

AN AEGIS NETWORK NOVELLA

A SEAL'S  
*Honor*

USA Today Bestselling Author

JENTALTY

# A SEAL'S HONOR

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THE AEGIS NETWORK: JACKSONVILLE DIVISION

JEN TALTY

JUPITER PRESS

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# A SEAL'S HONOR

AN AEGIS NETWORK NOVELLA

*The Jacksonville Branch*

*Book 1*

*USA TODAY* Bestselling Author

JEN TALTY

## BOOK DESCRIPTION

Navy SEAL Dante Fallon spent the last year of his enlistment haunted by his best friend's murder. He swore that once his time in the service was up, he'd get his revenge. However, he didn't anticipate finding the only woman he's ever had real feelings for working for the enemy.

When Kaia George buried her brother, she swore she'd seek revenge for his death. For the last twelve months, she's developed a relationship with the crime family that killed him. The last thing she needs is Dante walking back into her life, trying to fix things. No way will she take his help—until bullets fly, and she's left with two choices:

Work with Dante to take down the crime family.

Or meet her brother on the other side.



## NOTE FROM JEN TALTY

Thank you for checking out the Aegis Network and *A SEAL's Honor*. It should be noted that this novella was previously published with Lady Boss Press as part of Kristen Proby's *With Me Universe*. However, since the rights reverted to me I have expanded the novella, adding never before read scenes. So, if you have already read the story, you will be dazzled and delighted.

Thank you for spending your reading time with me and my characters. I do appreciate it. Readers rule!

*To Kim. Thanks for being right there with me!*

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## ONE YEAR AGO...

Navy SEAL Dante Fallon snagged his rucksack from the overhead bin and tossed it over his shoulder. He smiled at the flight attendant, who thanked him for his service. Sometimes, he really loved flying commercial. Between the free peanuts, the complimentary beverages, and the comfortable seats, it sure as shit beat the back end of a transport plane with a bunch of other smelly military men, heading home from a mission that was either hurry up and wait for nothing to happen...

Or be lucky to get out alive.

He stepped onto the jetway. He'd been all over the globe, and South Florida was still his favorite place on Earth. If he had any desire to leave the Navy, he'd move to Florida in a heartbeat.

His pulse kicked up a notch, thinking about a pretty lady with dark hair and sweet lips who, in a matter of hours, would have her legs wrapped around his body. If he did relationships, he'd do one with Kaia. Only he was married to his career, and she wasn't the settling-down type, either.

And if her brother ever found out, Dante would be shark bait for sure.

So, he'd settle for occasionally visiting the sunshine state with a few buddies who'd take to retired life or worked for the Aegis Network.

Of course, Beck, Kaia's brother, had been acting weird as shit lately with his ominous, late-night texts and strange phone calls. Something wasn't right with Beck, and when Dante asked his sister Kaia about it, she found a million reasons to change the subject, and that had Dante even more concerned.

And with good reason.

Dante's Apple Watch vibrated. He glanced at his wrist. A text from Holiday White flashed on the screen that he'd pulled into the West Palm Airport.

Holiday had moved to the Jacksonville area from Orlando about a year ago and is currently heading up the local branch of the Aegis network.

Dante dug into his pocket and found his cell, quickly sending a text, telling Holiday to go ahead and pull around. He would have rather had Kaia pick him up, but what was he to do? He couldn't advertise his non-relationship with his best friend's sister. That wouldn't be cool.

Dante rubbed the back of his neck as he double timed it to baggage claim. Since he had no checked luggage, he'd make it outside probably about the same time Holiday pulled up curbside.

It had been a good year since he'd last seen Holiday, which had been about the time he'd moved from Orlando to Jacksonville when he'd been promoted. Ever since, Holiday had been talking up what a great organization the Aegis Network was and that Dante had a job there when he was ready.

Dante stopped at the vending machines and purchased a soda and a package of peanut M&M's. The drive from the airport to Beck's place on the Intercoastal was only about thirty minutes, but Dante's stomach growled, and knowing Beck, there'd be nothing but chips in the cupboard and fish dip and beer in the fridge.

God, he hoped Kaia would manage to have him at her place, but he couldn't push that arrangement.

He stepped outside into the hot, humid Florida air. Perspiration beaded on his brow. He adjusted his shades and took a swig of cola as he saw Holiday pulling toward him in an SUV. And not just anyone old one, but a big one with a third seat.

Basically, a mom car.

“Nice ride,” he said, tossing his rucksack into the back of the vehicle. He paused for a moment, staring at two baby seats. He leaned over, examining the contents of the little accessories. “How many kids are you going to end up having?”

“After this one, the wife says we’re done, but she’s already getting that look. The one says she’s be okay having one more.” Holiday glanced over his shoulder before easing back into traffic. “How was the flight?”

“Uneventful. How are all the kiddos?”

Two years ago, Holiday had gone and done the unthinkable by falling in love with a woman who was not only too good for him but had also saved him from himself. Candice had helped him gain custody of his teenage niece. Candice and her son had given the man a family life—and now, two more little rugrats.

He had it all.

And then some.

But that was no life for Dante.

Or was it?

He’d never thought about forever. Not until he met Kaia. And while they cared about each other, they also had an understanding. She was under no obligation to wait for him between missions. If someone better came along, she was a free woman. So far, he’d been lucky that he’d been able to satisfy her, and she hadn’t gone looking for anyone else. That made him oddly happy.

However, at the end of the day, Dante loved two things: the Navy and the water. And those two things went hand-in-hand.

And they were not a good fit for a family, something that Dante didn't want.

Only Kaia made him rethink that decision and he didn't know how to process that emotion.

"Awesome," Holiday said. "Though Mauve has a boyfriend. A serious one, and I've tried scaring him away. But he's not afraid of me."

"I find that hard to believe."

Holiday laughed. "I think Candice coaches him on what to say to me so I'm impressed or something. First time I met him, he showed up knowing all the stats for the Army-Navy football games. We sat and chatted for a good half-hour before I realized what had happened."

"How's Xander doing?"

Holiday laughed. "That young boy is turning into quite the little man. He's playing on an elite basketball team and he's getting straight A's. He's a good kid."

"And what's your little girl's name again?" Dante couldn't imagine being a husband, much less a father. He loved women, but he couldn't ever love only one. Not in the forever kind of way. His heart was too unsettled. His soul too damaged.

Or at least that's what he kept trying to tell himself every time he came within ten feet of Kaia, because that woman had the ability to turn his world upside down—if he let her.

"Well. I have two now. Leslie is two months old and starting to sleep, finally. And Bianca has started walking and talking and"—Holiday paused and patted his chest—"she's just simply amazing. Of course, she takes after his mother. All the kids do." He smiled with pride, as he should. "I'm just along for the ride."

"Speaking of which, have you talked to Kaia? Are we supposed to stop and get anything?"

Holiday glanced in Dante's direction with an arched brow. "You're seriously going to play it like that?"



“I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.” Dante raked a hand over his freshly buzzed head.

“Right. Everyone knows the two of you hooked up the last time you were down here. And up in New York. And when we were—”

“Excuse me?” Dante stared out the window. Kaia was sexy as hell with her sleek, jet-black hair, chocolate eyes, and dark skin, but her fierce personality, sharp tongue, and wicked-mad skills on the range had Dante shaking in his boots the first few times he’d met her. He’d nearly fallen off the barstool when she’d propositioned him two years ago. Since then, they’d gotten together every chance they got.

And he’d thought they were being discreet.

“I’ve seen you with her, and I know you. You’ve got it bad for Kaia. Nothing wrong with that.”

Dante wasn’t exactly sure how he felt about Kaia, other than he couldn’t stop thinking about her when he wasn’t with her, and he worried about her brother pulling her down into his shit. On the one hand, Dante wished Beck would be more upfront with Kaia about the problems her father had faced before he died, and how much their dad had owed the Russells. However, Dante’s instincts were to protect Kaia, which meant keeping her in the dark about her father’s financial troubles and her brother’s involvement.

But when her father died, Dante had made a promise to Beck to never breathe a word to Kaia about how bad it had gotten. And Dante was nothing without his SEALs’ honor.

“She’s not the kind of person anyone messes with. I mean, she looks like a lady, all sweet and gorgeous, but watch out, she’ll eat you for dinner.”

“I’m married. You don’t have to warn me off. Now, Walli, he’s the one you need to worry about. Or maybe Morty. We know he’s got no shame.”

“When do they get in?” Dante decided to redirect the conversation.

“Around midnight,” Holiday said. “They will meet us at the docks before this shit goes down.”

Dante stared out the window. Having grown up in Seattle, he wasn't accustomed to the bright sunshine pelting his eyes, but he loved how the warm rays heated his skin. There was nothing but tall palm trees stretching toward the blue sky. A few white, puffy clouds floated over the ocean as they got off the highway and headed toward the sleepy little seaside town. In the distance, Dante could see the Lighthouse.

It almost felt as though he'd returned home.

“Does Kaia have any idea?” Holiday asked.

“I promised Beck we wouldn't tell her anything, and he thinks she's oblivious, but she knows more than she lets on.”

“She's never talked to you about it?”

“Only that she's worried about Beck, and I've shared the same concerns.” It's hard not to when he shared a bed with Kaia. And he hated lying to her about what he thought was at the root of Beck's troubled soul, though he did tie it to their father's father's financial problems and then his sudden death last year.

“I can't believe how bad things got for Beck,” Holiday said. “He made it look like he had it all taken care of.”

“He got stuck between a rock and a hard place,” Dante said. “I'm just glad he finally called for backup.”

Holiday punched the gas, heading north past the Pier. Beck lived in a trailer right on the river a few miles up the road, walking distance from the marina where he kept his charter boats.

He'd also managed to purchase a surf shop, and Dante wondered where Beck had gotten the money for the third charter boat and the new shop. Things just seemed too good to be true, and Beck didn't appear to be the happy-go-lucky man he'd been before he left the military.

Now, Dante knew why.

His pulse got caught in his throat the second they pulled into the driveway.

The beautiful Kaia, her long hair pulled into a ponytail at the nape of her neck, sat on the front porch of the modular home. She'd twisted the tail over her shoulder and ran her fingers through the strands, her nose in a book. She glanced up and smiled, then set her reading material to the side and stood. Her toned legs went on forever. Her white T-shirt with a picture of a turtle on the front didn't cover her stomach, showing off a taut midriff and a silver belly button ring.

"Seriously. Don't say a single word to her about our plan. She'll either want in on it, or she'll be up my ass all night about it, and I'll never be able to sneak out," Dante whispered. "And I promised Beck she would be kept in the dark."

"Understood."

Dante did his best not to let his gaze linger on her voluptuous breasts, but he couldn't help himself. He opened his mouth to say something, anything.

But all he did was grunt.

He'd been all over the world and had had his share of beautiful women, but no one could hold a candle to Kaia—and she was way out of his league.

She lifted her sunglasses to the top of her head. "Look at what the cat dragged in," she said.

"It's been a while," Dante finally managed, keeping up the ruse that he and Kaia hadn't seen each other only a few months ago. She kissed Dante on the cheek. Her hot lips scorched his skin. She squeezed his biceps. "Nice of you to make the trip down, Holiday."

"Wouldn't miss it," Holiday said.

"So, what're the sleeping arrangements?" Dante asked, keeping up the ruse for her sake.

"Unfortunately, Beck only has two guest rooms. Holiday, you get the bigger one with the queen bed. Walli and either Morty or Riker get the one with two beds. The other one gets

the couch here or the couch at my place. Dante, you get my guest room.”

“You are a lifesaver.” He smiled, dropping his rucksack onto the porch. He pulled his cell out of his back pocket and quickly sent Beck a text, letting him know that they had arrived and would head over to the docks shortly.

Beck responded immediately with a thumbs-up emoji.

“He’s done.” Dante waved his cell. “Why don’t you head over? I’ll drop my stuff at Kaia’s and meet you there.”

Holiday arched a brow. “Seriously?”

“I’ll be fifteen minutes behind you.”

“You better be.” Holiday slapped Dante on the back. “We wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

Dante waited until Holiday was out of sight before pulling Kaia into his arms. “I guess we haven’t been as discreet as I thought because it seems Holiday and the guys are onto us.”

“My brother acts like he doesn’t know.” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, slipping her tongue between his lips. “But I suspect he might.”

When it came to sex, Kaia was certainly the best he’d ever had. He couldn’t imagine it getting any better. And if he were honest, he didn’t want it to get any better—at least not with anyone else. If he never experienced anyone else, he would actually be fine with that.

A reality he struggled to accept.

He ran his hands up and down her back, letting his fingers dance over her soft skin. Whether she knew it or not, she’d helped him get through a few tough nights during his last deployment. “Does it bother you that I don’t want—?”

“I don’t want my brother to know. He gets weird when I have flings with his friends, so it’s best if we just keep things under the radar.”

Dante leaned against the railing, resting his hands on her hips. “Have you dated anyone while I was gone?”

Kaia shook her head. “A few friends have tried to fix me up, but I wasn’t feeling it.”

“You are allowed to do whatever you want when I leave. We don’t have exclusive rights or anything.” The second the words left Dante’s lips, he regretted them, but being in a full-time relationship wasn’t something he’d ever done before.

Not just because of his job, but because his heart started pounding at the mere thought of being with a woman for more than a few months.

Except for Kaia. All bets were off where she was concerned. If he could say he had any real feelings for a woman, it would be Kaia.

“That sounds like you’re having second thoughts.”

“No. I’m actually jealous of the idea of you being with another man. But I don’t have the right to tell you that you can’t.” Jesus, he sounded like a fucking lovesick idiot. “I’m only in town for a few days, and I’ll be deployed again for months. I don’t think it’s fair to ask you to sit around and wait for me when I don’t even know if I’m...” He glanced at the sky. “I’m not very good at this.”

“No. You’re not.” She cupped his cheek. “Are you saying you want more?”

“Do you?”

“I asked first.”

He groaned. “Kaia, I want more, but I don’t know what that looks like.”

She smiled. “I like the idea of more.”

“You do?” He arched a brow.

She nodded. “It looks like you got yourself a secret girlfriend.” She kissed his neck. “Did my brother say anything to you about him seeing anyone?”

“No. Why?”

She shrugged. “I think he’s been screwing around with this chick, June. Her brothers are the ones who helped Beck get set

up in his charter business. I don't trust them. They have shady business dealings."

"How do you know?" Dante rolled his neck.

"About June or her brothers?"

"Both."

"People talk." Kaia had moved from Virginia Beach to Jupiter less than a year ago, after her father's passing, so she hadn't been around to see the Russells and their dirty work. "And I have eyes." She cocked her head. "I just worry June isn't a stand-up girl."

June wasn't part of the plan, and Beck hadn't said anything about a woman. But what concerned Dante more was that Kaia wasn't being truthful with about what she knew about her brother, the Russells, and their connection to her father. However, right now was not the time to deal with that. "Do you want me to see if I can get anything out of him about this girl?" Dante asked, doing his best to pretend that he didn't know anything about the family.

Or the fact that when he'd been here a few months ago, he'd taken the Russell boys for two thousand dollars.

And that'd totally pissed them off.

Not so much that they'd lost, but that Dante wouldn't give them the chance to win it back.

"No. Because then he'll know I asked you, and that would just piss him off, and he and I have had words lately," Kaia said. "You should probably get going. I'll take your bag to my place and meet you a little later." Kaia strolled down the steps, glancing over her shoulder. "I expect a full-body massage tonight."

Dante jogged down the steps and reached out, curling his fingers around her arm, yanking her to his chest. "I have a few expectations of my own."

She smiled. "I'm sure you do."

Dante strolled down the dock toward Beck and one of his charter boats. Holiday had made himself comfortable in the bow, while Beck moved about the vessel.

“I guess you finally decided to join us instead of sucking face with my sister.” Beck lifted a hose and sprayed it in Dante’s direction.

Water landed on his feet, soaking his boat shoes. He wiggled his toes, sloshing them around inside the wet fabric. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Dante should have known it would eventually get out, and frankly, he was tired of denying it and hiding his...fling or whatever one called a casual relationship with a woman. Though he wasn’t sure how he really felt about Kaia, other than the fact that he couldn’t stop thinking about her every time he left her, and she was the first person he texted when he came Stateside.

“Are you going to deny that you like my sister? Because that would be so uncool,” Beck said.

“Everyone thinks your little sister is amazing. What’s not to like?” Dante did his best to keep things light and breezy as if his heart weren’t racing at about one hundred and twenty beats per minute.

“Yeah, but you like her a little more than the rest of us,” Holiday said with a wicked-ass grin. “That kiss I witnessed as I walked away proved it.”

“Asshole,” Dante muttered.

“I’m so looking forward to making my sister blush tonight when she tries to explain why she offered you her guest room instead of one of the other men.” Beck smiled widely.

“Don’t push her buttons, or I might have to tell a few of your secrets. Like when you accidentally slept with her college roommate.”

“She already knows about that.” Beck sat in the captain’s chair and stretched his legs out on the center console. “How long have you and Kaia been an item?”

Dante knew he should have had a conversation with Kaia about how to handle this if it came up because he couldn’t lie to his brothers. At least, not for very long. “We’re not a thing.” Dante glanced over his shoulder. If she heard him talking about this, he risked not sleeping in her bed, and he couldn’t have that. Not tonight.

“So, you’re just using my little sister?”

“It’s not like that, either.” Dante jumped onto the vessel. “It’s a mutual fling. Haven’t you ever had one of those? Or is this thing with your new girl more serious?”

Holiday laughed.

“And this is funny why?” Dante glared at his buddy.

“Because you and Kaia have been an item for almost two years.” Holiday smiled as if he’d won the lottery. “It’s far from a fling.”

“Fuck,” Beck said. “You hurt my sister, and I’ll kill you.”

“And if she hurts me?” Dante asked.

“Then you deserved it,” Beck mumbled.

“Now, why don’t you tell me about June?” Dante narrowed his stare. He knew he shouldn’t toss Kaia under the bus, but he had no choice.

“You promised to keep Kaia—”

Dante held up a hand. “She knows nothing. But she’s worried about you and heard the chatter about the Russells and



their shitty business dealings. Kaia is a smart girl and incredibly observant.”

“June’s not involved in what her brothers are doing.”

“Are you sure?” Holiday asked.

Beck nodded. “She’s with me. One hundred percent.”

“I hope you’re right.” Dante pointed to the beer in Holiday’s hand. “I’ll take one of those.” He lifted the top of the built-in cooler.

“Not a good idea.” Beck pushed it closed, nearly taking Dante’s hand off in the process.

“I was looking for a cold one.” Dante stared at him with an arched brow. “You don’t have any more?”

“In the front carry-on one.” Beck pointed.

“I’ll get you one.” Holiday had perched himself in the bow of the boat. He reached in and pulled out a longneck.

“What’s going on?” Dante sat on the hull’s edge and watched the fish in the blue light swim around in the shallow water.

“Unfortunately, a little change in plans.” Beck’s feet hit the deck, and he sat up a little taller. “June, what are you doing here?”

Dante glanced over his shoulder and smiled at the pretty young lady with long, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. She wore a denim miniskirt and a teal, long-sleeved sun shirt. He’d seen her the last time he’d been in Jupiter with her brothers, and he’d gotten the distinct impression that she’d set her sights on Beck but that her brothers weren’t having any of it.

“I thought I’d give you a heads-up that my brothers are on their way here, and they aren’t too happy.” June folded her arms across her chest. “But I have no idea why.”

“You tell Jeff and Pete that what happened wasn’t my fault, and I can’t deal with it until my friends leave. They will understand.”

“I’ll tell them, but I haven’t seen them like this since that one took their money in a so-called friendly poker game.” June pointed at Dante.

Beck had told Dante that it was a mistake to take on the Russells in a game of Texas hold ’em, but Dante had needed to know what kind of men he would be dealing with when this shit actually went down, and what better way than a friendly—or in that case, not-so-friendly—card game?

“Not my fault your brothers suck,” Dante said.

“Beck, I’ve warned you about being so glib about my brothers. I’d tell your friends to tone it down.” June shook her head. “I’ve got to get back to the hostess station.” June turned on her heels and hurried down the dock.

“What the fuck is going on?” Dante asked.

Holiday made his way to the fishing boat’s stern and sat on the back compartment, tapping his knuckles. “Are there drugs in here now?”

Beck nodded.

“You weren’t supposed to pick up that shipment until tonight,” Dante said. “I’ve got everything set up for the coast guard to cut them off a mile from shore.”

“I know.” Beck ran a hand across his face. “When I showed up this morning, all three boats were filled, and I was given instructions for where to off-load. I’ve never been the one to do that. Usually, the drugs come on board, and when I return the next morning, it’s all gone.”

“So, when are you supposed to get rid of this shit?” Holiday asked.

“That’s just it. I was supposed to off-load a couple of hours ago, only I smelled a setup, so I didn’t let it happen.”

Holiday jerked his head toward the end of the docks. “Fuck. What the hell are we going to do now?”

“Have you had any contact with Jeff or Pete?” Dante stared out at the lighthouse, letting his mind turn over the change of events.

Beck shook his head. "I had charters all day. And let me tell you, I've been scared shitless sitting on this stuff. Every time the coast guard goes by, or I see the sheriff, I think that's it, I'm getting arrested."

"Do you really think they were setting you up that way?" Holiday asked.

"I doubt it," Dante said. "I bet it was a hit."

"I'd have to agree, which is why I haven't been alone. I wanted a witness with me at all times," Beck said. "What I'm worried about is that they'll go after my sister. I can't let that happen."

"Jesus. Then why the fuck did you let me leave her alone?" Dante jumped to his feet.

"Relax. I've got eyes on her," Beck said. "That's how we knew you were in a major lip-lock." Beck held up his cell. "My friend sent pictures and everything."

"That's perverted," Dante muttered. "Have you talked to my buddy, Rugs, today?" Dante would have to run his new thought by the detective. No way would he let his friend die, nor could he let Beck go to jail. And if he got caught with drugs on his boat, that's exactly what would happen.

"Honestly, I was afraid to reach out." Beck rested his hands on the steering wheel.

Dante nodded, glancing between the water and the edge of the dock where the Russells were still engaged in deep conversation with June. Either she was team Beck and was stalling her brothers, or she was helping them devise a plan. "All right. I'll give him a call."

"I can hear the wheels spinning inside that head of yours," Holiday said. "What are you planning?"

"Beck, you agreed they intended to kill you. Why?" Dante asked.

"Because the shipment was so light, and the meeting was five miles offshore. It just smelled fishy to me." Beck stood and folded his arms. "I honestly believe they know I'm

working to put them out of business, and they want to put me six feet under first.”

“That makes me question June’s loyalty,” Holiday said.

“I’ve tested it. A few times. She passed.” Beck rubbed his jaw.

“I think it’s time to call in reinforcements,” Dante said. “Rugs will help make sure you stay out of jail.”

“I honestly don’t care anymore. I’m willing to cut a deal, anything to save my sister from becoming another casualty in this bullshit war my father started with these assholes when he decided to borrow money from them and then not allow them to launder it in his business. Fuckers gave my old man a heart attack.” Beck stepped onto the dock.

“I hate to ask, but why the hell did you borrow money from them?” Holiday asked.

Beck shrugged. “Arrogance. I thought I could beat them at their own game.”

“We will,” Holiday said. “Here they come. Find out what they have planned, and we’ll go from there.”

“I’ll call Rugs and see what kind of play he wants to make.” Knowing Rugs, he’d want to make sure he had enough hard evidence to lock up Jeff and Pete for a long time, and that would take more than the drugs aboard this boat.

And they had less than eighteen hours to make it happen.

---

Dante sipped his beer and stared at his cell.

**Kaia:** *When are you coming home?*

**Dante:** *Give me an hour.*

**Kaia:** *Why? What’s going on?*

**Dante:** *Nothing. Just trying to play it cool. It’s only 8. I’ll be there by 9:30, the latest. Kiss. Kiss.*

It was official. He'd turned into a dorky boyfriend. A strange feeling settled in his chest. It was a warm one. A gentle swelling of his heart, and he welcomed it.

"I wish I was a pelican on a post," Dante said.

"What?" Holiday ask.

"You know, like a fly on a wall?" Dante just wanted to hear what the Russells were saying to Beck. What their plan was for the drugs. Where the dropoff was. Anything. And, of course, Morty and Walli hadn't even landed yet. They would have to switch gears really quick.

"Sometimes your analogies suck." Holiday lifted his water and chugged.

"No one has ever hired me for my gift of gab."

"Here come the Russells," Holiday said.

The hair on the back of Dante's neck stood tall. He resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder. Instead, he kept his focus on the band setting up on the stage.

"So, Dante, right?" Jeff stopped at the table.

"That's me." He glanced up. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. You can give me my two grand back." Jeff folded his arms across his chest.

"Ah. I remember you now. And your brother." Dante pointed to Pete, who had strolled over to the bar and was currently flirting with some redhead.

"We're going to be having a game tonight. How about you join us?"

"No can do, but thanks," Dante said, raising his lukewarm beer that he'd been nursing for the last hour. He needed to stay sharp both physically and mentally.

Jeff leaned forward, pressing his hands against the table and getting into Dante's face. "A *gentleman*—which I thought a Navy SEAL would be—would give a man a chance to win back his money."

“Maybe another time. But after I finish this beer, I’ve got a date with my girlfriend.” He shrugged. “So, a warm, soft body takes precedence over a card game with a bunch of sweaty guys smoking cigars. I’d think you’d agree.”

“Depends on the chick.” Jeff winked. “Of course, Kaia’s a good fuck, though I’m more of an ass man myself.”

“You fucking asshole.” Dante jumped to his feet with his fist cocked.

“He’s not worth it.” Holiday stood between the two men. “I think you should go.”

Jeff laughed. “I’d watch your back if I were you.” He turned on his heels and disappeared into the crowd.

Dante shook out his hands.

“He’s bullshitting you. There’s no way Kaia—”

“I know,” Dante interrupted Holiday. “I fucking hate that guy.”

“Feeling seems to be mutual.” Holiday nodded toward the water. “Let’s go see what Beck has to say.”

Dante stuffed his cell into his back pocket and strolled down the dock. The Jupiter Lighthouse flashed its strobe across the sky, hitting the dark water with a striking white flash. He needed to tell Kaia about this, but not until morning. He’d do it after it all went down and then he’d make her understand why he’d waited.

God, he hoped she forgave him.

Beck leaned against the center console with his arms folded across his chest.

“What happened?” Holiday asked.

“It’s pretty simple.” Beck rubbed his jaw. “I’m supposed to meet two of Jeff’s men at four in the morning, where we’ll drive the boats to meet his new buyer.” Beck locked gazes with Dante. “He’s never once had me do this, which means I’m a dead man walking.”

“No. You’re not.” Dante pulled out his cell. “You said you were willing to cut a deal in order to put these assholes away. Is that still true?”

“Absolutely. Why?”

“I texted Rugs, and he had an idea.” Dante scrolled, finding the message. “He might be able to get a judge to sign off on a search warrant based on your statement and the drugs on your boats. He can haul Pete and Jeff in for questioning. And he can do that tonight.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Beck asked.

“Do you have a better idea? Because the clock is ticking,” Holiday said.

Beck shook his head. “Let’s do it.”

“Okay. I need to go deal with your sister before she gets spooked and ends up down here.” Dante quickly sent a text to Rugs that it was game-on. He made sure that Beck, Holiday, Morty, and Walli were all included in the group message. “Holiday, why don’t you take point?”

“I’ll keep you in the loop,” Holiday said.

“I’ve got the books from the surf shop that I’ve been making copies of. It doesn’t prove they are laundering money, but there are some concerning items,” Beck said. “I also have some things from my dad that might help. I’ve been collecting what I can, but it’s never enough. Just bits and pieces.”

“There are enough drugs on all three boats to put them away for at least a good five years, so that’s a start. With search warrants, I’m sure Rugs can find everything he needs to nail those bastards,” Dante said.

“I wish I could warn June.” Beck held up his hand. “But I won’t. I know better. And she’ll understand.”

“I hope your sister understands, because if she catches me sneaking out in the middle of the night, I have a feeling she’ll lock the door.”

“*H*ey, babe.” Kaia opened the door with a smile. “You’re lucky I like you.”

“I’m sorry, but this is supposed to be a *guys*’ trip.” He took a piece of her hair and tucked it behind her ear. “And the cat is officially out of the bag. We suck at being secretive.”

“Well, we have been screwing around for two years.”

“I can’t believe I’ve been exclusive with one woman for that long.”

She tilted her head as she rested her hands on his shoulders. “Now that you’re off the market, I should warn you that I’m a jealous woman, and if I even see you looking some chick up and down, you’ll regret it.”

He grabbed her by the hips and pulled her to his chest. “I only have eyes for you.”

“We’re crazy.”

“Yes, we are.” He brushed his lip gently over her mouth, keeping the kiss slow and controlled.

“You’re a million miles away.” She palmed his cheek. “What’s wrong?”

He took her by the hand and dragged her into the family room. Her condo was pretty small, with only two bedrooms, one and a half baths, a kitchen, and one other room. But it was close to the beach and right next to her brother.

And the rent was dirt-cheap.



She'd been lucky to find it so quickly when she decided to move.

At the time, he'd pretended he didn't care. Considering that he was stationed in Virginia, it made it easier for him to see her whenever he was Stateside—which wasn't often—so when she moved, their stolen moments decreased, but they still made it work.

“You're scaring me,” she said softly. “Is something wrong with my brother?”

“It's not that.” He sat on the sofa and pulled her close. “Being a SEAL is all I know.”

“Okay.”

“For now, I'm still stationed—”

“Stop talking.” She kissed him. Hard. And with intent. Her tongue swirled around inside his mouth.

He pulled back. “Let me finish.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“You're being an asshole.”

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

She laughed. “I would never ask you to stop being the man you are. Or to give up what you love. I know what being a SEAL means to you. And as far as where you're stationed, when you come back from your next deployment, we can discuss living arrangements.”

He arched a brow.

“Too soon for that conversation?” She bit down on her lower lip. For months, she'd been thinking about what it would be like to be with Dante in a committed relationship, but she'd been too scared to even broach the subject. Not because she was afraid of rejection but because she didn't want to give him up.

Ever.

And she knew him well enough to know that while he said he wasn't the settling-down type, he wasn't a player. When he dated a woman, he was only with her.

The question was, how long would it last?

He lifted her off the sofa.

“Whoa. What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed.”

“But you didn't respond to my...to my...”

He laughed. “You're going to have to move because I believe I will be stationed in Virginia for a good three years after I sign my re-enlistment contract.”

“I don't mind moving back there.”

“Good to know. Now, can we stop talking and get naked?”

She lifted her index finger. She really hated to bring this up, but she had to. She had to know the truth. “I have one more thing I want to ask.”

He set her down on the bed and lifted his shirt over his head, showing off his taut stomach.

Damn, the man was gorgeous.

“Speak.” He knelt, fiddling with the button and zipper on her jeans.

Her breath caught in her throat in anticipation of what was about to happen. She'd waited months for this. For him. She wiggled out of her pants. “I know about my father and the money he owed the Russells.”

Dante stared at her with wide eyes. “Your timing on this topic sucks.”

Quickly, she removed her shirt and unhooked her bra, tossing them both to the side. “I know you and your buddies are helping Beck navigate how to pay off those debts and keep his business afloat. I know he's in deep with them, but he's doing well. I just worry about him and June.”

“Don’t worry. It’s going to work itself out. I promise.” He shed the rest of his clothes, and she took off her panties.

Never in her life had she trusted anyone like she trusted Dante. He’d come into her life when she wasn’t sure she ever wanted to be in a relationship again. She’d thought all she wanted was casual one-night stands. Two ships passing in the night, sharing sexual gratification. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Dante had offered her the best of both worlds.

Being with him was a combination of wild, animalistic sex and sweet, tender lovemaking. There would never be anyone else for her, and she knew without a doubt that she was falling in love with him.

He dotted her body with kisses, bringing her the kind of pleasure women fantasized about but could never quite achieve.

Her orgasm snuck up on her, exploding under her skin, curling her toes. She clutched his shoulders, arched her back beneath him. “Dante,” she whispered as he thrust inside her, his climax spilling into her as he whispered loving words into her ear.

She ran her hands up and down his back.

“Mmmmm, that feels good.” He rolled to his side, pulling the covers over their bodies. “I’ve got to get up at the butt crack of dawn.”

“Don’t wake me.” She snuggled into his chest.

“I’ll try not to.” He kissed her forehead. “Sleep well.”

She closed her eyes and pictured a small house with a dog in the front yard and...too much, too soon—one thing at a time.

---

Kaia bolted upright and gasped. She blinked and stared at the clock. Eight in the morning.

Her phone buzzed.

Again.

“Jesus,” she mumbled.

First, Dante couldn't sleep and tossed and turned half the night before finally sneaking out of bed at three in the morning. She only hoped he got an hour of shut-eye on the sofa or in her guest room.

Now, someone was hot to get ahold of her.

She reached for her phone and blinked. Dante had texted or called a good dozen times. She tapped the screen and gasped. Her hands shook.

“No. No. No.” She shook her head.

**Dante:** *Come to the marina. Now. It's an emergency.*

**Dante:** *Where are you? I've tried calling like 5 times. Call me. Now.*

She tapped Dante's contact information and put the phone on speaker. As quickly as she could, she found some clean clothes and got dressed.

“Where the hell have you been?” Dante asked.

“Sleeping. Someone kept me up half the night. What's wrong?”

“It's better if you come here. I'll tell you in person,” Dante said. “And, Kaia, whatever you do, don't turn on the news.”

“Now I'm going to turn it on.”

“Fuck,” Dante muttered. “Beck is missing.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? How is that possible?” She snagged her purse and raced through the house. She didn't know if she should drive the half-mile or run. She decided on the latter. Parking alone would take more time.

She stopped by the television and turned it on. She didn't need the sound to know part of what'd happened as she stared at a picture of her brother as the words *Missing* and *Drugs* flashed across the screen.

“I’ll be right there.” She tapped her screen and turned up the volume on the TV, listening in horror as the newscaster painted a picture of her brother being some kind of drug runner. She took the television remote and tossed it across the room before running out the door, not bothering to lock her condo behind her. She didn’t take the elevator, taking the three flights of stairs instead. She bolted down the street and toward the marina. It took maybe ten minutes to get there, but it felt as if she’d been running down a hallway that kept growing and growing.

She barreled to the edge of the dock, placing her hands on her knees to take in a few deep breaths. The salty sea air burned her lungs. She knew her brother had been trying to pay back her father’s debts with the Russells, but never in a million years had she expected there to be drugs involved.

Ever.

Dante walked up and placed his hand on her back. She shrugged it off.

“Where the fuck is he?” She glared.

“I don’t know.” Dante folded his arms across his chest. He stood tall and proud as he stared out at the ocean. “I just don’t know,” he said softly.

Kaia twisted her body between him and the inlet. “Did you sneak out early this morning?” She poked him in the chest. “And don’t you dare lie to me.”

He kept his gaze over her head, not looking her in the eye. Not even once.

She let out a short laugh. “My brother—your best friend—is missing. And you have nothing to say to me about what happened last night?”

“I don’t know what happened, and that’s the truth.”

“But you snuck out,” she said.

“I did.”

Kaia rubbed her temples. Every time she’d tried to talk to Beck about his financial problems, he always kissed her

forehead and told her not to worry. That, soon, he'd have their father's debt paid, and he'd be free and clear. Deep down, she knew she shouldn't have let her brother deal with everything alone, but Beck was a proud man.

"You were with him. You have to know something." She looked up at Dante.

"No. I was supposed to be, but by the time I got here, he and his Sea Chaser were gone."

"What time did you leave me last night?"

"Three-thirty."

"You were meeting Beck here in the middle of the night? Why the fuck would you do that?"

"It wasn't supposed to go down like this. But the Russells changed things on us, and we had to adjust our plans."

"Adjust? You mean you didn't come down here for a *boys'* trip? Or to see me. You came down here for something else?"

"No. I did come here for you. And for a fishing trip. But I also promised Beck I'd help him deal with the Russells and what they were making him do."

"And what was that, exactly?"

Dante let out a long breath. "Running drugs."

"So. You come down here, make up some stupid plan, and it goes wrong, and now you may have gotten my brother killed? Do I have that right?"

Dante lowered his glare, catching her gaze with fire burning in his dark eyes. "I do this kind of shit for a living."

"No, you don't," she said, planting her hands on her hips. "You're not a DEA agent. You're a fucking Navy SEAL. And while I don't pretend to know anything about your missions since my brother never talked much about his time in the military—and I get he couldn't—I do know that—"

He took her by the forearms. "I didn't act alone. Your brother was in on everything. As were the rest of our buddies. And you know I have friends down here. Cops. Good ones."

“If they are so good, then why is the news reporting that my brother was a local drug dealer and that he’s now missing? Or worse, dead?”

The wood under her feet shook. She glanced over her shoulder. Holiday and two detectives, one of which was an old buddy of Dante’s from boot camp, strolled down the docks.

“I think we’re about to find out,” Dante said.

Kaia flattened her hand across her stomach. Her heart pounded so fast she couldn’t hear anything but it beating between her ears. She swallowed.

“Hey, Rugs. What do you know?” Dante asked his old buddy.

Joe Rugby, better known as Rugs, took off his sunglasses and stuffed them into his front pocket. “Like I told you last night, the Russells have been on our radar for months, but we haven’t been able to connect the dots.”

“And now?” Kaia asked.

Rugs shook his head. “While they aren’t squeaky clean, I don’t have enough to arrest them.”

Dante kicked the post. “This is bullshit. They were using Beck and his business to—”

“But you can’t prove it,” Rugs said. “We’re going to have to let the Russells walk.”

Holiday pointed down the Jupiter Inlet toward the ocean. “Here comes the coast guard.”

Kaia inched closer to the edge of the dock. She covered her forehead with her hand, blocking the sun, searching for her brother’s Sea Chaser. She squinted. It appeared a tugboat was towing something—maybe her brother’s vessel—but she couldn’t tell at this distance.

Rugs’ cell rang out. “I need to get this,” he said.

Kaia kept her gaze locked on the incoming group while trying to listen to Rugs’ part of the conversation, but he’d stepped too far away, and he listened more than he talked.

“I’m going to call my boss at the Aegis Network. See what kind of manpower we have in the area. I’m sure they will lend some resources,” Holiday said.

“Thanks man,” Dante said before turning his attention to Kaia. “It’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that.” She couldn’t even look at Dante. One of the things she had first been attracted to had been his confidence. But right now, all that felt like was the kind of arrogance that might have gotten her brother into trouble.

Something she couldn’t forgive.

Ever.

And then there was his betrayal of her trust.

“Kaia—”

“Leave me alone,” she interrupted Dante and kept her gaze glued to the boats heading in her direction. A crowd had gathered on the dock next to her. The sounds of whispering voices echoed in the salty air. She couldn’t make out the sentences, but she could hear words.

*Dead.*

*Suicide.*

*Gunshot wound.*

*That’s his sister.*

“Rugs just got off the horn with the coast guard,” Dante said.

“And?” Her heart dropped.

Strong arms wrapped around her body. “Kaia,” Dante whispered, turning her to face him. “I’m so sorry.”

She blinked, staring into his glossy, kind, and loving eyes.

“Sorry?” She resented that his warm embrace actually gave her strength.

Dante cupped her face. “They found your brother on his boat about five miles offshore.”



“What was he doing? Fishing by himself? At three-thirty in the fucking morning when he was supposed to be with you? His best friend.” She tried to twist her body toward the inlet, but Dante held her in a firm grip. “Did he have engine trouble or something? Is that why they are towing him in?”

“He’s gone,” Dante said.

“What do you mean, gone?” Kaia blinked. She knew what the words meant, she just couldn’t bring herself to let them register fully in her mind.

“Shit,” Rugs mumbled. “There was a note on board.”

Dante spun around. “No. No fucking way. He wouldn’t do that. He was murdered. And it was those bastards, the Russells. I know it.”

“You don’t know that,” Rugs said. “More importantly, right now, you can’t prove it.”

Dante shook his head. “Beck wouldn’t take his own life. He wanted to put an end to this madness. He was done with the Russells, Rugs. You know that.”

“What I know and what I can prove are two different things,” Rugs said.

Kaia’s stomach lurched, and bile rose to the back of her throat. She curled her fingers around Dante’s biceps and held onto him for support. The dock moved under her feet as if she were on a boat, swaying back and forth. “No. No. No,” she whispered. “He’s not dead. You’re all wrong. This is a sick, cruel joke.”

“I’m sorry, Kaia, but he is. A single gunshot wound to the head. According to those who found him, it was self-inflicted,” Holiday said calmly. “And there was indeed a note. I’m trying to get someone to get me a copy of it.”

“Come on, man. We both know he would never commit suicide.” Dante swiped at his eyes.

“I know that, but it doesn’t matter. These guys covered their tracks,” Holiday said.

“That’s bullshit.” Kaia poked Dante’s chest. “Whose fucking idea was it to try to nail the Russells? Who came up with this stupid plan?”

“I did,” Dante admitted. “But Beck—”

“Don’t you ever speak his name again.” She squared her shoulders. “You might as well have pulled the trigger. You killed my brother, and I never want to see you again.” She pointed toward the mainland. “Get your things and get out of my condo. You are not welcome in my life.”

“Kaia, you don’t—”

“You’re as dead to me as my brother.”

*K*aia stood over her brother's grave. The warm Florida sun beat down on her scalp. Normally, she would welcome the sensation. But not today. She held a single rose between her fingertips. Her eyes felt like sandpaper. She had no tears left.

There was no room left for grief.

Not now.

Not until her those who helped put her brother six feet into the ground were brought to justice. She knew she couldn't rely on the police. They had made their judgment and walked away. It was up to her.

She didn't know what she was going to do. Or how.

But she'd think of something. She wouldn't rest until everyone who had a hand in her brother's death paid a price.

Stretching her arm out, she let the flower fall from her fingertips. It floated through the air until it crashed into the top of the casket.

She glanced up and stared at the sea of Navy men that spanned across the hilltop. Her gut twisted. Her love for Dante pumped through her veins like an electric current.

Fast.

Hard.

And so hot it burned her from the inside out.

In the last week, if she wasn't crying over the death of her brother, it was over Dante's betrayal.

Her heart wanted to forgive him for lying to her, and maybe she could have if they hadn't made plans for their future. If they hadn't declared they indeed were in a loving relationship. But the moment she committed to him was the moment he owed it to her to be honest. It wasn't as if she didn't know things were off with her brother.

Dante and Riker stepped forward from the rest of the pack, all decked out in their sailor white. They stood at attention directly across from her and raised their hand in salute.

The rest of the servicemen followed, doing the same thing, following Dante as he turned and marched away from the grave.

Always the professional.

She glanced over her shoulder. June hung out under a tree about fifteen feet away. She'd kept her distance since Beck's death.

And thankfully, so had her brothers.

Deep down in Kaia's soul, she knew that Pete and Jeff were responsible for her brother's death. However, that didn't mean Dante was given a pass for his part in the ridiculous plan that had gotten Beck killed.

Every time she tried to reconcile that Dante was doing exactly what Beck would have done if the tables were turned, she reminded herself that Dante lied.

Right to her face.

He hadn't flinched. His eye didn't twitch. He didn't appear to have a single drop of guilt. And she wondered if things had turned out differently—had his crazy plan worked and her brother was still alive—would Dante have ever told her the truth.

Deep down in the depths of her soul,

she understood why he did it, but she suppressed that notion and held onto the anger. The rage.

The injustice of it all.

She inhaled sharply. The smell of rose petals mixed with death assaulted her nostrils. She adjusted her purse over her shoulder and headed to her car, which was parked at the front of the line. She needed to get out of the cemetery and away from Dante. She hadn't seen him since the morning of the accident.

Though, not for lack of trying on his part.

He'd called. Texted. Even showed up at her apartment. He threatened to camp out on the catwalk until she called his buddy Rugs.

That had been slightly amusing when Rugs showed up and had to escort Dante from the premises. Though, she had felt bad for doing it. She was sure it had been humiliating for Dante, but she needed space. Time to clear her head.

More importantly, she knew seeing could result in forgiveness.

Something she couldn't afford to happen at this juncture.

"Hey. Wait up," a familiar voice called.

Shit. She moved her legs as fast as she could, which wasn't all that quick considering the ground was soft and she was in three-inch heels, which if she wasn't careful would sink into the dirt and prevent her getaway.

"Stop avoiding me, and give me ten minutes." Dante curled his fingers around her arm, halting her forward progress.

She shrugged his hand off. "Don't touch me," she said behind a clenched jaw. "I don't know how many times you need to be told that I don't want to see you, much less talk to you."

"You're not being fair."

She dug her heel in and swiveled, nearly losing her footing. She had to grip his shoulders for support.

"I got you," he said holding onto her hips.

She took a step back, breaking all physical contact, and glared. “You want to stand here and waste your words on what’s fair?”

“Kaia. I know you’re hurting.” He removed his cap, tucked it under his arm, and widened his stance. “We all are. What happened is a total shock.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “If you want to be angry and someone, be pissed Pete and Jeff. And maybe June since I’m not sure what she might have had to—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Kaia swallowed her emotions. Part of her wanted to fall into his arms. Let him hold her, stroke her hair, kiss her temple, while he told her that it was going to be okay.

But it would never be okay again.

Not until those responsible paid for what they’d done.

“I don’t care what the plan was or who came up with it. All I know was that you are not the man I thought you were, and I want you out of my life.”

A tear rolled down Dante’s cheek. He quickly wiped it away. “I know you don’t mean that.”

“But I do.”

He placed his cap back on his head. “My flight leaves in less than two hours and I’m being deployed on a mission as soon as I get back.”

“Good-bye Dante.” She saw no point in standing there and listening to him for a second longer.

“Kaia. I’m worried about you and what those assholes might—”

“Don’t. And please respect me enough to leave me alone.” She found the keys to her car and continued toward the road. She didn’t look back. She had no idea if he followed her, stood still, or went somewhere else.

She told herself she didn’t care. She had to become a master at lying to herself if she was going to manage getting over him.

Right now, all she wanted to do was get in her vehicle, drive to the beach, and sit there. Maybe the ocean would give her some peace.

Or answers.

Or even better yet. A plan.

---

“Well, that didn’t go well.” Dante let out a long breath as he climbed into the front seat of Holiday’s SUV. “She won’t even let me explain what Beck had wanted and why. She totally blames me for everything.”

“Give her some time.” Holiday punched the gas, easing out onto the street, her car only two in front of them.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. We’re being deployed in two days, but we don’t have any details about where or what the mission will be. But we’ve been told that we need to be prepared to be gone for a month. Maybe longer.” Leaving her behind had always been hard for Dante. But this time it left a massive hole in his heart. “I hate leaving like this, especially when there are still so many unanswered questions about what happened and she’s being so damned stubborn.”

“I’ll do what I can to keep an eye out for her,” Holiday said.

“Jacksonville is four hours away. You have a family and —”

“And nothing,” Holiday said. “You’d do the same for me, so shut the fuck up about it.”

“She wouldn’t give any of us the time of day.” Dante kept his focus on her car. When they got to the gate, she’d go west, and they’d be going south toward the airport. That would be it. She’d be out of sight.

Though, certainly not out of mind.

His chest tightened. He glanced over his shoulder. Riker and Walli were in the back seat being unusually quiet, even for them. “Did she speak to either of you? To Morty?”

“No,” Riker said. “Morty tried right before the service. She shot him down faster than Superman flying over a tall building.”

“Did anyone else see June hiding in the trees?” Dante’s stomach flipped and flopped as Kaia’s vehicle disappeared around the turn. “If she was there, I bet her brothers weren’t too far behind.”

“I don’t understand what Beck was doing with her,” Walli said. “And I’m not sure I believe she didn’t know what her brothers were up to.”

Dante had no idea what June knew or didn’t. But she’d been genuinely devastated when she’d found out about Beck. Either that, or she should receive an academy award for her performance. “As long as they all stay away from Kaia.” Dante fixated his gaze on the rearview mirror, searching for Kaia’s vehicle, praying she turned it around and chased him.

It was wishful thinking.

“Rugs isn’t going to let this go,” Holiday said. “Internally, his hands are tied. There is no case where Beck is concerned, but he still has his Pete and Jeff on his radar and he wants to nail those assholes if it’s the last thing he does.”

Dante appreciated his buddy’s words, but there was nothing Rugs, or anyone else for that matter, could do. Beck’s death had been ruled death by suicide. They could be suspicious all they wanted, but unless Pete and Jeff committed a different crime.

They had just gotten away with murder.





## ONE MONTH LATER...

Gently, as if the picture might disintegrate in her fingers, Kaia placed it in the wood frame she'd picked up at the store on the way *home* from work.

Home.

Her brother's home, but now she was going to call it hers.

She set the fame on the mantel and took a step back. Tears stung the corners of her eyes as she stared at the image of herself, her brother, and Dante.

Her heart broke into a million pieces. Again.

Nothing she did would ever bring her brother back. However, she couldn't sit around and do nothing. No. She needed to find justice for Beck. Only then could she move on with her life.

She pulled the letter that had arrived today from her back pocket and made her way to what had to be the ugliest recliner known to man. It was plaid. It was probably forty years old and maybe in the nineteen-seventies, it was stylish. But today, it was god-awful.

But it had been Beck's favorite chair. She couldn't get rid of it, like everything else in this trailer. She needed to surround herself with her brother's memory. She needed to feel the intense pain as if it all happened yesterday.

To be reminded of all the reasons she couldn't forget.

There was no room for forgiveness.

Not yet.

However, her heart demanded a reprieve from being tortured. Her soul craved a tiny reminder that she was indeed flesh and blood.

And that she once loved someone—still did. And they might have loved her back.

She tore open the letter postmarked three weeks ago.

The Navy could be so slow, even today. Of course, he could have emailed her, but one thing he enjoyed was snail mail. He once told her that when deployed, there was nothing more exciting than receiving that envelope or package from home.

She used to write to him all the time. Sometimes two and three times a day. Once she'd stuffed a box filled with his favorite treats and five letters. He'd written back that it was hard to explain why his best friend's sister was sending him care packages but begged her not to stop.

The last she'd heard from him had been two days after the funeral when he'd left a couple of messages on her machine about being deployed.

Life has to go on for the living.

Only, to her, life felt as though it stood still.

She sucked in a deep breath and braced herself for Dante's words.

*My Dearest Kaia,*

*All I want is for us to talk. Please stop shutting me out. If nothing else, we were friends once. I miss you. I miss us.*

*I'm going to be gone for a while. I'm writing this on the back of a transport plane, so I apologize for the bad handwriting. I don't know how long I'll be gone. They tell me for at least four weeks. Maybe six.*

*Once again, I'm going to an undisclosed area. I wish I could tell you where, but you can write to me through the base. It will take some to get to me, but you know the drill.*

*I care so much about you. It was so unexpected, and I wish I hadn't been so frightened by those emotions and had the courage to express them sooner. Or that it took me so long to know being with you was what I wanted.*

*You are the girl for me. I want us to have a future together. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me.*

*For everything.*

*I know I hurt you by not telling you what Beck and the rest of the team was up to and I can give a dozen reasons on why. However, I do understand that to you they are simply excuses. And I agree. I can put myself in your shoes and see it from your perspective. I was wrong. And I'm sorry.*

*Please, watch your back. Be careful of Pete and Jeff. And June. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you.*

*I hope to hear from you soon.*

*Love, Dante*

She squeezed her eyes shut, blinking out a couple of tears. She loved Dante. With all her heart and soul. She stood and made her way to the den where she pulled out pen and paper. She swiped at her cheeks.

She'd write him.

But she'd never send the letter. She couldn't.

She simply needed to get her thoughts on paper. Give her heart a place to bubble-wrap her feelings. Protect them from herself. This way, she could focus on making sure Jeff and Pete got what they deserved.

Only then would she be able to try to mend things with Dante.

*Dear Dante,*

*I'm sorry for the way I've treated you. You didn't deserve that. I was crushed by Beck's death and the fact that neither of you trusted me enough to fill me in on the plan. That was a difficult pill to swallow.*

*But like you, I can see this from where you were standing. I know Beck and I'm sure he was too proud to want me to know and I bet he made you promise to keep me out of it. Since we were kids, he was always trying to protect me. To keep me safe. That was his nature.*

*As it is yours.*

*But what I will always need from you is honesty.*

*I do forgive you.*

*However, you and I can never be until there is justice for Beck. That's just the way it has to be.*

*Love, Kaia.*

She folded the letter, stuck it in a shoe box and brought it to the bedroom. It gave her some peace. It eased a little bit of the pain. She knew it did nothing to help Dante. But he had his buddies to support him through this.

Turning her head, she glanced out the window and gasped.

*June.*

Why the hell was June at her brother's house?

Kaia raced to the front door and pulled it open before June had even made it from her car to the third step of the porch.

"Oh. Hi," June said. "I was hoping you'd be here."

"Why?" Kaia folded her arms and tapped her toe against the wood floor.

"I need to talk to you about the charter business."

Kaia narrowed her eyes. Of all the things that could happen, she never expected June to take over her brother's fishing charter business. But that's exactly what had happened.

To make matters worse, Pete and Jeff were running the Surf Side thanks to the way things had been set up in the partnership and loan agreements. It seemed incredibly fishy to Kaia, but she didn't have a leg to stand on.

Both businesses were struggling in part because of the rumors about her brother but also because Pete and Jeff were

assholes and everyone in town knew it. The problem was either people were afraid of Jeff and Pete, or they worked for them, or they owned them.

“What about it?” Kaia asked.

“I need the purchase agreements for the last boat Beck bought. It’s not at the office over at Surf Side.”

“Give me a day or two, and I’ll see if I can find it.” Kaia made sure she stayed in the doorway. She wasn’t ready to randomly invite June into her space. Yet. She had to do some digging into June’s background. Though she hadn’t a fucking clue how to go about that, but she did need to start getting to know her better. By doing that, she might get to know her brothers and then she might be able to form a plan that made sense. “Did you get the box I left for you at the docks? You weren’t there when I brought them by.”

“I did. Thank you so much. It means a lot to me to have a few things that were Beck’s.”

“I believe he’d want you to have them.” Kaia didn’t want to be friends with June. But she did want to seek justice. That might mean bringing her enemies close. “Maybe we could go out to lunch sometime.”

“I’d like that,” June said. “Well, I best be going.” She turned on her heels and strolled back to her car. Before she got in she glanced over her shoulder. “I loved him. I really did.”

“I know.” Kaia wasn’t sure if she believed June or not.

June nodded and then slipped into her vehicle and drove off.

Kaia sighed. Let the games begin.



## SIX WEEKS LATER...

Dante dumped his rucksack on the floor by the stairs in his two-bedroom townhouse that he shared with Wallie in a little neighborhood called *Chic's Beach* not far from Joint Expeditionary Base–Little Creek in Virginia. He'd been away for eight weeks. The mission had been grueling.

He'd been shot at a half a dozen times.

His team had moved locations in the middle of the night, on foot, in rough terrain three times.

The other team that they were working with suffered two major injuries, but luckily, no one died.

And in the end, they had achieved their goal.

The mission was a success.

Though no one would ever hear about what they'd done.

But he wasn't in this for the medals. He was proud to serve his country. It had been his dream for as long as he could remember. Being a SEAL had been all he wanted. Desired.

Until he met Kaia and fell in love with Kaia.

She changed everything and now he found himself questioning his next move.

"Sorry, man." Walli made a beeline for the kitchen carrying a twelve-pack and some takeout from their favorite local greasy spoon. It had become a tradition in the last couple of years after every mission. Once they left the base, they'd call in a couple of bacon cheeseburgers, some onion rings, and



pick up some adult beverages. They wouldn't get overly shitfaced. They were too old for that shit. But getting a good buzz was in the works. Hopefully, their cleaning service had stocked the fridge as instructed. However, if they'd forgotten, it would give Dante something to do in the morning besides twiddling his thumbs.

And obsessing about Kaia.

"I really thought she'd write," Dante admitted. He pulled his cell from his pocket.

Nothing.

Not one fucking response to his voice message or to his text that he'd sent the second he stepped from the debriefing room.

He'd written her a dozen letters.

She'd written him none.

Any other man would have given up. But he couldn't let it go. He worried endlessly about her and what Pete and Jeff might have in store.

So far, the reports Holiday had given him had been good. Pete and Jeff had kept their distance.

But June hadn't.

June and Kaia had been spotted having lunch together. They were all smiles. They even hugged at the end, according to Holiday's source.

There hadn't been any other sightings, but that didn't mean June and Kaia weren't in contact with each other and that made Dante nervous. He knew Kaia and she wanted blood. If she thought she could get to Pete and Jeff through June, she'd do it.

But why was she still freezing Dante out? Why was she still so pissed off at him? He'd owned his part. He'd apologized. He'd begged for forgiveness.

He'd done everything he could think of except getting on a plane and going to south Florida, which he really wanted to

do, but he couldn't. At least not in the next few months. He had only two days off before heading to California for three weeks of specialized training. From there, another deployment for two months.

After that, he had no idea what would happen. Only he knew he had a major decision to make.

To re-enlist.

Or chase after Kaia.

Well, he couldn't make that decision today.

"Maybe her letters haven't caught up to you yet," Walli said.

It was nice of his buddy to try to cheer him up, but they both knew that wasn't true. If Kaia wanted to reach him, she would have. "Thanks for the effort. It's appreciated it." Dante opened his take-out container and placed his food on a plastic plate. The sizzling smells of meat and bacon mixed with cheese and onions filled his senses. He followed his buddy out to the back patio with his food and a beer, making himself comfortable on one of the lounge chairs. He clanked his glass bottle against Walli's. "It's good to be home in one piece."

"That's for damn sure," Walli said. "You know, Kaia's a lot like Beck. She's stubborn, and doesn't like to ask for assistance."

"That's not helping."

"Holiday has people watching and while I know you don't want to hear this, you can't make her talk to you. I know you care deeply. But maybe it's time to move on."

Dante took a hardy swig of his cold beverage. Everyone had told him the same thing. To stop torturing himself and let her go. If she was done with him, it was time for him to be done too.

But it was so much more than that. He could let go romantically. Maybe.

However, he couldn't let go of the responsibility. He'd failed her brother. He'd be damned if he failed her.

“Let me ask you this,” Dante said. “Have you been able to put what happened with Beck in the past?”

“You know none of us have been able to do that. We’re all still baffled by what happened. Pissed and angry at the system. Rugs might be on our side, but the badge that represents can’t do shit for us right now and we have obligations to fulfill. A constitution to defend. We took an oath. We can’t simply walk away from it because of a single injustice that has nothing to do with our job.” Walli lifted his beer and chugged. “This makes my blood boil and I do lose sleep over it, but I there isn’t anything I can do about it right now. Holiday can and he is. You have to trust the people who are there working it. You know it takes time.”

Dante nibbled on a few onion rings and stared at blue sky.

His heart ached. Letting her go wasn’t going to be easy. He wasn’t sure he’d ever truly be able to get over her and he didn’t want to.

But she left him no choice.

“Beck ran out of time right in front of us and I fear that’s exactly what is going to happen to Kaia.”

“You can’t control her.”

“No. But maybe she’s reading my letters and taking some of my advice.”

“Which is?” Walli asked.

Dante had been very careful with what he’d chosen to write in his letters. He kept much of it personal. However, in the last couple, he’d opened up more about the specifics of the plan. How they’d been working with the local police department—specifically Rugs. Dante had given her a few details about the drugs and how the operation had been working and why Beck had gotten in so deep and how he and the rest of his team had planned on getting him out of trouble.

Focusing on why he kept her out of the loop would only perpetuate all the reasons she had to be made.

“I’ve explained how truly dangerous Pete and Jeff are.”

“Jesus,” Walli mumbled. “You’re giving her ammunition to walk into the fray.”

“Maybe.” Dante knew it was a calculated risk. “But she’s not stupid. I’m hoping she’ll see how in over her head she’d be by taking on those two by herself and she’ll back off and let Rugs do his job.” Dante let out a long breath. He’d given Holiday and Rugs a heads up with what he’d done. They both thought he was nuts, but promised to keep him abreast of the situation. So far, other than the one meeting, it was business as usual.



## TWO MONTHS LATER...

*K*aia sat at a table at Surf Side and did her best not to cry like a baby while she watched June hose down one of the charter boats.

Those had been her brother's pride and joy and killed her that someone else now had possession.

But better June than her brothers.

Though, Kaia still didn't know where June stood with Pete and Jeff. Half the time June acted as though she hated her brothers and the other half it was as if they could do no harm.

The Russells were an odd family with old ties to the area.

They weren't well respected or even overly liked, but they had been around a long time.

Jeff leaned against the bar and stared at her with steely eyes. She'd been coming to the Surf Side every Friday night for the last five weeks. She had thought since her lunch with June, that she'd have an ally, but that hadn't turned out to be the case. Kaia thought that strange since she thought the lunch went well enough.

They talked mostly about Beck and what a pain in the ass he could be. They had bonded a little over grief, but since then, June had been cold and unapproachable.

Especially at Surf Side.

When pressed, all June had to say was: *sorry. We're just not meant to be friends. I didn't mean to imply otherwise.*

Jeff pushed from the counter and sauntered in her direction.

She lifted her rum runner drink to her lips and took a slow sip. It burned as it hit her stomach.

“It’s Kaia, correct?” Jeff asked as he dared to pull up a chair and sit down.

“You know who I am.” She set her drink on the table and fiddled with her napkin on her lap.

“You’re right. I do,” he said. “I have to admit that I’m surprised to see you here every week.”

“This used to be my brother’s place and it makes me feel close to him.” That wasn’t a totally false statement. But it also made her angry. No. More like it fueled the rage in her veins.

*They set your brother up. They knew we were coming, and Beck tried to get out from under it. They will be up and running with their drug business the second the heat is off and I can guarantee you that’s exactly what Rugs is banking on.*

*Don’t get in his way. Let him do his job. He will get you justice.*

Those were the words that Dante had written in his last letter and they were ingrained in her brain. She wanted to believe them. She tried desperately and since she hadn’t yet come up with her own plan to derail the Russells, what else could she do?

Well, she could come sit and observe. Wasn’t that what Dante had told her half his job was most of the time?

“I suppose I can understand that.” Jeff leaned back and crossed his legs. “Beck did a fine job at running Surf Side. I was impressed when we took over. Too bad his reputation has put a dark cloud over us and it’s been a struggle.” He pointed to his sister. “For June as well.”

“I hear you all are bouncing back, and business is picking up.”

“Not fast enough.”

That wasn't her problem, and she didn't care, but she wasn't about to voice that opinion. This was an unexpected opportunity and she planned on taking it. "If you don't mind me saying, it's not just my brother's image that's a problem, but your family has quite the reputation for being—how shall I put it—difficult."

Jeff laughed. "That is true."

"Again, I don't mean to be rude, or disrespectful, but I haven't seen you do anything to change that. Whereas your sister has changed the name of the charter business and done her best to disassociate herself with Beck and you."

Jeff leaned forward and clasped his hands. "I thought that was smart of June, but my brother, not so much. He was actually insulted that she didn't want to be associated—at least not publicly—with us. No one ever needs that we all support one another or—well, I don't need to bore you with the details of me and my sibling's business arrangements."

"I'm not bored. Honestly, I'd like to see both businesses live on. I want them to be successful. For my brother's sake. In his name." Shit. That was a bit over the top.

Jeff arched a brow. "I figured you'd want us to fail. That you blamed us. Thought we murdered your brother, like the rest of his friends believe."

"Have you ever heard me say that?"

"No," Jeff said. "But I know you were romantically involved with one of your brother's old Navy buddies."

"That was in the past." She swallowed her emotions and stiffened her spine. "I can't bring Beck back. The medical examiner has ruled his death a suicide. I have to accept that. As far as the rest of it goes, I don't know what to think." She shifted, adjusting her shorts. "Are you running drugs using the charter business?"

The right side of Jeff's mouth tipped upward as he stood. "I'm not going to dignify that with an answer." He tapped the table. "Your dinner is on the house. And please, we'd



appreciate it if you told your friends what a fine establishment we had here.”

“Thank you for the meal and I will absolutely spread the word.”

She would do more than that. She would help make this place one of the finest restaurants in the area. She’d put it back on the map.

And in the process, she’d talk Jeff into hiring her if it was the last thing she did.



## SEVEN MONTHS LATER...

*K*aia did her best to ignore Rugs and his partner, Anton, from the Palm Beach County Police Department as they sat at a table by the water. Rugs sipped a lemonade, and Anton had opted for a diet soda. They had also ordered some burgers and fries. It certainly wasn't uncommon for police officers to have dinner at Surf Side, but these two seemed to have become a staple at the restaurant—and it wasn't for the food or the awesome view of the lighthouse.

No. They were here to check out the Russells.

And maybe her involvement with the family, as she'd finally gotten them to give her a job at this fine establishment.

Like being a manager in a bar had been her dream job, especially when she'd given up a perfectly good office management position. Although, the rest of the world believed she'd been fired, which is exactly what she wanted, in hopes that Jeff would take pity on her. Of course, flirting with Jeff Russell and acting as if she might actually have the hots for the man, made her vomit a little in her mouth. But she'd do whatever it took to make sure Jeff, Pete, and the rest of their family paid for their part in her brother's death.

It all came back to the Russells and the hold they had over the small businesses in the Jupiter area, along with the drugs they continued bringing in and out of the county. The fact that they still used her brother's old charter business and that the cops had yet to stop them made her skin crawl.

“I’m supposed to call Jeff every time those two—or any other cop—comes in here,” Christina, the bartender and the only friend Kaia had at Surf Side, said. “One more reason I can’t stand working here.”

“I already texted Jeff.”

Christina shook a drink before pouring it into a plastic glass and placing it on a tray with a couple of beers for one of the waitstaff. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re quitting.” But Kaia already knew that Christina had one foot out the door.

“Consider this my two-week’s notice. I got a job at Jett’s as the assistant bar manager.” Christina filled another order for a different waiter. She was Surf Side’s best bartender, and Kaia would be lost without her.

“There has to be something I can do to make you stay. What if I talk to Jeff about a raise and give you a title? I keep telling them I need a right hand, and you pretty much do that already. I’m sure I can make it happen.”

“No amount of money will keep me here,” Christina said. “I’m tired of the bullshit, and I’m tired of all the rumors milling around about the Russells.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear.” The second the words hit Kaia’s tongue, she shivered. She knew without a doubt that if Jeff hadn’t pulled the trigger himself, he’d hired someone to kill her brother. The only reason she’d gone to work for Jeff was to somehow find a way to get enough evidence to have him arrested.

To finish what Dante and his buddies had started.

But so far, neither Jeff nor Pete had slipped up. But now that she was working for them, she should be able to find something.

Anything.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’ve been here a lot longer than you, and no offense, but your job should have been mine.” Christina sliced up a couple of limes, putting them into

the tray, preparing for the happy-hour rush. “Between Pete’s slippery hands, him calling me ‘baby’ and ‘sweetheart,’ and the fact that I was told before the previous bar manager quit that I’d be a shoo-in, I can’t stomach this place any longer.”

“I didn’t know you were promised this position when I applied.”

Christina let out a chuckle. “I didn’t get it because I refused to sleep with Pete. Honestly, when you first came aboard a month ago, I thought you and Jeff were an item, but I’ve since changed my mind about that. Although you sometimes give the vibe you wouldn’t be opposed, which surprises me, honestly.”

Kaia couldn’t afford for anyone to think that she wasn’t anything but a loyal employee to the Russells. Now that she’d been working for them for a couple of months, and Jeff hadn’t pushed past the flirting, perhaps she could pull back.

Maybe.

She needed to stay as close as she could to the Russells, and since June, Jeff’s sister, had kept her at arm’s length, this was her best bet.

“Jeff’s not the worst person. He’s actually kind of sweet. It’s his brother who’s the real dick.”

“Pete is a jerk.” Christina nodded. “But everyone around here says that Jeff is running drugs with his charter business. Which...didn’t he buy from you or something?”

Kaia shook her head. “He was business partners with my brother. When Beck died, Jeff inherited the boats. I honestly think that’s why he gave me this job when he found out I had been fired.” Wow. Now that was one big fucking lie on top of another juicy tall tale.

But what the hell did it matter?

“What do you mean?” Christina flipped the tops off a couple of longnecks and set them on a tray for one of the waiters while she filled another order as the happy-hour crowd began strolling in. So far, four people sat at the bar, and five tables were filled.

In an hour, the place would be packed.

“Jeff felt sorry for me.” Not even close. She’d had to beg Jeff to hire her, lying to him about how she’d become unemployed. She’d been telling Jeff and his family for months how she had no idea what insane lies Beck’s buddies had told the police, and that she believed without a doubt her brother’s final words in his suicide note.

The same note she carried around with her wherever she went.

The one she knew her brother did not pen.

*Who do you address a suicide note to? Does it even matter? All I want is for it to end, and this is the only way. I’ve screwed up, and now my buddy is here reminding me of how bad I’ve fucked up my life, and I just can’t take it anymore. Fucking Dante. The perfect man in every way. No one can live up to his expectations, and I’m tired of trying. There is no way he could ever understand. The man was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He doesn’t know what it’s like to have to work for a living. Having him here, telling me how I can do better, is just too much. And now he’s going to try to pin my crimes on someone else? I just can’t have that. These are my crimes. And only mine. It’s time for me to say goodbye to this world.*

No way would her brother ever talk like that, and while he admired and looked up to Dante, Beck didn’t begrudge Dante anything—even if everyone called Dante the charmed one.

“The only reason he gave me this job was because I went a little crazy after my brother died and I got fired. And then I couldn’t pay my bills as well as my brother’s. I nearly lost Beck’s trailer and, well, Jeff just took pity on me.”

Christina tossed a towel over her shoulder. “I remember your brother. He was an odd duck but a nice guy. I couldn’t believe when I heard he was selling drugs and that he...he’d... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so flippant about it.”

“It’s okay. Those are the facts.” Not even close, but what else did Kaia have to work with? The world believed that

Beck's last two actions were being called out as a dealer and killing himself. It was a stigma she had to bear until she could prove otherwise.

Kaia glanced toward the water and noticed Rugs waving at her. "I'd better go see what they want. Let me know if you need a hand at the bar. I'll be jumping around tonight." She wiped her hands on a towel and strolled across the sandy floor.

Rugs and his partner had taken one of the tables closest to the marina docks. They had a good view of the boat activity. Neither Jeff nor Pete drove the charter boats. Nor did they run that business. They left that up to their sister, June, who often took out one of the bigger vessels, while she hired a couple of local captains for the other two.

Kaia covered her eyes and glanced out at the farthest dock. June and the Sea Chaser Kaia's brother had died on were still out to sea.

Her heartbeat lurched into the back of her throat. One of the many reasons June didn't care too much for Kaia was that June had been sleeping with Beck.

Now, she was running charters.

And drugs.

And Kaia didn't understand why, especially if June actually cared for her brother as she said she did.

"What can I do for you?" Kaia asked the two detectives.

"I still struggle with why you, of all people, would take a paycheck from the man you believe killed your brother," Rugs said.

"I only believed that for a few minutes. My brother was a troubled soul." She swallowed the bile that her lie created. While Beck had seen some things in the military that had fundamentally changed him, the only thing that'd troubled him was the financial crisis their father had left him in. "He didn't want me to know how bad things had gotten."

"You're laying it on too thick," Anton said. "You're playing a dangerous game. We wish you would back away and

just let us do our jobs.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her brother’s old boat inching closer to the dock with June at the helm and four male passengers.

But it was the one standing next to June that made her heart sink like an anchor dropping to the bottom of the ocean floor.

Holy fuck.

It couldn’t be.

All the air in her lungs escaped like a slow-leaking balloon.

“Are you going to tell us you’re working for Jeff and Pete Russell because you want to?” Rugs shook his head. “No. I think it’s because you believe you can do our jobs better than we can. But you’re mistaken. We know what your bosses are up to, and we’re gathering intel. I’d hate for you to become collateral damage. So would Dante.”

“What the hell does he have to do with anything?” Her heart hammered in her throat.

“Your brother was Dante’s best friend.” Rugs cocked his head. “I promised him I’d look out—”

“Tell Dante I’m a big girl.”

“He’s worried about you.” Rugs handed her a business card. “If you ever want to talk, or if you have the information you’d like to share, please reach out to me.”

She set the card on the table. No way would she let anyone in this restaurant see her pocket a cop’s business card. Besides, she had his number memorized from when she’d taken it the last time. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

The waiter came by with the check, which she snagged before he had a chance to even set it on the table. “This one is on the house.” She eyed the Sea Chaser as June tied it off. The passenger adjusted his baseball cap and tossed a knapsack onto the dock. She couldn’t get a good look at the man, but



something about the way he moved was all too familiar. “Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“You’re making a big mistake,” Rugs said.

The only mistake she’d made was not paying attention to the financial problems her father had gotten himself into and how it had trickled down to her brother. They had both tried to protect her, but all that had done was put them both in an early grave.

First, her father when he’d borrowed money from the Russells and couldn’t pay it back.

And then her brother for trying to save their father from financial ruin.

She strolled to the edge of the dock and focused on the man talking with June.

It couldn’t be.

No way would Dante dare show his face in Jupiter. She’d made sure that he wouldn’t ever want to be in her presence again. She’d done everything in her power to ensure that he would not only feel responsible but also know, without a doubt, that there was nothing for him in Florida.

Nothing.

The man turned, catching her gaze.

She swallowed her beating heart.

Dante had indeed returned.

Dante's breath hitched. He knew it was only a matter of time before he saw Kaia. Hell, he half-expected to see her at six this morning when he and his buddies had shown up for their fishing trip.

He'd almost texted her last night when he landed, but that would have been a big mistake, and based on the way she currently glared at him, he knew he'd made the right decision. However, now that he'd laid eyes on her, all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and kiss her hard. He missed how her skin sizzled against his body and how his name rolled off her lips in the heat of passion. For the last year, the memory of her had tormented his soul in unexpected ways. He'd never thought a woman could ever seep into his heart and mind so deeply.

He'd tried everything he could think of to forget her, but all that did was make him miss her more.

"Thank you." He handed June a sizable tip. "That was enjoyable."

"We haven't had that much fun in a long time," Walli, one of his ex-SEAL teammates, said.

"Just wish I could have hooked that shark for you boys." June slapped their catch on the cutting board at the end of the dock and hosed it down. "Are you planning to have the restaurant cook this up for you tonight?"

"That would be awesome." Riker tapped Dante on the shoulder and nodded in Kaia's direction.

Last night's discussion had circled back to Beck's sister a half-dozen times, and Dante did his best to keep her out of it because she wasn't part of the mission. She didn't have any effect on the plan.

Only the fact that she worked for the Russells changed everything.

And not in a good way.

"I'll have the kitchen take care of that for you with all the fixings. Just tell the manager, Kaia—oh, here she comes now."

"Looks like you caught yourself a feast, Mr. Fallon." Kaia's sweet, familiar voice tickled Dante's ears.

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. His pulse pounded in his ears, drowning out his thoughts. She had a way of stealing his ability to think and speak.

Kaia stood next to June, taking the headless fish and placing it in a bag.

"You two know each other?" June asked.

"He, and all his buddies here, served with my brother," Kaia said matter-of-factly. "I'm surprised you didn't recognize them." Her tone was harsh, and her glare as sharp as a fresh steak knife.

Dante cocked his head and pursed his lips. Since June hadn't said anything about remembering who he was, he hadn't wanted his little ruse to be brought to light, and he wasn't sure why Kaia had decided to out him—other than she just didn't want Dante sticking around.

But was that because Kaia had her own plans? That thought alone scared the crap out of him.

"You knew Beck?" Walli asked.

June nodded. "You all served in the military with him?"

"I was on his first SEAL team," Riker added.

"He and I went to boot camp together," Andrew "Morty" Mortan said as he shoved his glasses up to the top of his head.

“We wanted to come pay our respects to our fallen brother in our own way.”

“I can understand that.” June arched a brow and pointed a finger at Dante. “For the record, I knew who you were the second I took your reservation. I just didn’t want to make things awkward.”

“I appreciate that.” Dante let out a short breath. “I was here with our friend Holiday, who couldn’t make it this trip.” Unfortunately, the Aegis Network had needed Holiday’s services elsewhere. However, since Dante now worked as a contractor for them, they gave him the thumbs up to use his own team members. Even though this wasn’t a sanctions assignment, his new bosses understood why this was so important and gave him a couple of weeks.

“Yeah. I remember. The two of you thought my brothers and Beck were running drugs. Had my brothers sitting in county lockup all night.” June shook her head. “Is that what you are doing now? Checking me out to see if I’m taking over the family drug business?” Every single syllable dripped with disdain and sarcasm.

“No,” Dante said. “I’m trying to say a proper goodbye to an old friend who died a year ago, that’s all.”

“Excuse me while I struggle to believe that,” June said.

“I was hurting,” Dante said. “Beck was my best friend. I couldn’t believe he would commit suicide. I wanted to believe there was some nefarious reason. I was grasping at straws. I’ve since learned a few things about Beck and his life. I know I was wrong, which is why we all came back here and chartered this boat. We just wanted a moment out there to honor our friend. I hope you can understand why we wanted to do that without anyone knowing, including Kaia.”

“We meant no disrespect to anyone,” Riker added.

“We’ve been coming down here on and off for years with Beck.” Morty tapped his chest. “We all loved him.”

June leaned against the dock post. “I suppose I can understand.”

“I can’t,” Kaia muttered. “And I can’t believe you, of all people, are going to stand there and be okay with them acting like what they did, lying to you like that, was okay.”

“I guess you’re not very happy to see an old friend,” June said with an amused smile.

“We’re not friends.” Kaia held the bag full of fish they’d caught in her right hand and gave him a nasty glare. “Follow me. I’ll show you all to a table.”

“We’d appreciate that.” Dante rubbed the back of his neck. When they had shown up this morning, and he had seen Kaia’s name and picture listed as bar manager hanging by the marina, confirming what Rugs had told him, he almost hadn’t gotten on the boat. Not to mention he hadn’t yet had a chance to have any real conversation with his buddies regarding how to handle the Kaia situation. The last thing he wanted was for her to get caught in the crossfire. And knowing her, she’d be up in his face, wanting to know exactly why the hell he was in town. “Thanks again, June. I’m sorry if we offended you.”

“Just don’t expect me to take you out again.” June smiled. “There are plenty of other charters in town.”

He nodded, turning on his heels and following Kaia down the dock toward Surf Side, his buddies just one pace behind. No way would they abort, but they would have to rethink their entire mission, which would suck because Morty, Riker, and Walli only had five days before they had to leave for their next deployment.

The restaurant had started to fill with the evening crowd. Country music filtered through the speakers, echoing off the water. The sun turned the darkening sky a dazzling array of purples, oranges, and blues. A warm, salty breeze ruffled the palm trees.

Dante opened his mouth, but he had no idea what to say. He’d been practicing a speech for months, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember a single word of it.

She paused at a prime table with an excellent view of the marina, the lighthouse, and the beautiful water. “I hope this

will be acceptable.”

“It’s perfect, thank you.” Walli pulled out a chair and made himself comfortable.

Riker and Morty followed suit. However, Dante continued his stare-off with Kaia. He had a million questions, and he wasn’t sure where to start, but he wasn’t going to let her off the hook.

Not yet, anyway.

“Seriously? You’re working here?” Dante asked.

“A girl has to make a living.” She let out a long breath. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m about to sit down and eat dinner.”

“Why are you here? And for how long?” Her right eye twitched, as it often did when she became angered.

“I’ll answer the latter part of that first.” Oh, boy. This would not go over well. “But maybe we should go somewhere a little more private to talk.”

She ran a hand through her long hair. “How do you want this cooked?”

“Excuse me?” He furrowed his brow.

“Fried? Blackened? And do you want fries with it?”

He glanced toward his friends, who shrugged. “Beer-battered and with fries,” he said.

She handed the catch off to one of the waitstaff and gave him instructions before curling her fingers around Dante’s biceps and tugging him into a small office area on the far side of the building. “I only have a few minutes before I’m missed. Start talking.”

“You haven’t changed much. Still direct and to the point.”

She rubbed her temples. “And you still like to avoid hard questions.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’m here indefinitely.” He held her stare. Her dark, smoldering eyes tore right through to his soul.

Her jaw dropped open. “What about your next mission?”

“I left the military.”

“You did not.”

“Actually, I did.” He let out a long breath. “I was supposed to reenlist six months ago. I couldn’t do it. Not after what happened to Beck.”

“And what about them?” She gestured back to the main restaurant.

“They leave in less than a week. They are still SEALs.”

“So, why are you here?”

“You’re kidding, right? As if you don’t know.”

She narrowed her eyes and poked him dead center in the chest. “Don’t you go talking conspiracy theories around this place. Beck killed himself. He left a note explaining why. I still have a copy if you need to be reminded of the details.”

Dante swallowed. Hard.

He never wanted to read that letter again. Yet he glanced at it every night before he went to bed. “Jesus. I can’t believe you just said that. You know damn well that’s not true and that the letter is full of lies.”

“The autopsy says otherwise.”

He cocked his head. “This is bullshit.” He glanced around, scanning the room for security devices. Perhaps they were being watched or listened to. But if that were the case, then why would she lead him into the office in the first place? “I know you don’t believe that Beck would kill—”

“You don’t know shit.”

“Did you read any of my letters? Listen to my voice messages?” He’d tried contacting her for months after Beck died, and not once did Kaia reply. All Dante wanted was a chance to talk things through and tell her how he felt, but she wouldn’t even give him the time of day.

“No.”

He ran a hand over his unshaven face. “What’s happened to you?”

“You, that’s what.”



Dante jumped off the back of Rick's Golf Cart Service, an ingenious idea for the small town of Jupiter. Hell, any seaside town with a strip of restaurants, bars, and nightclubs all in close proximity to the best hotels and the nicest neighborhoods could use a few golf cart taxis like this one. It made for safer roads and a better time for all.

Memories of long, romantic walks on the beach in front of the Beach Hotel and Resort filled his mind. If there had ever been a woman he might have changed his ways for, that lady had been Kaia.

She made him rethink everything he thought he wanted until that fateful night when his world—and hers—had been turned upside down. He hadn't slept well in a year, and he wouldn't rest until the men who'd murdered his friend and destroyed Dante's chance at a different kind of life paid for their despicable actions.

"I don't think this is a good idea, man." Riker had been the first to sign on for the mission. Hell, Riker had been itching to come back down and kick ass over Beck ever since the newspapers published the apparent suicide after calling Beck one of Jupiter's largest drug runners in a decade.

Everyone who had served with Beck wanted to clear his tarnished name and make sure no one else died in vain.

Especially Kaia.

"I've got to talk to her, alone. She needs to hear some things, and she needs to hear them from me." Dante stared at

Beck's old home. For a trailer, it was pretty damn nice, and it overlooked the Intracoastal. It wasn't the greatest view, but it was water, and there was nothing more soothing than that—or at least that's what Beck had said. And Dante had to agree. "And I need to know if she's involved with them or not. And to what extent and why."

"Do you really think she'd go to bed with the likes of Jeff and Pete Russell?" Walli asked.

Dante sucked in a harsh breath. The salty air burned his lungs. He knew Walli didn't mean sexually. Or at least he hoped that hadn't been the implication. "I think she'd do whatever it took to get revenge for her brother."

"That's what I was afraid of," Morty said.

"When Holiday told me she was working there, I thought it wouldn't matter," Dante admitted. "I don't know why I thought we could just come down here and do this. I don't want anyone else getting hurt, so we put the brakes on until I know more."

"Do you really think she'd be that reckless?" Riker asked.

"She wouldn't see it as being reckless but as having a plan," Walli said.

"And I intend to find out exactly what those plans are tonight." Dante took a step back from the golf cart. "I'll see you all for breakfast." He turned and made his way up the five steps to the porch. For about five seconds, he felt as though he were invading her space, but he quickly reminded himself that his best friend, her brother, had been murdered by the very people who currently signed her paychecks.

He sat on the rocker next to the front door and snagged his cell, pulling up Holiday's phone number.

It rang twice before Holiday answered. "How goes things?"

"I'm pulling back for a day or two so I can do some recon when it comes to Kaia," Dante admitted.

“I told you she wouldn’t leave it alone and her taking that job proves it.”

Dante pinched the bridge of his nose. Deep down, he had known that Holiday was right, even though the guy barely knew her. However, when she hadn’t responded to Dante’s letters, emails, or voice messages, he wondered if maybe she’d managed to find some peace in her life. Or at the very least, wasn’t putting her life in danger. “We have to protect her at all costs.”

“I won’t argue that point, but we need to know what the hell she’s doing, and I don’t think you camping out at her place and confronting her is the best way to go about it.”

Dante let out a short laugh. He should have known that his buddies would have reported back to Holiday. “She’s not going to talk to anyone else.”

“Come on, man. Be real. She’s not going to tell you jackshit.”

“Perhaps, but I can tell if she’s lying or not.” Besides, he had a lot of unfinished business that he needed to deal with when it came to Kaia, and if he were going to deal with this mission, he needed to do so with a clear head.

“Just don’t let your emotions get the best of you,” Holiday said. “Have you had a chance to talk with your detective friend? I learned that he worked with my buddy Nick Sarich back in the day when Nick was on the force.”

“Not in person,” Dante admitted. “But he was at Surf Side when we returned from the charter. He texted me last week stating there was a lot of chatter about a big shipment coming in this week and that he planned to show his face there regularly.”

“Is he still thinking Kaia isn’t involved?”

“From what he can tell, she’s not part of the illegal business activity. But we both know that restaurant cleans the Russells’ money, so he can’t be sure that she’s not cooking his books.” Dante swallowed the bile crawling up his throat.

“If she is, you could be setting yourself up for—”

“You don’t need to tell me the risks,” Dante said, glancing at the time. Thanks to Jupiter’s noise ordinance, the bar would be closing in a half-hour. “I’m going to do a little breaking and entering. I’ll be in touch.”

“Be safe.”

“Will do.” Dante tapped the screen. He stood and stuffed his cell into his back pocket. He glanced around, making sure no one was looking and then snagged the key hidden in the light over the door. Beck always kept a spare there, and it seemed that Kaia hadn’t moved it. As quietly as he could, he inserted the key and twisted, hoping there was no security system.

There hadn’t been one the last time he’d visited, but he’d always been on Kaia to install one when she’d been living in the condo by herself, and she often agreed it would be a good idea.

He stepped inside, tapping on the flashlight icon on his phone.

His breath hitched. Not much had changed.

Kaia had kept all of her brother’s furniture and all the same wall hangings. She had switched up the photos on the entertainment center on the far wall across from the sofa. He picked up an image of him, Beck, and Kaia, taken the day Beck had died.

She’d framed it.

And kept it.

He wasn’t sure what that meant, but it made his heart beat a little faster.

He stepped into the kitchen. It smelled like homemade cinnamon bread—Kaia’s specialty. His mouth watered when he noticed some in the basket in the center of the table. He couldn’t resist. As he placed a small piece on his tongue, his tastebuds went insane. He continued down the hall and into the first bedroom, which used to be Beck’s.

She'd emptied his things from it, but it was obvious that she didn't use it for anything other than storage, so he moved on to the second room, which she'd set up as an office.

He stood behind the desk and pulled open the top drawer. "Didn't read them, my ass," he mumbled as he pulled out all his opened letters. He found the one he'd sent when he made the decision not to reenlist. And, sure enough, she'd at least torn through the envelope.

If she'd read it, she knew exactly how he felt about her, that it wasn't simple attraction or heavy like.

And yet, she'd done nothing in response.

That spoke volumes.

The sound of a floorboard squeaking behind him caught his attention. He spun on his heel and stared down the wrong end of a Glock.

"Jesus, Kaia. Put that fucking thing down." He wiggled his fingers. Nothing worse than having the woman who meant more to you than life itself shove a loaded pistol in your face.

She steadied her arm, narrowing her gaze. "Get the hell out of my house, or I will shoot."

"I don't think you will." Only, the Kaia he knew, when she committed to a decision, was all in, and nothing could stop her.

She lowered her aim to his knee.

He held his breath, waiting for precisely the right moment to disarm her. He'd spent a fair amount of time at the gun range with Kaia, and she knew her way around a weapon.

However, since he'd been the one to give her pointers, he also knew how she handled one, allowing him the opportunity to get the upper hand.

He hoped.

"You broke into my home. It's self-defense. No one, not even your friend, would call it anything—"

He reached out and jerked the weapon from her hand.

“What the hell?” She blinked, shaking out her arms. “Fucking jerk.”

He released the clip, slipping it into his front pocket before tucking the Glock into his belt. “What the hell are you doing with that thing?”

“Protecting myself from assholes like you.” She turned on her heel and stomped down the hallway, her sexy hips swaying back and forth, just begging for him to take her into his arms...fuck, he had to stop thinking about her that way. “I still want you out of my house. Now. If you can’t do that, I will call the cops.”

“I’ll leave after we’ve had a chance to talk about a few things.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you.” She paused in front of the small makeshift bar to the right of the kitchen table and poured herself three fingers of whiskey, not offering him a hit.

He helped himself.

She growled at him as if she were about to turn into a wolf and bite his head off.

“I’m really not going to leave, so either you answer a few questions, and we have a nice little conversation...” He took his drink into the family room area and plopped down on the sofa. “Or you deal with me stalking you until you do.”

She leaned against the doorjamb and stared at him with her big, chocolate eyes. A single tear rolled down her cheek. “I don’t know what you want me to say. My brother is dead. You can’t bring him back.”

“No. But I’m here to make sure someone pays for his murder.”

“The only thing that is going to happen is that someone is going to kill you, and I’m not going to stop them.”

*K*aia swallowed her beating heart. Seeing Dante again awakened something in her soul that she'd been working hard to bury so deep that no one could ever pull it to the surface again.

Not even Dante.

But there he sat in all his glory, making her feel loved and cared for in ways she couldn't bear. She couldn't deal with Dante. Not until Jeff, Pete, and June paid for what they'd done. And even then, she wasn't sure she'd ever truly be able to reconcile her feelings for him. It wasn't because she blamed him for Beck's death because she really didn't. Not anymore.

She'd made that decision the second she decided to take matters into her own hands.

She hated turning Dante away. The look on his face when she'd blamed him for Beck's death had nearly killed her, but it had been a necessary evil if she were going to take down the Russells. She couldn't have Dante getting in her way.

Or taking control.

"Kill me?" Dante raised his glass and took a slow draw of the dark liquid. "Better men have tried and failed."

"Don't be a condescending asshole."

"I'm not." Dante patted the cushion. "Or shall I show you all the bullet holes and scars on my body again?"

"So not the fucking point." She settled into the center of the sofa, tucking her feet under her butt. "Jeff and Pete have a

long memory, and they were pissed as hell at what you did.” She snagged a large chunk of her hair and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger. A nervous habit that gave her something to do with her hands when they itched to touch his hard muscles and soft skin. It would be so easy to rest her head in his lap and let him soak up all her troubles. “If they knew I was entertaining you, even though you broke in, it wouldn’t be good for me.”

“Or your plan?” he asked with an arched brow. “Do you even have one? Because I can’t believe you’d go to work for them because you think they’re nice guys.”

She dropped her head back and stared at the ceiling. She could tell him everything, which was almost nothing, considering she’d gathered next to no intel.

Or she could lie and let him believe that she was on team Russell.

He tapped his finger on her thigh. Heat radiated across her skin like little lightning bolts touching down. “Tell me what you know.”

“I know absolutely nothing.” She downed her drink, looking for some courage. “Except that you being here just reminds me that my brother is dead.” She squeezed her eyes shut for a good ten seconds before blinking them open. She needed Dante gone, and the only way to do that was to hurt him in the worst way. “My brother killed himself in part because of you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? His so-called suicide note made no sense at all, and you know it.”

“Really?” She sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was going to be one of the hardest things she’d ever had to do in her life. “Are you going to deny that you shamed my brother for his life choices?”

“I absolutely will deny that bullshit.”

“I heard you tell Beck, more than once, that he was making a mistake when he wanted to help bail my father—”



Dante waved his finger. “I only suggested that borrowing from the men who helped destroy your dad was a mistake. I didn’t say that starting a charter business was a bad idea. And you don’t know what Beck and I had planned when I came back last year because we didn’t tell you.”

“Beck told me everything,” she mumbled.

“Oh, please, Kaia. Don’t do this. I know Beck didn’t tell you about our plans because he begged me before I came back to your condo and made love to you not to breathe a word of it to you.”

Her body heated at the memory. Dante had been unusually tender and romantic. He’d held her in his arms for what seemed like an eternity, and they had talked about being a couple. About things she’d never thought he wanted or they could have together.

It had been the best night of her life.

Until it wasn’t

“You expect me to believe that when Beck is dead and can’t corroborate your story? And let’s remember how you constantly butted in and had your buddy, Rugs, looking into my dad’s business dealings. It put my father in a bad situation, and he ended up so stressed out that he had a heart attack.”

Dante pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can’t put that on me. I was deployed, and your brother was—”

Kaia raised her hand. “My brother hated disappointing you, and that’s all he seemed to do between leaving the SEALs, failing at helping my father, and then his own failed —”

“That’s fucking enough.” Dante’s words bounced off the walls. It was rare that he ever raised his voice, but it rattled her throat when he did. “All I ever did was try to protect Beck. He was the one who asked me to put together a team and come down here to help him. He was the one who begged me to keep you out of it, even after he knew about us. And trust me, I knew you’d be pissed.” Dante reached out and curled his

fingers around her biceps. “I wanted to tell you. I really did. But my honor as a SEAL wouldn’t allow it.”

“Your honor as a SEAL? What about your honor to me?” She couldn’t stop the tears from coming if she tried. She shrugged free of his grasp and pushed to a standing position. Strolling across the room, she took the picture of her, Beck, and Dante into her hands. She had no idea why she’d felt the need to frame it, but it was the last time she’d seen her brother.

And he looked happy.

Content.

Hell, so did she.

“We talked about a future that night. I was considering moving back to Virginia. I actually thought we could have something special.” She turned and faced Dante. “I cared about you.”

“I cared—*still* care—about you. Everything I wrote in those letters is true.” He closed the gap.

She gripped the picture, running her thumb over the soft edges of the wooden frame and then closed her eyes.

“You should have told me what you had planned. I might have been able to help.”

“I made a promise to my brother in arms.”

She set the picture down and turned. “You made me a promise that night. Do you remember?”

“I told you that I’d take care of you and Beck.” He held her by the forearms and nodded. “And I meant that.”

“But you didn’t, and Beck is dead.”

He cupped her face. “I don’t know what happened that night. He was supposed to wait for us, but he was gone when we got to the docks. Pete and Jeff were on to us. They had already tried to kill your brother once, and I needed to come back here.” Dante pressed his warm, loving lips over her mouth. He let them linger for a long moment. “I’ve been going out of my mind worrying about you and what you might be

doing. I've been trying to reach you for months, but you've ignored me."

She took a step back, needing some space. "I had to. Besides, I knew Holiday was keeping tabs on me for you. And now you have to leave. If they find out you're here, I might as well be dead."

Dante yanked her to his chest, holding her tightly. "I'm not going to let that happen."

She let out a dry laugh. "You couldn't save Beck from—"

He hushed her with his index finger. "I underestimated the Russells once. I won't make the same mistake twice." He dropped his forehead to hers. "I won't keep you in the dark ever again, but you have to trust me."

She stared into his adoring eyes. She'd tried not to miss him every night for the last year. She'd told herself that the pain in her heart was only for her brother, not the void that had been created by not having Dante in her life. "How can you expect me to trust you when I haven't seen you in almost a year?" she asked.

"Because, like I told you in my letters, I love you."

Her heart fluttered, tickling her throat. She gripped his shoulders, steadying herself, hoping she didn't fall over. She'd read his sweet words over and over every day, and she desperately wanted to believe them, but she wouldn't allow herself to feel them.

She couldn't.

Not until the Russells were behind bars.

When he kissed her again, she could no longer deny the swell of emotions that she'd been trying to hide from.

"No," she whispered, slamming her fist against his chest. "Please, don't do this to me."

"Do what? Love you? Care for you?"

She nodded. "I need to take revenge for my brother's death. You don't understand."

“Why do you think I’m here? Why do you think I left the Navy? I want the same thing. I want to make sure Jeff and Pete are locked up forever.” He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Even if you don’t love me, I’m going to do whatever it takes to make sure that happens.”

She swallowed a guttural sob. “Dante,” she whispered. “I can’t be seen with you. It will ruin what little trust I’ve developed with them.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Don’t you worry about that. I’m a down-on-my-luck, out-of-work SEAL. We’ll make this work. I’ve got your back. This time, we’re a team, okay?”

She nodded. “You’re not going to go sneaking out in the middle of the night?”

“Not without waking you first. But you have to promise me the same, okay?”

“I can do that, I think.”

He pulled her weapon out of the back of his pants. “And you can’t go pointing this at me anymore.”

“Don’t break into my trailer, and I won’t.”

He smiled like a kid in a candy store. “Perhaps you shouldn’t leave the key where anyone can find it.”

“Point taken.” Her eyes went wide. “Now it’s your turn to tell me about your plan to take down Jeff, Pete, and June.”

He shook his head. “Not until two things happen.”

She tilted her head. “And what two things are we talking about?”

“First, you haven’t responded to my declaration of love. And, second, we need to make up for some lost time.” He interlaced his fingers with hers, tugging her toward the bedroom. “You do love me?”

“I might.”

He chuckled. “I require more.”

“Are you saying you need to hear the words?”

“I do.” His impressive, muscular body pinned her against the wall by the bedroom door. “I’ve waited a year for your forgiveness, and I won’t settle for you merely implying that you feel the same way.”

“You did write some seriously romantic notes.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you thought so.”

“I wrote you back.”

He arched a brow.

“I have them all in a box and planned to send them after I took down the Russells in hopes you’d forgive me.”

Dante brushed a piece of hair from the side of her face. “I’d love to read them sometime.”

“When this is all over, maybe.”

“For now, I just want to hear you say the words.”

“You’re not going to let me off the hook, are you?”

He shook his head. “Remember the night in the hot tub when I kept bringing you close but not quite over the edge? If you don’t tell me, I’ll keep doing that, only I’ll never take you there.”

“That’s mean.”

“So is what you’re doing right now.”

She laughed, palming his cheek. “I love you, Dante. I always have.”

*K*aia tossed her shirt to the side, letting it fall like a brick to the floor. She couldn't rid herself of her clothes fast enough. It had been a year since she'd been with a man.

A year since she'd been with the only man she'd ever loved.

And a year since she'd felt alive.

Dante had always been in the back of her mind, haunting her dreams. When she closed her eyes late at night, she often let her thoughts wander to what it might have been like if her brother hadn't been murdered.

Or if they'd been able to pin it on Jeff and Pete right away.

How her life might have been filled with love and joy.

Instead of darkness that only churned rage and revenge, slowly crushing her soul.

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I'm right here, and I'm never going to leave your side again," he said as if he could read her thoughts.

Pressing her hand against his bare chest, she leaned into his strong frame. "I should have trusted you. Believed in you."

"I should have done the same." He kissed her palm. "I might not have been a very good boyfriend, but I'm a quick study, and I don't repeat the same mistakes twice."

She smiled, giving him a good shove toward the bed.

He fell backward, not even protesting a little bit, only he grabbed her by the biceps and tugged her to the mattress with him with a light laugh.

Come the light of day, things would be very different, but they would have their moment for now.

They'd been given a chance to heal old wounds and start over, and while she could be a stubborn mule, she wouldn't let him walk out of her life.

Not this time.

Their tongues twisted around each other as if they were having their first and final dance. It was wild and crazy as well as tender and sweet. Her ship had arrived, and this time, she'd sail through the rest of her life with Dante at the helm.

He caressed her body, taking her nipple between his fingers and pinching gently. Every erogenous zone ignited, sending her into a frenzy. She couldn't get enough. She wanted him deep inside her, and she didn't want to wait.

Only he had different plans as he dotted her belly with soft kisses. His hands and mouth brought her more pleasure than she'd imagined.

Or remembered.

Digging her heels into the small of his back, she gripped the sheets and sucked in a deep breath, trying like hell not to let her climax reach the surface before he'd even tasted her for more than a few seconds.

But she couldn't resist the sweet release of passion.

She raised her hips, clutching at his head, grinding against his mouth shamefully. Her orgasm spilled over. "Dante," she said with a groan vibrating against her throat. "I need you, now. Please."

"I won't last half as long as you." He settled between her legs, brushing her hair from her face and planting a hot, wet kiss on her lips. He teased her, not entering her, only rubbing against her most sensitive spot.

Her nipples tightened and tingled while her body convulsed as another orgasm tore through her system.

“That’s my girl,” he whispered. “I love how you can do that.”

“It feels better when you’re inside me.”

“Does it now?” He rose on his hands, thrusting his hips forward.

She arched her back. “Oh, God, yes.” It was as if an explosion of warmth zigzagged across her skin, soaking into her muscles, leaving her body trembling and her begging for more.

Their lovemaking had always been a combination of wild abandon and gentle tenderness that could only be described as the best she’d ever had. And she’d never want another man again.

Dante was it.

She’d loved him from their first kiss, and no matter how hard she tried, she’d never stopped.

And now, she never wanted to.

In his arms, she knew things would be okay. They had to be.

“Kaia,” he whispered, kissing the tender spot just under her earlobe. His breathing became more erratic as he plunged deep inside her over and over again. His climax spilled out into her like a lightning bolt reaching down from the sky, touching the ground with a quick but firm electric shock that rattled the earth for long moments.

She gripped his shoulders, staring into his kind, loving orbs that told her he would forever be in her corner.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too.” She accepted his full weight, holding him tightly, running her hands up and down his back. Squeezing her eyes tight, she kept the tears from reaching the



surface. Nothing would ever bring her brother back, but with Dante's help, she would get justice for his death.

Dante stared at the woman sprawled out on the bed next to him. Her long hair pooled on his chest while her hot breath tickled his skin.

He'd dreamt about this day for months, never expecting it to ever happen, yet praying it would.

Loving her came so easily. Naturally. As if he were born with the honor.

If only he'd come to accept it sooner, maybe Beck would still be alive.

Gently, Dante pulled his arm out from under her body and slipped from the bed. It was only four in the morning, and if he'd slept two hours, it would be a miracle. He bent over and kissed her temple before hiking up his jeans and heading toward the kitchen. No reason Kaia couldn't get another hour or two of rest while he worked out a few adjustments to the plan, one of which was informing his buddies that Kaia would be included and informed of every detail.

But she wouldn't be given anything too dangerous.

While he'd keep his promise to her, he wouldn't put her in the line of fire. That would be insane.

He took one step into the kitchen and paused mid-step, staring at June sitting at the table with a cup of coffee in one hand and a pistol in the other. He reached for a weapon, only to realize that he didn't have one.

Fuck.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” she said, raising her mug. “There’s a fresh pot if you want some.”

“I’d prefer an answer to my question.” He spoke in a slightly deeper tone, hoping it would be loud enough for Kaia to hear him and just ominous enough that she would get the hint to stay put and maybe call for backup. He opted not to move any closer, keeping himself centered between June and the hallway.

“I was sent to keep an eye on Kaia.”

“And you thought you’d do that by breaking and entering?”

June shrugged. “When my brothers found out you and Kaia were doing the nasty, they decided it might be better if I made sure neither of you left the premises until they could get here.”

“I see. And what do Jeff and Pete plan to do once they arrive?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but one thing I know for certain is Kaia will finally get to prove her loyalty.”

Motherfucker. That didn’t sound good. Those kinds of tests were always a lose-lose for those forced to choose simply because they couldn’t win. And something told him that Kaia’s test might include getting rid of a body.

Specifically, his.

“You shouldn’t have come,” June said. “All you’ve done is successfully piss off my brothers. Again. They don’t take too kindly to being made fools of. You’ve done that twice now. They won’t tolerate it again. They will take care of you first.”

Dante held up his hands. “Like I told you, I only wanted to pay my respects to an old friend.” He glanced over his shoulder. “And try to win back my girl. That’s all. I don’t give a rat’s ass about you or your brothers or what you do or don’t do. So, I’d appreciate it if you’d get your ass up off that chair and out of this house.”

She laughed. “Sorry. That’s not going to happen.”

“I could forcibly remove you, but I do prefer to remain a gentleman.” He decided a cup of coffee might not be a bad idea, but he wouldn’t be drinking anything that woman made. Not unless he wanted to risk being poisoned.

“I’m the one with the speeding bullets.” She waved the small gun in the air as he passed.

He dumped the coffee down the drain and started a new pot while contemplating how best to deal with the situation. He had no doubt that June would shoot. The question was how good of a shot she was, and whether she’d aim to kill or try to maim.

He could handle a gunshot wound—depending on where it went. He’d been shot a dozen times or so. But if he had to take one to the gut, that wouldn’t be fun. Or to the shoulder, that would make it harder for him to take her down.

Hell, he’d prefer not to deal with a bullet at all if he could help it. But he needed to deal with this chick before her brothers showed up.

“Don’t trust me?” She stood, holding the gun steady, aimed in his direction. She was quite different from the young woman he’d met a year ago.

“I sure don’t,” he said. “Tell me something. Did you love Beck?”

“I did,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“One more thing, I don’t believe.”

“Why’s that?” She leaned against the wall by the family room and sipped her coffee.

“Because if you truly loved him, you’d be doing whatever it took to make sure his killer was brought to justice.”

“How do you know I’m not doing exactly that?”

“Because you’re pointing that fucking gun at me and not your goddamned brothers.” He took his mug and stepped around the table, glancing down the hall.

No movement.

He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"My brothers didn't kill Beck."

"If they didn't do it themselves, they hired someone."

"Perhaps," she said.

He coughed, nearly choking on his coffee. "Are you admitting that to me?"

"I'm not admitting anything. I'm merely not ruling it out as a possibility."

He rubbed his temple. "If you loved Beck, and you believed your—"

"God, you bore me," June said. "Jeff and Pete tried to keep me from the family business for years. They didn't want their sweet baby sister involved in their criminal activities, and I was happy to be blissfully ignorant until Beck walked into my life. When I found out what was going on with him and what my brothers were doing, I was furious. But I didn't know what to do or who to trust. Of course, you and your friends showed up, making matters worse."

"How the fuck did we do that?"

"You made Beck secretive. He started keeping things from me and pushing me away. When he died, I really only had two choices. I could believe my brothers, or I could go out into the world alone, with no one to back me up, and no resources to find the truth. I chose the devil I knew, and now you're back, fucking everything up again."

"No. You and everyone else are just getting in my way." He squared his shoulders. "Jeff and Pete hired someone to write that pathetic note and put a bullet in my best friend's head. There is no other answer. No one else had any reason to kill Beck, and I'm going to prove it. Now, I need you to stay the hell out of my way." He glanced at his cell. "How long do I have before they get here?"

"I have no idea," she said.

A slow, pounding headache built between his ears. He didn't trust June as far as he could spit, but he had to find out whether anything she said had merit. "What have you been planning?"

"You want me to tell you—oh, fuck it." She set the gun down on the counter. "Since Beck died, my brothers haven't been able to run drugs on the charter boats. The cops pulled us over almost every time we went out for the first few months after Beck's death. The idea behind having me run the charters and Kaia manage the bar has been to legitimize the business again. And so far, it's been working. Only the detectives started showing up about two months ago, and then came the chatter of your return, which once again put a damper on their drug business—which has them in hot water with their partners."

"Why are you telling me all this?" He reached out and quickly snagged the weapon. Thankfully, she didn't try to get the upper hand.

"I'm tired of playing these games. I'm tired of being miserable and pretending I actually like being related to Jeff and Pete. They're soul-sucking scumbags. And as far as my plan goes, well, I don't really have one, other than waiting for the drugs to show up so I can fuck up and get caught."

"You'd go to jail with your brothers?"

"If it meant clearing Beck's name, hell, yes."

"And how do I know you're not setting me up?" Dante asked.

"Other than the fact that you have my gun? You don't."

The sound of the front door rattling caught his attention.

June flung herself at him, pressing her back against his chest. She grabbed his arm and wrapped it around her body. "Act as if you've overtaken me," she whispered. "That will buy us some time."

*K*aia blinked her eyes open and stretched. She inhaled sharply, only the fresh, salty scent of Dante was missing. She patted the mattress, and sure enough, he was gone.

She bolted upright to a seated position. He'd promised that he wouldn't sneak out in the middle of the night, and yet, here it was, four-thirty in the morning, and he was nowhere to be found.

The faint sound of voices coming from the other room tickled her ears. It sounded like Dante—and a woman?

Quickly and quietly, she scooted to the end of the bed and found a pair of jean shorts and a T-shirt. She pulled open the door and peeked her head out when she heard June's voice.

What the fuck? Kaia craned to hear the conversation in the other room.

This wasn't good. She snagged her cell from the top of the dresser. Her fingers hovered over Rugs' contact information. If she contacted him, she could be putting all her eggs in one basket.

If she didn't, she could be risking her life and Dante's.

Shit. She had to do it. Maybe Rugs would do what she asked and reach out to Dante's buddies. Hell, Rugs had served with Dante in the Navy. He should have that same honor code that Dante and the rest of the boys had. She tapped on the screen and then stuffed the cell into her back pocket.

“And how do I know you’re not setting me up?” Dante asked.

“Other than the fact that you have my gun? You don’t.”

“Act as if you’ve overtaken me. That will buy us some time,” June whispered.

The sound of the bedroom window rattling behind Kaia caught her attention. She turned on her heel and gasped.

“Hello, Kaia.” Jeff grabbed a handful of hair. “I don’t like being wrong, and not only was I wrong about you, but I’m out a couple hundred dollars.”

“Excuse me?”

“A bet with my brother, who warned me that your fucking idiot boyfriend would be back. That bastard is a damn thorn in my side, always showing his ugly face and fucking up our plans. Not to mention that you would never cross over to the dark side. But what really gets my goat is that you all poisoned my sister against us.” He yanked her by the hair, hard, tugging her down the hall.

She grabbed his wrists. Her eyes watered from the pain in her scalp. Her heels scuffed against the vinyl floor. “What are you doing?”

“Something I should have done a year ago.” He tugged harder, pressing his handgun against her temple.

As soon as she rounded the corner to the kitchen, she made eye contact with Dante, who was holding June by the forearm and shoving a pistol into her gut while Pete aimed his weapon at Dante.

That was interesting.

“Well, well, well. Looks like we have us a party,” Jeff said. “I’d let go of my sister if I were you.”

“You release Kaia, and I’ll do the same with June.” Dante inched toward the family room.

“I can’t do that,” Jeff said.



“Then I guess we’re at a standstill.” Dante raised his weapon. “What are we going to do about that?”

“You’re still going to let June go, and then we’re going to take you fishing. I don’t think my sister showed you a good enough time. She mentioned something about a shark taunting you, and Pete and I thought it might be fun to go on a hunt for one, just like in that movie, *Jaws*. We’ll toss some shark bait over, draw that bad boy to the surface, and you might have to go for a swim.”

“I don’t like sharks,” Dante said.

“That’s too bad.” Jeff shoved the muzzle of the gun into Kaia’s cheek. “Let go of June.”

Kaia swallowed. Hard.

The cold metal froze her muscles, making it impossible to even blink. Her heart beat so fast, she could no longer feel her pulse.

Dante placed the pistol on the counter and held his hands in the air. “No need to do that.”

“Hands behind your back.” Jeff waved his gun in front of Dante. “You do the same. June, tie these assholes up.”

June nodded like a bobblehead. She started with Dante, using duct tape to secure his hands.

“You can’t toss me overboard and expect my friends to think I just disappeared. And a suicide note won’t work this time.” Dante’s tone was slow and relaxed. He was always as cool as a cucumber, and that allowed Kaia to focus her thoughts on the here and now.

She did her best to keep her hands as far apart as she could while June wrapped the tape around her wrists. Kaia glanced over her shoulder, but June didn’t lift her gaze.

“And what do you plan on doing with Kaia?” Dante asked.

“Oh, this is where it gets fun,” Pete said. “And you went and made it easy by sleeping together.”

“Really? And why is that?” Dante inched closer to the family room and leaned against the doorjamb as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“We can play it a few different ways.” Pete smiled. “Lovers’ spat. Or a romantic night on the boat gone bad.”

“No one saw us being nice to one another,” Dante said. “Not even my buddies. So that’s not going to work.”

“As a matter of fact,” Kaia added, “I told my coworkers I wished Dante was dead instead of my brother.”

“I did hear her say that,” June said.

“Oh.” Jeff waved his gun in the air. “That’s a fucking great idea. Dante was bothering you at the restaurant and came here, and when you turned him away, he got mad, and you had to shoot him. Dead.”

Dante laughed. “That’s a good one, but too hard to pull off. Besides, either I have to kill her during a gunfight, or she has to go along with it, and that’s not going to happen.”

“She’ll work with me.” Jeff looped his arm around Kaia’s shoulder. “Otherwise, she’ll go to jail.”

“If I broke in, it would be self-defense. She wouldn’t go to jail for that,” Dante interjected.

Kaia stole a quick glance in June’s direction and then at Dante, who had his back toward the wall. Her brain filled with a million questions with no answers and no time to figure them out.

“You’re right. She wouldn’t. But you’d be dead,” Pete said.

“I would never admit to shooting Dante. I would tell everyone what really went down,” she argued.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Pete said. “And even if you did, no one would believe you because your neighbors will tell whatever story we spin.”

“That’s bullshit,” she said.

“How do you think we knew that the two of you were fucking like rabbits?” Jeff asked with a wicked-ass grin, but he didn’t wait for anyone to wager a guess. “Your neighbor works for me and watched Dante here jump off the back of the golf cart taxi and then use your spare key. And then our friend called us while he watched and waited.” Jeff pointed at his face with his middle and index fingers and then pointed at her. “I’ve got eyes and ears everywhere.”

Bile rose in the back of Kaia’s throat. She shivered at the idea that someone had been spying on her intimate reunion with the only man she’d ever loved. “You’re a disgusting pig, and I hope you rot in hell.”

Jeff glanced at his watch. “We better pull the trigger on this plan.”

“What plan?” June asked. “Because if you think having her kill him will help get Rugs off your ass, you’re a bigger fool than I thought.”

Jeff raised his hand and smashed it against the side of his sister’s face.

Her body twisted, and she fell to the floor.

“Jesus,” Dante muttered. “What the hell did you go and do that for?” He dropped to his knees. “Are you okay?”

June wiped blood from the corner of her mouth. “Fine,” she said.

“You fucking little traitor,” Jeff said. “You fucked me over when it came to Beck, and now you’re doing it again.”

Pete snatched her up by her elbow. “What did you tell them?”

“Nothing,” she said.

Kaia blinked. She’d never gotten along with June, and it had only gotten worse since her brother died, but if she were trying to help clear Beck’s name, then Kaia owed her one hell of an apology.

“But what difference does it make?” June said. “They know the truth, and so do I. And I’m tired of pretending I

don't. So, looks like you're going to have to kill your own flesh and blood because I'm not going to stand here and let you do this anymore."

Pete gave her a good jab right in the nose. "Learn your place, little sister."

Her head popped back, and she slammed into the wall, groaning while holding her face.

"You're going to fucking pay for that," Dante said in a menacing voice. His shoulders were tight. Even with his hands behind his back, he was a man to be reckoned with.

Kaia twisted and turned her wrists in a frantic panic. Her pulse pounded in her ears. She knew Jeff and Pete to be ruthless men, and she knew without a doubt that they were responsible for her brother's death.

But she'd never seen them behave violently before. Given they would treat their own sister this way, she could only imagine what they might do to her when push came to shove.

Jeff quickly cut Kaia free of her restraints, holding her tight, bruising her skin. He placed the weapon against her hand. "Grip the handle."

"No." She wiggled, trying to break free, but Jeff was too strong.

Dante lunged forward. Pete stepped in his way, shoving him back against the wall with a thud, his hands still tied behind his back. "Let her go," Dante said.

"Take the fucking gun." Jeff stood behind her, wrapping his arms around her, and placing the weapon between her hands.

*Bang!*

“*M*otherfucker, that hurt.” Dante staggered as he tried to break free of his restraints. The bullet had torn through the right side of his thigh. A good, clean shot, missing bone. It was more of a graze, but it still did a fair amount of damage, making it difficult to concentrate on the small pocketknife that June had strategically placed in his hands before she loosely pulled the tape around his wrists.

He was close.

But not close enough.

“Fuck. I should have known you wouldn’t be able to do this right, and I’d have to take care of it.” Jeff steadied the weapon, inching closer to Dante.

Not good.

“I don’t think so.” June limped between Dante and Jeff, holding her handgun.

“Don’t make me shoot you.” Jeff cocked his head.

Pete froze in his place, glancing between his siblings. “June. I’m begging you to stand down. He’ll do more than hit you. He’ll kill you.”

“And you think I don’t have it in me to kill either of you?”

Jeff laughed. “You don’t have the balls.”

She lowered her aim.

*Bang!*

Jeff screamed, clutching his knee. “You bitch.”

Dante finished cutting through the duct tape. He stretched out his arm, stopping Pete from making his way toward Jeff.

Pete cocked his weapon just as the front door flew open while the sliding glass door off the kitchen shattered.

Dante sighed in relief and raced—more like hobbled—toward Kaia, pulling her into his arms as Walli, Morty, and Riker barreled into the tiny kitchen, successfully laying Pete out flat on his face.

Jeff was curled up like a baby, demanding an ambulance.

“What the hell happened to you?” Riker asked.

“My girlfriend shot me,” Dante said.

“You have a girl?” Walli snagged a dish towel and tended his wound. “I’m surprised anyone would have you.”

June and Riker did their best to control Jeff’s bleeding while Morty made sure no one was going anywhere until the authorities arrived.

“I don’t know if she’s going to stay mine. She tried to kill me.” Dante stretched out his arm and pulled her close.

“Now you’re just being dramatic,” Kaia said, kissing his cheek. “And I didn’t pull the trigger. That piece of shit did.” She jerked her chin at Jeff.

“I just hope we have enough on these assholes to put them away for a long time.” Dante leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. His thigh throbbed, and his heart ached. “If it weren’t for June, we’d all be dead.”

“I might be able to help you seal my brothers’ fate,” she said.

Dante blinked open his eyes. “How?”

“I have more proof about what—”

“Shut up, June,” Pete said. “You’ll end up in jail or dead if you don’t.”

“I’m going to jail anyway.” June wiped the tears from her face.

“I wouldn’t say that is a fact,” Rugs said as he walked up. “The district attorney will probably cut you a deal, depending on what you have. And between your tip and Kaia’s backup call, I’ll put in a good word for you.” Rugs bent over and lifted the towel from Dante’s leg. “That’s nasty. Your girlfriend really did that to you?”

Dante nodded.

Kaia let out a long sigh and slapped her leg. “I didn’t do it \_\_\_”

“Sweetheart, I’m teasing you.” Dante took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I would have shot me too if I thought it would buy us some time.” He brushed his lips over hers in a tender kiss. A siren bleeped twice in the background. The muffled voices of the first responders filled the room. “But please don’t ever do it again.”





## A MONTH LATER...

Dante carefully lifted his leg, setting it gently on the pillow on the sofa. It had been four weeks since he'd been shot, and while he was healing nicely, the muscle tear was still giving him a difficult time. "Are you sure I can't help?" His stomach growled. Not that he cared that Kaia was later than she'd said she'd be, but it was close to seven-thirty, and he was starving.

"Here you go." Kaia placed a tray over his waist. "Beer-battered fish, fries, coleslaw, and a nice glass of white wine." She sat on the floor next to him with her own plate.

"How did your interview go today?"

"Well, I can tell you I didn't get the job," she said. "I have some thoughts on a career change."

"I'll support you no matter what you decide to do." He dug into the fish. It melted in his mouth. He closed his eyes and moaned. "Jesus, that's good. Where'd you get it?"

"I know. A place Holiday and his wife recommended. I think I'm going to like living in Jacksonville," she said. "A fresh start."

"I'm glad I could start a charter business here."

"Are you sure that's what you want to do in your retirement?"

There was only one thing Dante was sure of, and that was that he loved Kaia more than anything, and he wanted to be

with her. Besides, he couldn't think of a better way to honor his buddy than turning Beck's Charters into the lucrative, legit charter company Beck had always dreamed it could be.

"It's not the only thing I'm doing. I will still be taking assignments with the Aegis Network from time to time. That will be fun to work with Holiday again. But yeah, I'm sure. This is the life I want," he said with a wink and a smile. "I did get an offer on the two Sea Chasers from the old business. I think I want to replace those."

"I'd say they are bad luck."

"I tend to agree." He raised his wine glass. "To new beginnings."

"I'll toast to that." She tapped her glass against his.

He cocked his head. "Water? You're drinking water?"

"Yeah. That's kind of why I was late, and I brought home takeout instead of cooking for us." She shifted on the floor, tucking her hair behind her ear. "And it also has something to do with my career plans."

"You could have texted. I could have cooked." He waved his fork in the air. "I might have to take it easy for a little while, but I can stand on my own two feet. I don't mind helping out around here." He pointed to the boxes. "I did unpack a couple more."

"You're supposed to be taking it easy for another two weeks."

He rolled his eyes. "Do you know how many times I've been shot? This ain't my first rodeo."

"So, you've said." She shook her head. "But I was thinking since you want to be a little flexible, you need someone good to manage the charter business while taking whatever assignments Holiday sends you."

"I'm part-time when it comes to the Aegis Network. It's special missions only. And I'll be able to say no if things are too busy, especially while I hire captains and such."

She pursed her lips. “I was suggesting that we become business partners. That was always part of my brother’s problems. He tried to do much by himself. I can help.”

“Oh wow. Yeah. That would be great. Things might be tight for a while,” he said. “But if that is really what you want. Then give up the job search. He lifted his glass. “Go pour yourself some. This is good stuff.”

“I don’t know how to tell you this or even how I feel, so I will show you.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“That depends on your point of view.” She reached behind her, grabbing her purse. “Over the course of the last few weeks, we’ve made some big changes. We moved and hell, you even brought up marriage.”

“I still like that idea.” He winked.

“I can get on board with that, though it’s a bit scary considering we were two confirmed singles.”

He laughed. “It does freak me out a bit.”

“Well, there is one thing that hasn’t come up amidst all those topics.”

He tapped her nose. “I think I know where you’re going with this.”

“Yeah. Where’s that?”

“Kids.”

She coughed, and her big, chocolate eyes just got even bigger. “Good guess.”

“It’s kind of the natural progression of things when you move in together and while my mention of nuptials was a shitty ass proposal, I meant it.” He swirled his wine before taking a long sip. He set the glass down, pushing the tray to the side, and twisted his body, lowering himself to the floor. “I take it you want to know how I feel about them?”

“Something like that.” She stuck her index finger into her mouth and chewed on her fingernail.

He batted her hand away. “What’s going on with you?”

“Do you want to have children?”

“Do you?”

“I asked first.”

“I want everything with you. So, yeah, I like the idea of having a family.”

“You like the idea, or you’re down with having a couple of rug rats?”

He palmed her cheek. “Where is this coming from?”

She blew out a puff of air and reached into her purse. “I’m late. Like a few weeks. So I decided to take a pregnancy test.”

“You decided to do what?” His voice screeched like a schoolgirl who’d just gotten her pigtails caught in the jungle gym.

She handed him a white stick. Inside the little window was the word: *Pregnant*. “I have an appointment with the doctor that Candice recommended next week to confirm, but the nurse said these things are pretty accurate.”

“How is this possible?” He held the test up to the light as if the answer might change.

Not that he wanted it to.

“Do you really need a lesson in how babies are created?”

“No.” He tapped his chest. His pulse increased. “A baby?”

“I know. It’s crazy. I mean, we’re barely back together, and we have the trial to deal with, but I’m not totally freaked out by the concept. Are you?”

“Oh, I’m wiggled out, all right.” He set the stick down on the table and pulled her close, kissing her lips softly.

“I want to have this kid.”

“So do I,” he said with conviction. A swell of emotion filled his gut. His chest tightened. He’d always loved kids, he’d just never thought he would love a woman enough to want to have a family with her.

That was until Kaia walked into his life.

“Don’t mistake my shock for lack of excitement.” He brushed away the few tears that had escaped her eyes. “You just have to tell me if you want a big wedding or not. If you want it now, or if you want to wait until after the baby is born.”

“Can you hear yourself?”

He nodded. “I’m getting better at this, aren’t I?”

“I’d say so.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “I’d rather do a quickie wedding. Nothing big. Do it on the beach. Maybe in a couple of weeks.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

She glanced up at him and the sight of her bright, loving orbs sucker-punched him in the gut. “We could go to the Bahamas for our honeymoon and when we come back, we can set up our lives.”

“Look at us making plans,” she said. “I love you, Dante.”

“I love you right back, and I’m going to enjoy spending the rest of my life honoring you and our children.”

# EPILOGUE

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## EIGHT MONTHS LATER...

Dante raced through the sliding doors of the local emergency department, well aware he smelled like dead fish. He skidded to a stop at the information desk. “I’m looking for my wife.”

The nurse glanced up and literally plugged her nose. “Her name?”

“Kaia Fallon. She called me a half-hour ago saying she was in labor and that she called an ambulance.”

The nurse tapped on her keyboard. “I’m sorry, but we have not admitted anyone by that name.”

“Are you kidding me? She has to be here. Her water broke about a—”

“Dante,” Kaia’s voice rang out.

He turned on his heels and nearly fell over. He grabbed the man standing next to him for support as he stared at Kaia being rolled into the ER with a baby in her arms.

His baby.

“Kaia?” He raced to her side. “Are you okay?”

“Never better,” she said with a bright smile. “Oh, my God. You smell horrible.”

“Sorry. I was cutting bait and was dealing with that when you called.” Tentatively, he reached out and palmed the bald head of the child in her arms. “Is this our kid?”

Kaia laughed. “I almost had to deliver this baby all by myself.”

“The head was crowning when we arrived,” one of the paramedics said. “Your wife is a rock star. She was calm and had everything under control.”

“I was totally terrified.” She kissed the baby’s forehead. “Would you like to hold your son?”

“A boy?” Dante took his son into his arms. Tears burned the backs of his eyes. Seven months ago when he said, “*I do,*” he’d thought he was the luckiest man alive.

But holding his little boy was something no one could have prepared him for. It was as if the world had stopped for a moment, allowing him to savor what life was all about.

The little boy blinked, wiggled, and yawned. “He’s so little.”

“Actually, he’s pretty big. We’re guessing about eight and a half pounds,” the paramedic said.

“He’s beautiful,” Dante whispered, trying to keep himself from crying like a small child. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“You’ll be there for the next one.” Kaia squeezed his shoulder. “We need a name for this little fella. We only had girls’ names picked out.”

Dante nodded. “I’ve been thinking about that a lot.”

“And?” Kaia asked.

“Beckham James Fallon.”

Kaia gasped. “After my brother and dad?”

“I can’t think of a more honorable name for my son than that.”

Thank you for reading *A SEAL’s Honor*. Please feel free to leave an honest review.

Grab a glass of vino, kick back, relax, and let the romance roll in...



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guessing until the end. You won't want to miss this one..." *USA Today bestselling author Janice Maynard*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Talty is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, and Paranormal Romance. In the fall of 2020, her short story was selected and featured in a 1001 Dark Nights Anthology.

Regardless of the genre, her goal is to take you on a ride that will leave you floating under the sun with warmth in your heart. She writes stories about broken heroes and heroines who aren't necessarily looking for romance, but in the end, they find the kind of love books are written about :).

She first started writing while carting her kids to one hockey rink after the other, averaging 170 games per year between 3 kids in 2 countries and 5 states. Her first book, IN TWO WEEKS was originally published in 2007. In 2010 she helped form a publishing company (Cool Gus Publishing) with *NY Times* Bestselling Author Bob Mayer where she ran the technical side of the business through 2016.

Jen is currently enjoying the next phase of her life...the empty nester! She and her husband reside in Jupiter, Florida.

Grab a glass of vino, kick back, relax, and let the romance roll in...

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*Rivers Edge*

*The Buried Secret*

*Its In His Kiss*

*Lips Of An Angel*

*Kisses Sweeter than Wine*

*A Little Bit Whiskey*

*It's all in the Whiskey*

*Johnnie Walker*

*Georgia Moon*

*Jack Daniels*

*Jim Beam*

*Whiskey Sour*

*Whiskey Cobbler*

*Whiskey Smash*

*Irish Whiskey*

*The Monroes*

*Color Me Yours*

*Color Me Smart*

*Color Me Free*

*Color Me Lucky*

*Color Me Ice*

*Color Me Home*

*Search and Rescue*

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