, Ms. Jones. We’ll be right back.”

“After you.” My hand directs my coworker to the kitchen door.

“Of course, *officer*.” He grins, winks at Jones, and slowly ambles forward.

“It’s *detective*.” Annoyed that I let him get under my skin, I follow him through the swinging door.

Inside, pots and pans hang from the ceiling. Steel counter-tops mirror blue, fluorescent lights overhead. Stoves and grills stand quiet and pristine as if waiting at attention for the staff to arrive.

Taking a deep breath, I force my voice to calm. “Special Agent Drew, kindly back off.”

That was quite well done on my part. After all, it’s a perfectly rational request. This is my investigation. Unless I hear differently, he technically reports to me.

“Not going to happen.” He grins smugly, waiting for me to blow but I behave as a perfect professional with hands clasped behind my back.

“She hacked into the software at HQ. She knows something.”

I sidestep when he tries to jab at my chest with an index finger. “You’re way off base. She’s not the enemy. That’s Doctor J. Jones. She’s owns the patent on HQ’s latest facial recognition software.”

“No way. She’s what? Twenty-five?” Cracking open the door, I take another look at the stunning auburn-haired beauty.

“Thirty, to be exact. And she didn’t break in, she logged in. Jeesh, O’Brien, let it go. We’re done here.” With an exaggerated huff, Drew straightens his silk tie and pushes at the door which swings wildly, whacking him in the ass as he exits.

I hold back my chuckle when he stumbles. Joint Task Force? What a load of BS. And he’s dead wrong. I’ve worked with our latest software and what popped up on the war-board today was definitely not it. Whoever locked us out of our own network was good and left no trace. If it was her, she’s beyond frightening.

I wait in the kitchen for a minute to regain my composure. Something about that guy makes my skin crawl. Then when I reenter the banquet room, the two of them stop arguing, her elf-like face blushing. Again, I get this nagging feeling we’ve met before.

Drew glances at his watch and smooths back his hair. “You’ve got exactly five minutes to release her, O’Brien. I’d stay but the press is waiting for me outside. Jenna, call me if you need anything, anything at all.”

I give her a bit of credit for rolling her eyes when he pats her on the head. Apparently, she’s had enough of me too, because when she turns, she gives me the evil eye. Then her feet plop on top of the table.

What’s this? She’s wearing a pair of...it can’t be, but it is... A grown woman with bright red Wonder Woman sneakers. Her arms cross behind her head, she leans way back, and her short skirt rides up her thighs.

My cock, having a mind of its own, takes notice.

“You could break your neck.” That comes out more annoyed than I intended but it can’t be helped. I’m not at all pleased with this attraction. Especially because she just made me look like a fool in front of Drew.

I hate know-it-all women. And liars.

Did I mention liars?

“Can I go now, Detective?” She tugs down on the hem of her skirt but leaves her comic-book shoes parked on the tabletop.

“Certainly.” However, before I can do that, I need to be certain she won’t lodge a complaint.

I don’t need that on my pristine record. I was doing my job. A job I’m really good at. In fact, much better than the man who just left to preen in front of the TV cameras.

I use my special tone. The one reserved for nuns, elderly ladies, and small children. “Please accept my department’s abject apologies, Doctor Jones, for detaining you unnecessarily.”

She ignores my amazing efforts, juts out her heart-shaped chin, and glowers with this how-dare-you kind of attitude. There’s also something else behind her mask, as if I’d hurt her feelings.

It’s downright asinine but I can’t help but stare back, waiting for her to blink first. I’m certain at some point in my life that I’ve played this game with her. Flashcards of faces flick through my mind but I come up blank.

I got nothing.

Suddenly her pupils dilate, and her pelvis tilts up. When she licks her lower lip with a flick of her tongue, my cock twitches.

Absolutely not.

This kind of thing isn’t going to happen to me, especially not on the job. I won’t get turned on by a beautiful liar with bright red sneakers.

I blink.

She smirks and lowers her lashes.

I go in for the kill. “Doctor Jones, before you go, can you explain how your *facial-reco* software found a random terrorist with a bomb in a canvas bag in a city of millions?”

And the traffic jam? I know your program did that as well.
And if you can login to our software, why did you hack in?"

She squirms, screams, and her stupid sneakers flay the air.

Unbelievable. I spring forward and grab the back of her chair a millisecond before her head would've bounced off the floor. Then while I'm congratulating myself on the incredible save, I realize I'm straddled across her lap with my interest inches from her 'V.' If that position isn't bad enough, she digs her short nails into my waist and stands.

Blood rushes south.

Her stunned face no doubt mirrors mine at the sexual attraction zapping between us. "S-sorry. Are we done, here? I've got a lot of work and I'm already late."

"Yeah. I'll help you hail a cab." I haven't felt anything like this since the biggest mistake of my life but back then, I was a whole lot younger and lot more stupid.

I got no excuse for what's going on between my legs and step back. It's good my dress pants have ample room in the front because I need to pass my coworkers on the way out. You'd think a brisk walk across Fifty-Third would curb my lust, but not so. Now that I'm walking behind her, all I can think about is why there's no underwear lines across her tight luscious ass.

At the curb of Seventh Avenue, I whistle through my teeth, a yellow cab comes to a halt, and I get in one final jab. "You know, if a low-tech guy like me is asking, how long do you suppose before someone smarter figures it out?"

"Figures out what?" Holding her purse to her chest, she parks her rear-end on the blue fabric, her skirt climbing high on those mile-long legs.

"That you broke into our network using some new mind-blowing piece of software."

She ignores me and gives the cabbie her address which I commit to memory. "We're not done here, Doctor Jones. Not by a long shot."

Her eyebrows raise and thick lips purse into a one-sided smile. “I might have something to say about that.”

When she tries to close the door, I shoot out my hand to keep it open, the small brain below my waist doing all the talking. I need to know more.

“Why not meet up with me later, Dr. Jones? Coffee? Dinner?”

“Are you threatening me?” Frowning, she slides to the other side of the seat and eyes me with that same pained expression as earlier.

Did my offer of a date sound remotely dangerous? Again, warnings clang in my brain as traffic starts to back up behind the cab. I definitely know her and her odd behavior from somewhere.

The driver taps on the meter, horns blare, and I let go. Then she slams the cab door shut, leaving me stunned at the curb. What just happened? Obviously, I’ve been working too hard, not taking enough time off. Maybe I just need to get laid.

Once back inside the restaurant, I whistle through my teeth, and my partner, Joe D’Angelo, looks up. His starched white shirt is untucked with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, exposing his Semper Fi tat. We’ve been together for five years and it sucks that I know that he knows what’s going on below my waist.

He raises one eyebrow and smirks. “What did she say?”

“Nothing. She clammed up when Drew walked in. I tried to get more out of her, but he said my security clearance wasn’t high enough. Can you believe that guy? So much for *joint* in JTTF.”

“Forget him. That ass-hat is never going to change...” Joe scrolls through a file on his tablet and then glances out the window. “So that was J. Jones. Who knew? She’s not the little bald-headed, myopic guy that I’d pictured. She’s like what, a nine? A ten?”

“I didn’t notice.” My glower says it’s not up for discussion.

“Riight.” He grins, no doubt planning the payback he’s going to have at my expense.

It’s my fault. The last time he’d fallen hard for a woman, I’d been merciless. I’d almost felt bad about it except for one thing. Like my ex, she too, was a scheming, conniving bitch. That brings my mind back to our job. I got a really bad feeling about this latest attack on the city.

“You call Georgio. I’ll meet you back at HQ.” Joe’s a mind reader. It’s one of the reasons he survived three tours in Iraq. That and he’s a cold mother under fire.

“Where’s the owner of this place?” I bite into a donut, something I almost never do but need the sugar rush.

“Got it covered. Gave him a PBA card for his dash. He’ll never get ticketed again.”

“I’m so proud of you.” I smirk.

Then before my partner can get in another dig about the state of my junk, my phone vibrates in my back pocket.

It’s a text from my boss. He wants me to report in.

I text back that I’ll be there in five. No doubt Drew already gave him his perspective on events. Then after pouring some caffeine for the road, I head out to my car double parked in front of the restaurant. It seems like days, but it’s only been there a few hours. Sitting, I speed dial the brightest analyst on the force and try to guess his language du jour.

I count three rings.

“Allo?” His French is pretty good.

“Bonjour, mon ami. What’ve you got for me?” I purposefully butcher my accent.

He snickers. “Nice, O’Brien. The name of the suspected terrorist is Roger Preevil. Home town is Chicago. Married. He got laid off last week. No known religious affiliations. Allah told him to build a bomb, so he did. He’s with the shrink now. The Feds think they can get more out of him. But from what I hear, I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“The suspect is adamant. He says he remembers *rien*. Nothing about this morning. We’re pulling his computer now.”

“Okay. Keep me informed. And what about Doctor Jones’ program?” I turn off my police beacon-light, whoop the siren, and pull into traffic.

Georgio speaks my thoughts aloud. “You think our HQ program is nowhere near as sophisticated as what she was using this morning? You might even be asking, could any known program in the world have found that terrorist on that bus?”

“Yeah. Something like that.” His lame humor makes me chuckle and for a moment there’s silence as my phone connects to the car’s Bluetooth speakers.

“Whatever she’s got, O’Brien, it’s light years ahead of Microsoft and Google. Probably worth millions, maybe even a billion on the black market.” The kid drops the accent, suddenly dead serious. That worries me about as much as anything that’s happened today.

Good God. No wonder Jones was reticent to give out details. “Drew says FBI has an eyes-only file on her. Can you get at it? Quietly?”

“*Mais oui*. And there’s one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Doctor Jones? Her birth name is Megan McCarthy. She changed it when she became an adult.”

“Meggie?” Holy B’Jesus. That explains everything.

“You know her?”

“Yeah, I did. I’ll fill you in later.” I hang up and stop at the next red-light, confused. The last time I saw her, she was young. What? Thirteen? For God’s sake, she still had a gaping hole where an adult tooth hadn’t fully grown in.

Even as I put the two faces side by side in my mind, I can’t see much similarity between the cute fat kid and the mind-

blowingly gorgeous woman in the restaurant.

I liked Meggie, she was a good egg, but the rest of the campers had been merciless. She always had a hard time connecting with the other girls. At the time I did my best to help her to survive what had to be the most miserable three weeks of her life.

Then I smile when I recall how she souped-up my computer. I had an old Dell, and it was hurting. She ordered more RAM, a new motherboard, and a solid state hard drive. She completely cleaned out the malware. Basically, she rebuilt it from scratch at only a fraction of the cost of what a new one would've run me. When she was done, it ran better than when it was new and kept me going for several more years.

That was right before I enlisted. Before the incident and before that bitch of an ex got her claws into me. When I was still young and stupid.

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