



BLOWWEED

UP

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

BLOWED UP

AN OPS PROTECTOR ROMANCE

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

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For Matthew

*This turned out to be the most amazing cover! Thank you for
always being so creative and adventurous in your shoots!*

CONTENTS

Cast of Characters

Blowed Up

1. Chase
2. Adam
3. Cash
4. Duke
5. Sinner
6. Vira
7. Rae
8. Tate
9. Zoe
10. Jane
11. Miranda
12. Lock
13. Zoe
14. Scottie
15. Jason
16. Rae
17. Duke
18. Scottie
19. Max
20. Iris
21. Thumper
22. Scottie
23. Rae
24. Ike
25. Jane
26. Sinner
27. Vira
28. Asher
29. Patrick
30. Sinner

31. Ike
32. Asher
33. Chase
34. Iris
35. Red
36. Cash
37. Tate
38. Jones
39. Jack
40. Thumper
41. Jack
42. Zoe
43. Slider
44. Fox
45. Cash
46. Fox
47. Lock
48. Thumper
49. Eva
50. Cash
51. Zoe
52. Jack
53. Cash
54. Sinner
55. Jack

Also by Giulia Lagomarsino

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Cash Owens- Owner of Owens Protective Services, sniper, and overall badass.

Eva James- deadly mistress of throwing knives and Cash's...person

Team 1:

Jerrod Lockhart- Complete hardass, rule follower, and generally the guy considered to always have a stick up his ass.

Juliette Cassinelli- Junk food addict, avid runner, tiny human that can't reach the top shelf. Oh, also a fabulous model who has stolen the heart of the unmovable Jerrod Lockhart.

Edward "Edu" Markinson- Hater of hospitals, slow drivers, and references to anything in the '80s.

Brock "Rock" Patton- Wannabe model, obsessed with his looks and constantly combing his hair...A ferocious fighter for a man so obsessed with his looks. Also, as a side note—he can't act for shit and hates the word 'loins'.

Scottie Dog Thacker- Tactical vomit expert, hater of flying planes, and always up for a good time. If you're with him, have a barf bag in hand. Has never had even a sip of alcohol in his life.

Quinn Lake- Awesome geologist who is terrible at telling people no. She's a runner—running from situations so she doesn't have to grow a spine and deal with confrontation. Awesome at Battleship and Twister.

Team 2:

Marcus “IRIS” Slater- His name stands for *I Require Intense Supervision*. EOD expert that has taken up a new love...blowing up shit.

Jane Layne- IRIS’s sidekick in real life and in her mystery novels. Also known as Shayla Jacque. Absolutely despises technology, and goes so far as to use a typewriter to avoid it.

Mick “Slider” Jeffries- Not Slider from *Top Gun*. Sorry, ladies, I know he was gorgeous, but it’s not the same hottie.

Tate “Thumper” Parsons- No, not named for the adorable furry rabbit. Thumper got his nickname after losing a foot to an IED. Now using a robotic foot, he is probably the fastest person on the team.

Bree Wilton- Financial guru, killer of the boardroom, and newly appointed partner in her firm. Wilts under the sun. Hates hiking, dirt, bunnies, and generally all things that don’t come with a luxury sticker.

Team 3: Now known as The Ditty Boppers

Eli Brant- Fierce team leader, but will put you in your place with a good practical joke when necessary.

Sarah Williams- Pickpocket, crazy lady that reacts inappropriately in tense situations.

Red Warren- Funny, meat-eating, California-hating, rifle owner. Proud to take out the bad guys in any way possible.

Zoe Thacker- Screenwriting badass that hates guns, refuses to eat meat, but loves a good gunfight.

Bradford Kavanaugh- Son of a senator, terrified of mummies, scarabs, and basically anything from ancient Egypt. Loves practical jokes, except when they’re about him.

IT Department:

Rae Dennon- Sarcastic, witty, badass woman. Terrified of nothing, will take down any man with little effort, and has an intense feud with Dash.

Duke Mason- The mechanic. Sexy, dirty, and the man every woman wants. His hands alone could have a story written about them and all the things they can do. Not afraid to have his ass kicked by Rae.

Dash- Awesome with computers and a skilled fighter. Constantly being compared to Rae, the sexier version of him. Still trying to convince Fox he's just as awesome.

Black Ops Team: Also known as The Three Js

Jack Cox- Team leader who loves aviator sunglasses as much as a good gun fight. Willing to take one for the team as long as the mission is long and hard...just like his johnson.

Johnny Wood- Dangerous cowboy, loyal to Rafe—a man that would kill his own mother if it finished the job. Respects a man willing to get the job done.

Tahlia James- Mad scientist...well, coroner. Desperate for the truth and willing to do anything to get those answers, as long as it doesn't include enclosed spaces. Not afraid of Johnny and his sexy body.

Jason Long- Number 3 of the baddies. Dangerous and dark, always full of threatening wisdom. Stay out of his way.

The Other Guys:

New Guy- Also known as FNG- Doesn't have a death wish, but firmly believes he can never be killed. Willing to take horrible risks to prove he's unstoppable. Medic and smart as a whip, but also one of the most ridiculous men you've ever met.

Jones- Spotter for Cash during their military days, with a bad attitude since losing the use of his leg. Like you really need one of those.

Rafe- Evildoer posing as the good guy. Or is it the other way around? Dangerous antihero with not a single redeeming quality who stays hidden in the shadows. Unknown relationship to Cash.

Liberty- Pretty ballerina with hidden talents. Obsessed with Rafe and willing to sacrifice anything to be with him. Or

is she???

Fox- Works in training, has an undeniable fascination with throwing knives, and loves singing show tunes...sometimes a little too much!

Anna- Gorgeous Hollywood star that has captured Fox's twisted heart. Her looks aren't nearly as deadly as her right hook.

Nicholas Tate: Former SEAL that worked with Fox. Still a mystery, but currently works as a cop in Kansas after Cash got him a job. Must be crazy to be friends with Fox.

The Young Squad:

Asher White: This suit-wearing enigma has a thing for dangerous jobs, fast women, and...trains. Yes, you heard that right! Don't come between a man and his love of locomotives.

Jade Buchanan- The wife of the elusive Asher. Forced into an arranged marriage by her power-hungry father, she suffers from terrible nightmares, longing to leave this horrible life behind.

Chase Carter: Tattooed badass with a bullring in his nose. His wacky personality is nearly as irritating as his love of playing Monopoly.

Patrick Cook: This is no ordinary gigolo. Hang onto your hats ladies! You're not just getting a striptease with this stud!

BLOWED UP

Military Origins:

The state of being hit by an IED.

OPS Meaning:

Everything went to shit.

CHASE

“This is a terrible idea,” Patrick said for the tenth time as we headed to Asher’s new place.

It was way out at the piss end of nowhere, not that Kansas was much better. If he was hoping we’d never visit him, he picked a great location. Aside from wheat growing in the fields, there wasn’t a whole hell of a lot to see.

“It’s not a terrible idea. He’s not answering our calls. We need to make sure he’s okay.”

“Of course, he’s not okay,” Patrick scoffed. “You saw him at the funeral. That was a man that was completely lost. He needs space.”

“He needs his friends to pull him out of the mess he’s in. Jade didn’t die because of him.”

“No, she died because she was depressed as hell. Kate saw it. She had Knight warn Asher to keep an eye on her.”

I slowly turned and glared at my teammate. “Are you suggesting he ignored the signs?”

“No, I’m suggesting she did a really fucking good job pretending she was okay. I was with her the most. I’m telling you, I thought she was pulling out of it. The nightmares seemed to be gone. She was getting better at moving around the house.”

“She was getting better at taking those fucking pills,” I growled. My hands clenched on the steering wheel to keep from driving off the road and straight into a fucking tree.

Considering how Jade took her own life, that was probably the wrong thing to think. The whole situation made me angry. If only she'd realized that day, though she might end her pain, she would hurt everyone around her.

“And us going to see Asher isn't going to be anything but a reminder.”

“So, when we didn't see the signs with Jade, that was bad. But when we should go check on our friend who is also depressed as hell, you want to walk away?”

He sighed heavily, knowing I had a good point. “Fuck, I just know he won't want to see us.”

“He doesn't have a fucking choice. We were there with him. We need to be the ones to drag him out of this.”

“In fucking Ohio. Who picks up and moves to Ohio?”

“People that don't want to see anyone else,” I surmised. “It's isolated.”

“Yeah, full of fucking corn fields and flat land as far as the eye can see. You don't think he took up farming, do you?”

“No. I think it's more likely he took up drinking.”

I looked at the navigation again and took the road to his house. We were only five minutes away. The closer we got, the more I started sweating. I was worried about what I'd find. I'd known Asher for long enough now to know that he was cocky, full of confidence that he could do anything he put his mind to. And when Jade died, that shook him to the core. Everything he was sure about was gone in just those few seconds when we watched her plow the minivan into the tree.

I closed my eyes briefly, but it was long enough to see the vivid images of Jade lying on the ground, her body broken. She wasn't even my wife, and I still woke up with nightmares of finding her that day—of seeing the utter devastation on Asher's face as he held her in his arms. Patrick and I never discussed it. I knew it shook him too, but neither of us could talk about that day.

“Did, uh...did Cash make you see someone?” I asked after a minute.

“Yeah.”

“Did it help?”

“You mean, did it ease the gripping guilt I feel every fucking day? Does it make me feel better knowing that we not only lost a client, but our best friend is tearing himself to shreds?”

I nodded. “Yeah, basically.”

“Did you see someone?”

“Do you want to talk about what happened that day?”

I sat in the chair, refusing to look at the woman in front of me. What the fuck did she know about tragedy? Had she ever witnessed a suicide before? I had, and it wasn't any better the second time around.

“You know, it can help to talk about it.”

“Does saying that make you feel better?”

“I hope I can help someone. I know it won't work for everyone. On the other hand, people that come to me have to want help. If you sit here every day and say nothing, I can't even try.”

I still sat there, unable to add to the conversation. I had failed. It wasn't just Jade...I failed Asher too, and now he was paying the price. I caused him that misery.

“Let me ask you this...what would you change if you could go back?”

“Chase?”

I cleared my throat, shifting in my seat as I pulled down the long driveway. The house was in shambles. I was surprised it was even standing. This was worse than I thought.

“Let's focus on Asher. He's the one that needs the help.”

“Are you sure about that?” he muttered as I pulled to a stop and turned off the car.

I ignored him and got out, slamming the door behind me. The house was nothing to look at from the outside. The brown clapboard house was weathered, barely standing if the tilt to the foundation was anything to go on. A few windows were broken, and the rest looked like they would collapse on their own weight at any moment.

“Christ, what the hell is he doing out here?” I asked, scrubbing my hand across the nape of my neck. “I think we waited too long to come out.”

“I think we should leave. This is something out of a horror movie.”

I was pissed at myself for letting him walk away, but seeing how he was living just made the guilt eat at me even more. “Come on,” I said, forcing myself to walk up to the house.

The stairs were cracking, barely attached to the porch. I was careful where I stepped, nearly falling through a broken board. When I finally made it to the crooked screen door, I decided to knock on the frame instead of the splintered wood barely hanging from the hinges. The whole house would probably crumble around us if the door fell off.

At first, I didn’t think he was going to answer. I stood there, disappointed that I wouldn’t get to see him. Hell, I’d camp out in his yard and wait for him to come home. But just as I was about to turn and leave, the front door opened and a very disheveled Asher appeared, leaning against the doorframe, staring at me through the crusty screen door.

“You look like shit,” Patrick scoffed.

Asher didn’t say a word. He stared at us, not moving, as if we weren’t actually there. The deep bags under his eyes showed how little he was sleeping.

“Can we come in?”

His eyes flicked to mine, cold and lifeless. Not at all the man I once knew. He stepped back, shoving at the screen door just enough to push it open a quarter inch before he walked away.

Patrick quirked an eyebrow, catching the door before it closed. "I guess that's our invitation inside."

I sighed heavily, knowing our work was cut out for us. I followed him inside, shaking my head in disgust at what I saw. There was a giant hole in the floor that Asher walked around before flopping down on the couch. His once white wife beater was stained, looking more gray than anything. But at least he was wearing pants. That was always a positive sign.

However, the state of his house said something different. Take-out containers littered the living area, and whiskey bottles were scattered on the various side tables. The built-in bookshelf that housed no books had bottles tipped over on multiple shelves.

"I like what you've done with the place," I finally said.

"Why are you here?" he asked, not bothering to look at either of us.

"We heard you got a new place," Patrick answered in his usual sarcastic way. "Thought we'd see how you've decorated."

If Patrick was hoping to get a reaction out of Asher, he was sorely mistaken. Asher ran a hand through his greasy hair that had grown at least a few inches since we last saw him. But that was the least of my worries. He had clearly stopped doing any kind of workouts. His muscle mass had decreased significantly, leaving a less-than-defined body. He wasn't just eating crap; he was withering away from the man he used to be.

"You want to go out to lunch?" I asked, hoping to draw him out of this depressing place.

He sighed heavily, leaning his head back on the couch. "What do you want?" he asked again.

"Asher, you disappeared. You had to know we'd come looking for you."

"Well, you found me. You can leave now."

His eyes slipped closed, almost like it was just too fucking difficult to keep them open. I couldn't blame him for feeling like shit. Jade was gone, and that responsibility rested on all our shoulders. But she was his wife, and how she ended it all...no man could come back from that easily.

“Asher—”

“Don't,” he growled.

“You're fucking wasting away here. I'm not asking you to come back with us, but at least let us take you to lunch.”

“Or to a barber,” Patrick piped up, earning a glare from me.

“What? He needs a shave and haircut. Maybe a shower. It fucking stinks in here.”

That wasn't what I had in mind when I said we needed to check on him. And joking around was the last thing on his mind.

“Look, I appreciate you guys coming out here, but it was unnecessary.” He didn't even open his eyes. It was like all life had seeped out of his body. This shell of a man, laying on the couch like it was just too much trouble to move, was not someone I recognized.

“Asher—”

His eyes flew open and he was on his feet the next instant, staring at me with murder in his eyes. “I don't fucking want you here!” he shouted. “What part of that don't you understand?”

I stood to his height and refused to back down. “I understand it all perfectly. I was there that day. I know what you're going through.”

“You know—” He burst out laughing, covering his mouth as he turned from me. “You know what I'm going through?” He looked back at me, but his eyes showed no traces of humor. “You know what it's like to see your wife...” His jaw hardened as I watched him fight back the tears threatening to spill down his cheeks, “—drive straight at a fucking tree, and

there's nothing you can do about it." The tears slowly seeped from the corner of his eyes and he swiped angrily at them. "You know what it's like to find her body broken, laying on the ground...and there's not a fucking thing you can do to save her?"

He lifted a shaky hand to his mouth, almost as if he was trying to hold in a sob. I watched my friend break in front of me. With every moment that passed, he lost a little piece of himself. The steady man who was always so unflinching was falling apart, his whole body shaking as if he had no control.

Slowly, I walked over, placing my hand on his shoulder. My own emotions had been on a tight leash since that horrible day. I couldn't even imagine what he was going through.

"Asher—" It came out as a whisper. I didn't know what to say, how to get through to him that we were here for him. "You don't have to do this alone."

He sucked back the tears, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes. "There's nothing left for me back there. I can't—"

He swallowed hard, telling me all I needed to know. "I know. But that doesn't mean you can't count on us."

He nodded slightly, but I knew he was just trying to placate me. "I appreciate you coming out."

"Maybe—"

"You should go," he said, stepping away from me. He glanced at Patrick, trying his best to shoot him a lopsided grin. "Don't you have somewhere better to be? Maybe some ladies to chase?"

"No ladies to chase," Patrick smiled.

"That's a shame." Asher took a deep breath, then walked around the gaping hole in the floor and pushed open the screen door, waiting for us to make our exit. "You guys should leave now if you want to get home."

"We packed bags," I said, trying to get him to listen.

"I don't have any room. As you can see, the house is a bit of a mess. Maybe next time."

“Asher—”

He shook his head. “Don’t make me fucking kick you out of my house.”

“You already are,” Patrick muttered.

“I don’t need your help. Just leave.”

I wanted to argue with him, but it was clear he wouldn’t allow us to stay. I nodded to Patrick, and we walked out onto the porch. I turned to say goodbye, but Asher slammed the door in our faces before I could say another word.

“That wasn’t exactly the reception I thought we’d get,” Patrick sighed. “He didn’t even offer us a cold beverage.”

I rolled my eyes and walked off the porch back to the car. “We’re not going far,” I said, ignoring his incredulous look. “We’ll be back tomorrow.”

He scowled as he dropped into the seat. “Fine, but if I don’t get a cold drink, I’m outta here.”

ADAM

Compass Security

Texas

I slapped the folder down on the table and watched as the contents spread across the glass top. Marks and Wally were my best guys—the only ones I trusted to take this job with me. We weren't exactly what you would call the good guys. We did what was necessary to get the job done, no matter the cost.

I leaned on the table, staring at both of them. "This is the target. He's well-surrounded by security and pretty damn capable."

Marks picked up the photo, studying the man in the picture. He didn't even bother to ask why. "When do we move out?"

"Tonight," I grunted. "Right here," I pointed at the location on the map, "is our first strike point. To get inside, we'll need prints and visual I.D."

"So, snatch and grab," Wally nodded.

"Exactly. From there, Wally will set the explosives and light it up. With the distraction, we'll move along the perimeter and slip in through the front. Marks, you'll enter the premises first and I'll cover you from the outside."

Marks nodded, rubbing his hand across his jaw. "And the objective?"

I slapped another photo down on the table, this time, a female. “We take her. This guy won’t make a move as long as she’s in our possession.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I’ve been watching him for a while now. I’m positive.”

“And everyone else?” Wally asked.

“Expendable. Take out anyone that gets in our way.”

“I’ll load up,” Marks said, shoving his chair back.

“Bring the usual,” I said, jerking my chin at him.

He nodded and left the room, followed quickly by Wally. I walked over to my desk and sat down in the seat, twirling the pen that sat on my desk. My business name was emblazoned on it, signaling I had finally made a name for myself. The world tried to chew me up and spit me out, but I retaliated, fighting with everything I had to get to where I was.

I picked up the phone as it rang, wishing I had finally hired that receptionist the guys had been bugging me about. “Compass Security.”

The heavy breathing on the other end immediately clued me in as to who I was dealing with. I didn’t have to ask any questions. I already knew what was needed.

I hung up without another word and sent a text immediately to Xavier. He had handled these situations in the past and knew exactly what to do. His response was swift, as expected. With that out of my mind, I switched gears, bringing up the pictures of the woman I would meet in just twenty-four hours. Taking her out of the equation was critical for this to work.

And it needed to work.

I’d been waiting my whole fucking life for this opportunity—waiting, planning, busting my ass to make it where I was now, all so I could take down this fucker. I would not fail.

I closed my eyes and let the day my world ended play on a reel in my head. I would never forget the sand biting at my

skin or the look in my father's eyes when he told me to hide. At that moment, I was sure he knew how it all would end.

I barely heard the sound of the gunshot over the wind that ripped through the air of the war-torn building we were hiding in. My father's eyes hadn't met mine once in three days. He couldn't take his eyes off the sniper in the opposite building. Looking away for even a short moment could cost him his life.

He was used to doing this, but I was bored. I knew how dangerous it was, which was why I didn't stay at home. I wanted to see what this was like, to understand why my father was gone for days at a time. But seeing it was not as wonderful as I imagined. My body hurt from spending too much time in one position. And the longer I sat here, the more I couldn't take it.

The silence. The waiting. The slow movement of time.

I hated every second of it. What was it all for?

I shifted slightly, drawing my father's attention. For just one second he looked my way. Our eyes locked and I knew I was in trouble. I cowered in my hiding spot, knowing I would pay the price when this was over.

But that one second of distraction was the moment that changed my life forever. I watched as my father's body jerked back, then slumped to the side. My heart thundered in my chest as I waited for him to move. But one minute passed, and then another, and still, there was no movement.

Tears filled my eyes, but I refused to let them spill over, to acknowledge that my actions may have gotten my father killed. He couldn't be dead. He was acting. He had to be. And when we got home, he would beat me with a stick to reprimand me for not listening.

But he never moved.

Time stood still as the sand whipped around us. I knew I should move, should get out of there, but I couldn't force my legs to do a damn thing. When just moments ago I couldn't handle sitting still a minute longer, now I was paralyzed, unable to leave the only family I had in my life.

I froze at the soft sound of footsteps on the stairs. I shouldn't have been able to hear them, but over the past few days, my senses changed and I heard every sound other than the wind tearing through this small space. I froze, knowing he wouldn't see me as long as I didn't move.

I would never forget his face, how his eyes stared at my father—at his kill. I itched to jump out and grab my father's gun, to place a bullet in this man's head, but fear gripped me in place, refusing to release its hold on me. I was forced to sit back and watch as my father's killer took his weapon and ejected the round in his rifle, taking it for himself.

And when he walked away, I knew in my gut I would never be free of this moment until I took that man down.

CASH

“It’s too early to be out,” Eva grumbled beside me.

She hadn’t slept more than three hours last night. I knew because I was awake with her the whole time as our demon child cried every time he was put down.

“Thank God we got this early appointment,” I said, swiping a hand over my face. I was fucking exhausted, and with Zoe’s screenplay being filmed this week, I finally had a chance to catch up on things. Except, I was too fucking tired to do anything.

“Can you stop for coffee?”

I rolled my eyes internally. Every fucking time I went into town, she wanted her frou frou coffee from the local coffee shop. And like the whipped husband I was, I got her the coffee. It didn’t matter that we had a coffeemaker at home or that Fox had picked out a fifteen hundred dollar machine for the break room that did the same fucking thing as the barista in the coffee shop. No, we still had to get the stuff from the local bean.

“Sure,” I said, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

It didn’t work.

She turned to me, narrowing her eyes at me. “And what does that mean?”

“It means sure,” I answered, not wanting to get into this with her again. I tightened my fist on the steering wheel to

calm the irrational rage about first having to get the coffee, and then having an argument about the response I gave.

“Yes, but you didn’t say *sure* like you were fulfilling my request. That was a *sure* with so many other meanings.”

I rolled my eyes—externally this time—and she fucking saw it.

“Oh, and now you’re rolling your eyes at me?”

“I rolled my eyes because this is the stupidest fucking argument we’ve ever had.”

“I really don’t think it’s that hard for you to just answer politely instead of acting like I’m asking you to tear off your arm for me.”

“Tearing off my arm would be less painful than having this conversation,” I muttered under my breath.

“I like how you think I didn’t hear that.”

“Maybe I meant for you to hear it.”

“If you did, you would have said it louder,” she snapped.

Christ, this kid was turning us into raging lunatics. We were arguing about words and—shit, we were turning into Dash and FNG. Well, if FNG were still alive. If she started a debate with me over *clearly* and *obviously*, our marriage would never survive.

“Look, we were both up late with Benjamin. How about we table this argument and realize that we’re both overtired and need to cut each other some slack?”

She scoffed. “I was up late. You laid in bed.”

“I was up with him too,” I argued.

She turned to me, glaring daggers into my eyeballs. “I got up with him every time. You patted my hand and said, *Is he up again? I’ll get him this time*. And then you went back to sleep. Like you do every night.”

“I have to be at work!”

“And I understand that, but don’t act like you were up with him all night when I was the one that actually had to be awake and functioning to deal with our child that won’t fucking sleep!”

“But I was awake! It’s not like I just went to sleep and left you to deal with him.”

“Yeah, it’s worse than that. You were awake and left me to deal with him. Do you not see how that’s not better?”

I opened my mouth but realized she was right. Of course, I was a man and didn’t admit I was wrong if I could help it. Which is how I dug myself an even deeper hole. “If you had a job, I would stay up with him and share the responsibilities.”

It grew uncomfortably silent in the minivan as she digested that gem. Yeah, I really knew how to stick my foot in it. And I had a feeling we wouldn’t be letting go of this argument for a very long time.

“I’m sorry, I thought working in your office was a job. I guess I was mistaken.”

I let out a long-suffering sigh. There was no way to win this argument. I pulled into the drive-thru and rolled down my window. I could already tell the woman at the window was going to make my life a living hell.

“Good morning! It’s such a beautiful day. What can I get for you?”

Her chipper attitude nearly had me pulling out my gun and putting one in her head, but it was generally frowned upon to kill people for being happy. “Yes, can I have a latte?”

“Chai latte,” Eva corrected.

“Chai latte,” I told the woman.

“Super, and what size can I get you this morning?”

“Large. Very, very large.”

“Medium,” Eva snapped. “Do you know how many carbs are in a large?”

“Does it really matter once you’ve already ordered a latte? Isn’t it bad in general? How does ordering a little less help you in any way?”

“Um...it’s psychological,” she snapped. “It makes me feel like I’m not being as bad as I actually am.”

“Which defeats the purpose of eating healthy. If you want to take off the baby weight, stop ordering lattes from the coffee house!”

I puffed out my cheeks, knowing I just stepped in it big time. Even the chipper woman behind the window was at a loss for what to say.

“So, I need to lose weight?” Her voice was quiet, but that just meant the storm was coming. Yep, I was going to die on the way home.

Not knowing what to say, I turned to the woman. “And a large black coffee. In fact, give me three. I have a feeling I’m going to need them.”

“Right away, sir.”

Her chipper attitude gone; she closed the window, effectively shutting us out. I couldn’t blame her. I wanted to jump out of the minivan and run myself over a few times. I peeked over at Eva out of the corner of my eye. Yeah, she was pissed and now on the verge of crying. Well done. I had completely ruined the morning, and we’d barely gotten anything done other than getting in the van.

I cleared my throat, trying to find a good way to say *I’m sorry*. “You know I think you’re beautiful.”

Her head whipped around as her face twisted in disgust. “So, you *do* think I’m fat.”

“I said I think you’re beautiful,” I said, completely baffled as to how that translated in woman speak as *you’re fat*.

“I think you’re beautiful just the way you are,” she said mockingly. “Even if you do weigh two hundred and fifty pounds with a big pooch of a belly.”

And then I made the mistake of actually checking out her body. “There’s no way you’re actually two hundred and fifty pounds.”

“I wasn’t saying I was,” she cried. “I look two hundred and fifty pounds?” she screeched.

“No!” I said quickly. “I thought you seriously thought you weighed that much.”

“And then you looked at me!”

“Because I was trying to figure out where you thought two hundred and fifty pounds could possibly be located on your body!”

Fuck, I was sweating hard now. Who knew you could get such a workout just by having a conversation with your wife?

She swiped a hand under her nose and wiped it on her sweatpants. “I just...I feel so ugly.”

“Kitten, you’re so fucking beautiful. I’m sorry that I’m fucking everything up this morning, but I never meant to call you fat. You’re basically a stick with a belly. A very gorgeous belly that will go away in time. It’s part of having a baby, and I love that you have it. In fact, you could keep it the rest of your life and I would pat it lovingly every night.”

She swiped at her nose again, then looked at me like I was insane. “Please don’t ever do that.”

“I make no promises. I happen to love your body just as it is.”

She gave me a watery smile, and I thanked the Lord that I somehow managed to sidestep that landmine. I couldn’t handle any more hits this morning. I just needed to get through this checkup so I could get back to work.

“Here you go,” the woman said, returning to her overly enthusiastic demeanor. “I hope you have a magnificent day!”

“With any luck,” I muttered, handing Eva her drink. I placed mine in the cup holders, then gave the woman ten dollars. When she handed me the change, I stuffed it in my pocket. As I pulled away, Eva continued to stare at me.

“You didn’t tip them.”

“When I came here yesterday for your coffee, I accidentally tipped five dollars on a five-dollar drink. It’s not even a real chai!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I watched her make it. It’s a packet she dumps in hot water.”

Eva gasped, covering her mouth as she stared in shock. “Why would you tell me that?”

“Tell you what?”

“That it’s not real chai? How could you be so cruel?”

I didn’t know what was going on here. “It’s still good, isn’t it?”

“But it will never be the same! How can I possibly look at this beautiful cup of tea and think of it as anything other than tainted?”

“Tainted by what?”

“By powdered packets!”

Christ, there was no winning this morning. “I’m sorry. Forget I said anything.”

“How can I just forget?” Then she turned to her cup and started petting it like a dog. “Daddy didn’t mean that. You’re such a good cup of coffee.”

“Tea,” I muttered.

“He never meant to say you weren’t real.”

“Are you really talking to your tea?”

She snapped her head to face me. “Hey, back off, mister. I just found out my chai latte that I love so much is not what I thought it was. Excuse me for needing a moment to process this.”

I flicked the turn signal to head into the clinic. “Yep, it’s gonna be one of those days.”

I barely walked back into OPS when the chaos started.

“Boss, you’re late,” Dash said, rushing over to me.

“I had to take Benjamin for a checkup. What do you need?”

“We’re beginning filming today!”

I rolled my eyes at his loose terminology. We weren’t actually making a film. While I fully supported Zoe in her attempt to make a career for herself, this was a disruption to the schedule, even if I did desperately need the break it provided.

“Okay, and what’s your point?”

“Nobody’s here yet,” he snapped. “Why is it that no one can be on time for the important jobs? FNG would never have allowed this to happen.”

I started sorting through my mail, doing my best to ignore him. “FNG isn’t here, so make it work.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“About what?” I asked, looking up from the stack of bills.

He scoffed, shaking his head at me. “He’s dead, and that’s how you flippantly react?”

“You know, unlike the rest of you, I made peace with the fact that FNG was dead when we buried him. It’s not my fault the rest of you were in denial.”

“But it wasn’t his body. Rafe as good as told you that.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t change the fact that in my mind, he was already dead!”

“Wow, I hope I never die.”

“You will, and sadly, not soon enough.” I sat down and picked up the phone, dismissing him without another word. When he was finally out of my office, I called back the

insurance company. They left a message for me yesterday, but I was too busy to answer.

“Yes, I’m calling to speak with Sam.”

“Hold, please.” A moment later, he came on the line. “Sam, here.”

“Sam, it’s Cash over at OPS. You called.”

“Yes, I hope you’re doing well.”

Not at all. “Can’t complain.”

“Well, it seems we’re having a bit of difficulty with one of your policies.”

I frowned, trying to remember if a bill hadn’t been paid. Bree was handling that side of things, and I hadn’t gotten any memos about something being late. “Which policy?”

“Your aircraft. It seems...well, there’s no easy way to say this.”

“Then just say it.”

“We can’t continue to insure you. There have been too many planes that have crashed.”

“But...none of them were our fault.”

“One of your planes crashed in the middle of a cornfield.”

“It was shot down,” I answered immediately. “You have the paperwork.”

“Yes, and another crashed in Colorado.”

“The military classified it as a training exercise,” I explained.

“And the bird incident?”

“Exactly as it sounds. I know it’s crazy and extremely rare ___”

“Extremely.”

“But it’s the truth.”

“And most recently, you had to abandon an airplane in the Caribbean. When it was returned, it had been stripped for parts.”

I winced. When he said it like that, we did sound like we had a horrible track record. “But we were able to get that taken care of.”

“Look, Cash, you know I would work with you, but the guys upstairs don’t want to play ball.”

“You don’t have an upstairs,” I said, trying to throw him off his game.

“You know what I mean. This pilot of yours is a liability we can no longer afford.”

“We’re getting a new one,” I said without thinking. Shit, Scottie was going to have my head for this.

“A new pilot or a new plane?”

“A new pilot. He’s...very reputable,” I said, shuffling through the papers on my desk.

“And his name?”

Shit. I kept moving things around until I found what I was looking for. “Uh...hold on.” I pulled up the paper and prayed I could get this guy to work for us. He wasn’t the best option, but I had to give them something if I was going to keep us insured. “Max Huxley. He’s former military.”

“And he’s a licensed pilot?”

“Yes. I’ll get the paperwork over to you as soon as possible. We’re a little slammed today.”

“Cash, I need that paperwork before I can push anything through. If you don’t get it to me by the end of the week, the policy will lapse.”

“I understand. You’ll have it.”

I hung up and tried not to scream in frustration. Scottie would be pissed, not because he liked to fly, but because he wouldn’t want to be replaced by a drunkard. Hell, I couldn’t

have him flying like that. I would have to sober him up, and that was if I could even get his ass back here.

And then there was the issue that I had two teams down a man. And while Jason and Johnny didn't technically work for me the way the other teams did, they still hung around without work to do because they were missing one man. If I had a way to move things along for Jack, I might be able to get back to work.

I knew Rafe could get me answers, but after our blowup on the ship, I wasn't sure contacting him was a good idea. I still had a few contacts around the world, and I was pretty sure one of them could get me answers. But there was one guy in particular that would be most likely to help. Well, he would if he didn't hate me so fucking much. Still, I picked up the phone and called him.

"No," Jones answered as soon as he picked up.

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"It doesn't matter. I've lost two homes, Cash. Two!"

"And I paid you back for those."

"That's beside the point. I had a sanctuary for years that was off the grid. I fucking loved that place. And now it's blown up."

"Technically, you blew it up."

"To save your ass," he shot back. "And then I had to save your ass again."

"I wasn't even there," I argued.

"And it was all to save one of your guys. Whatever you want, I don't want to hear about it."

"But it's good."

"Bullshit. I'm done."

He hung up without another word, but I had a feeling that curiosity would get the better of him, so I waited patiently. After five minutes, he didn't call back. I started pacing the office, gripping Betty in my pocket. There were things I

needed to know, and I couldn't go about it the usual way. I needed someone who could get in and out without drawing much attention. And Jones was the man for the job. He had no real connections to anyone at OPS or Rafe. Aside from the two times he helped me, he was never really involved. I was damn sure he could slip in undetected.

Finally, after ten minutes, my phone rang. "Miss me?"

"What's the job?"

"I need you to get inside a prison."

He paused. "You want me to break in?"

"No, visit someone."

"That doesn't sound like a job."

"This man used to work for me. He's been in there too damn long, doing a job for Rafe."

"Fucking Rafe. It always comes down to him." He sighed heavily. "So, what do you want to know?"

"What his end goal is."

"He won't be able to say that with everyone watching."

"I'm sure you can get around that."

"Anything else?"

Yeah, there was a shit ton I needed. "Make sure he's okay."

"Who is this guy?"

"His name is Jack."

"And you said he's in for a job?"

"Yeah, but I thought for sure Rafe would have him out by now."

"Which prison?"

"Beaumont," I said, knowing he would immediately understand how dire this was.

He hissed in a breath. "Wow, Rafe doesn't fuck around."

“Jones, whatever’s going on, I need to know how to help him. Rafe is going off the deep end, and I don’t want this guy to rot in prison because Rafe forgot about him.”

After a moment, he finally gave me what I was hoping for.
“Yeah, I’ll do it. But you owe me.”

“Yeah, I know. A big fucking house in the middle of nowhere.”

“I’ll send you the address of the property I’m looking at.”

DUKE

I rolled over, ignoring the twinge in my thigh and slid between Rae's legs. I loved seeing her like this, barely awake and vulnerable first thing in the morning. It wasn't often she let her guard down, so I treasured these moments.

With my cock notched at her entrance, she spread her legs and smiled sleepily at me. "It's too early."

"It's never too early to have you," I mumbled, sliding my hand down to her hip and gently squeezing it. She hitched her leg behind me as I slid inside her, moaning at how amazing she felt. "Fuck, that's one hell of a way to wake up."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and grinned. "Happy to help any morning."

"Hmm," I hummed. "It won't last forever." I slid my tongue along her neck, then swallowed her ear lobe in a sloppy kiss.

"Why wouldn't it be forever?" she giggled.

I loved hitting that one spot that made her laugh. She was ticklish but didn't let on to just anyone. I was fucking special like that. Her laughs were reserved for me.

"It's not like we can stay in bed and fuck every morning when we have kids."

Her giggles immediately died and her eyes flew open. She quickly unraveled her arms from around my neck and pushed at my chest. "What the fuck?"

I flinched back in shock. "What?"

She pressed harder at my chest until I relented and moved away, my cock slipping from her heat, instantly missing her. She sat up, scooting away from me. “Is that your idea of foreplay?”

What the fuck was she talking about? “Um...”

“You don’t start talking about kids during sex! What the hell is wrong with you?”

I was confused now. “You don’t want to talk about kids?”

Her eyes went wide. “Uh...not when you’re inside me! And what makes you think I even want kids? Don’t you think that’s something you should talk to me about *after* we’re married?”

“Are we getting married?” I asked with a grin.

“I don’t know because you never bothered to ask. But I don’t know why the hell you’d jump from living together to having kids.”

She tossed off the covers and got out of bed. Her bare, toned legs led up to one fine ass that did nothing to calm my growing erection. With some women, when they got pissed, it was a turnoff. Not with Rae. Everything about her drove me crazy, to the point that I had to have her just to calm the inferno inside me.

“If you’re trying to make your point, you’re doing a terrible job of it,” I said, flipping the covers off my body and showing her exactly what she was doing to me.

She quirked an eyebrow like that would show me she was unaffected. But I knew her better than anyone. She was soaked right now, and if I could only get her back in bed, I’d get to feel that silk around my cock.

“Baby, I know you better than anyone. You can pretend to be upset. Now, do you want to walk away from what I have for you this morning all because you don’t like what I said in bed, or do you want to come ride my cock and start your day off with a bang?”

I grinned, sure I had her right where I wanted her. But instead of her sauntering her fine ass back over to me, she turned and walked into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

I frowned, unsure of where to go from here. I slid out of bed and nearly fell when my leg gave out. Catching myself on the nightstand, I swore under my breath and waited for the circulation to improve. I was getting fucking tired of dealing with this shit. I hobbled over to the bathroom door and turned the handle, but she had fucking locked it.

“Rae!”

The shower turned on, not that she couldn’t hear over the sound of water falling. That woman had ears like a fucking bat. I banged on the door with my fist, but she ignored me, choosing to sing at the top of her lungs.

The door to my bedroom swung open and Bowie stormed inside. “What the fuck is that awful—oh God! Man, put on some fucking pants!” he shouted, covering his eyes with his hand.

“It’s my bedroom.”

“It’s a communal house!”

“It’s actually not. It’s my house, and you still live here for some reason.”

He looked ridiculous, talking behind his hand, so I grabbed a pair of pants and sat down to slip into them.

“I moved in to help you.”

“You moved in because it was free. Then you never moved out,” I said, standing and zipping my pants. “You can remove your hand now.”

He spread two fingers, peeking out from behind them to make sure I was telling the truth. “You could warn a guy before you stand in the buff.”

“You could knock,” I suggested. I grabbed a shirt and followed him into the living room, pulling it over my head. I winced at the twinge in my leg.

“Leg bothering you?” he asked.

I sat down on the couch and started massaging my upper thigh, trying to get the circulation moving faster. “It’s not a big deal.”

“That’s what you always say,” he grumbled, grabbing a mug from the cabinet. “Coffee?”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

“So, what’s with the horrible noise coming from your room? That wasn’t fucking.”

“That was Rae singing to drown out the sound of me trying to talk to her.”

“About what?”

I sighed, rubbing a hand over my face. “I said something about not being able to screw in the morning for much longer.”

He grunted. “You planning on going somewhere?”

“No, I meant because we’ll have kids.”

He nearly choked on his coffee, then stared at me like an idiot. “I’m sorry, did you just say you brought up kids during sex?”

“That’s what she said.”

He shook his head. “That wasn’t a joke.”

“No, I mean, that’s the same thing she said. Apparently, you’re not allowed to talk about things like that during sex.”

“Uh...yeah. Everyone knows that.”

“Why? Rae is going to be my wife. Why are there topics that are off limits?”

“Because it’s sex,” he said emphatically. “You can’t mix the two. There is no discussing babies when you’re balls deep inside her! Do you really think she wants to think about diapers and breastfeeding and...pushing a baby out of her vagina while she’s fucking you?”

For once, I was struck dumb. I hadn’t considered it like that. “I just assumed it was this romantic thing. You know,

discussing the future and everything.”

“Discuss it outside the bedroom. There should never be talk of babies in there,” he pointed at my room. “And while we’re discussing this, we should figure out just where the fuck you’re going to live if you do have kids, cuz it sure as fuck isn’t going to be with me.”

He drank his coffee and stared at me.

“Well, since my name is on the mortgage, and I lived here before you, I assumed I would stay here.”

“Not at OPS? Do you have any idea how fucking dangerous that is?”

“Are we talking about something other than having kids?” I asked, not sure where this was headed. “Since when is having kids in a house dangerous?”

He scoffed at that, plopping down in the seat beside me. “It’s like you don’t know a goddamn thing. Alright, let me lay this out for you. Rae works for OPS. OPS gets into dangerous shit. Shit tends to follow you home. Home is where your kids are. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“Yeah, you like to end a sentence with one word and start the next sentence with the same fucking word.”

He rolled his eyes, but yeah, I got what he was saying.

“There’s no room at OPS for us. She moved here for a reason.”

“They’re building like crazy over there. Just ask them to build another house.”

“I love it how you say that like it’s no big deal. People save up for years to be able to afford a house, and you just want me to build another one.”

“Like you can’t afford it. I know they pay you good money to keep their secrets. And let’s not pretend that moving onto the property hasn’t greatly increased your revenue.”

I couldn’t deny that. “I like this house,” I argued.

“Then get real fucking used to jacking off in your hand because there is no way you’re gonna stick a baby in that woman as long as you’re here.”

SINNER

“Lollipop, we have to hurry,” I groaned as she sank to her knees.

She swirled her tongue around the head of my cock, grinning up at me like the devil she was. Holy crap, I couldn't get enough of her. I still remembered the way she looked that day in the diner. Those gorgeous eyes stared up at me, swimming with insecurity, but she was fierce as hell. I thanked God every fucking day that she came into my life. She thought I saved her, but the truth was, she saved my life. I wouldn't be the man I was today without her. She stuck with me through the worst time in my life, fighting for me when I didn't know I had anything left in me to give.

My phone rang just as I was about to blow inside her. I ignored it, trying my best not to lose this moment with her. But when my phone went off a second time, I knew it was over.

She didn't even have to ask. This had happened too many times before. It was like Cap had some kind of sixth sense about this shit. I pulled up my pants and grabbed the phone, answering without pleasantries.

“You know, I was getting the best head of my life, and you interrupted me.”

“Sinner?”

The female voice on the other end had me pausing. This wasn't good. I hadn't spoken to Vira in years, and that was because of what happened between us when I was on a break from Cara. I couldn't blame Cara for not wanting me to speak

to Vira, though she never asked. It was just one of those unspoken rules you didn't break, like you don't shit where you eat.

I glanced at Cara, instantly running my hand over the back of my neck as nerves shot through me. "Uh...hey," I laughed, wincing at the pissed-off look on Cara's face. Shit, I was in trouble.

"Is this a bad time?"

Hell, it was always a bad time when a woman you tried and failed to fuck called while you were in the middle of fucking your wife. But if she was calling, it had to be for a damn good reason. Still, there was no easy way to go about this.

"Um..."

Cara got off her knees and stormed out of the room. Yep, I wasn't getting head for a very long time.

"I wouldn't have called, but I don't know what else to do."

"What's going on, Vira?"

"It's my father. He's—"

She was cut off suddenly or the line went dead. "Vira." She didn't respond. "Vira! Shit." I hung up and dialed Cap's number, not waiting for him to drone on about me calling early. "I'm headed to California. Someone's after Vira."

I stormed around the room, pulling out what I needed for the trip. This was the last thing I needed, but I wouldn't leave a friend to fend for herself, not when I heard the quaking in her voice. I knew all too well that Vira wouldn't have called if there wasn't something really bad going on.

"Who are you taking with you?"

I hadn't even thought about it. The only thing on my mind was leaving as fast as possible.

"I'll call Cazzo and Burg, then get you a private jet. Just get your ass out there," Cap ordered.

I hung up without another word and strapped on my holster just as Cara walked into the room.

“You’re going to her?”

I turned to her, knowing this was going to be a problem. But what other choice did I have? I wouldn’t be the man she loved if I turned someone away that was in trouble. “Lollipop, something’s wrong. You know I would never go back to her.”

She chewed her lip as she watched me continue to get ready. “I just don’t like you being around her. She’s the devil.”

I smirked at her. “She’s not that bad. You just don’t like her because of her relationship with your brother.”

She poked me in the chest with her fingernail. “And the fact that you fucked her.”

I rolled my eyes at the exaggeration. “I hardly think you could call it that. I couldn’t even get it up for her, and all I wanted was you the whole time.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Well, that and my adorable face that you can’t get enough of.”

She smiled and ran her hand along my jaw. “You’re getting gray.”

That instantly made me frown. “I am not. Take it back.”

“It’s the truth. But I like it. Men always look better as they age.”

I hauled her up against my body, holding her close to me. “And yet you don’t look any older than the day you passed out in my arms.”

“Okay, charmer—”

I caught her lips in mine and kissed her hard. “I swear, I will be back and one hundred percent yours. You know my heart is only for you.”

Her smile dropped. “You scare me when you say things like that.”

“Why?”

“It’s like you’re preparing for the worst. Just say that you’ll be home to fuck me hard in no time.”

I leaned in closer and bit her ear. “Just imagine all the sinful things I’m going to do to your body when I’m home. And I want a do-over on that blow job.”

Her breath hitched before she locked her lips over mine one final time. I wasn’t stupid enough to think she was imagining what I would do to her when I returned. She was on the verge of tears, and I fucking hated that, but she was strong, and I knew she could get through anything.

“Stay out of trouble.”

I grabbed my bag and headed out to my truck, picking up the phone as soon as I hit the road. “Sean, I got a call from Vira. She’s in trouble.”

“Mark—”

“I’m not calling to ask for help. Just keep an eye on Cara for me.”

“You know I will.”

I swallowed hard, hating what I was about to say. “Something feels different about this. Promise me if anything happens you’ll take care of them.”

Silence greeted me for a good ten seconds. “You know I will.”

“Thank you.”

“But you better come home, because there is no fucking way I’m watching her spiral out of control again. Keep that in mind while you’re away.”

“Always.”

“I’m fucking serious, Mark. After everything she’s been through, despite the fact that I really fucking hate you

sometimes, my sister needs you. Don't disappoint her."

"I won't."

I hung up and got out of my truck with my bag in hand. Cazzo and Burg were just pulling up. Whatever this was about, I really fucking hoped I didn't disappoint Sean.

VIRA

The phone was snatched out of my hand and I was shoved up against the wall. I cried out as my forehead connected with drywall, but I never gave in. I slammed my elbow back into my attacker's stomach, then spun and kicked him in the chest, sending him flying backward. He tripped and fell on his ass, giving me just enough time to make a run for it. I could grab my gun, but the chances of getting to it before he got to me were slim.

I veered into the kitchen and grabbed the first thing I saw—a pan I had just cleaned and left on the stovetop. I turned, gasping when I saw the man charging at me. I swung with all my might, clipping him on the head. It dazed him, but didn't stop him from coming at me. I swung again, this time connecting with his big melon. He stumbled back but still didn't go down. This pan wasn't going to cut it. I turned and grabbed the hefty wine bottle that sat on my counter. I had been planning to drink this tonight, and as sad as it was to depart with it in such a way, who else could say that wine saved them?

Before he could recover, I charged and swung hard, cracking the bottle over his head. He dropped again, but it wasn't the wine that took him out. He hit his head on the corner of the island on the way down, finally passing out on the ground. I shoved my toe into his body, only satisfied he was really out when he didn't move.

As much as I wanted to wait for Sinner, it was no longer safe here. If this guy found me, others could as well. And there

might be more men waiting for me downstairs. I glanced around the apartment I once shared with Sinner and considered leaving him a note, but that could lead anyone in my direction. I would just have to hope he found me.

Without thinking twice, I ran into my bedroom and grabbed the gun I kept in my nightstand. When I first moved out here, Sinner took me shooting to make sure I could protect myself. I had a feeling I'd need to tonight. I slipped on my tennis shoes, something I hardly ever wore, and grabbed my wallet, stuffing it in my back pocket. Cute purses and high-heeled shoes wouldn't get me through tonight.

I snatched the keys off the counter, though I doubted they would be of any use if I ever came back here. Whatever was going on with my father, I didn't want to stick around to hear the details as someone slit my throat. I quietly opened the door and peeked into the hallway. It was quiet, but that was to be expected at five in the morning. Sinner was three hours ahead of me, so at least I shouldn't have woken him up. Although, I highly doubted Cara would be happy I was calling.

Slipping my hood over my head, I walked down the hall, keeping my head down as I did my best not to run to the stairwell. I bypassed the elevators, not wanting to be stuck in them if someone was waiting for me.

As soon as I shoved open the door, I breathed a sigh of relief that I made it that far. But that easy feeling was quickly cut short when I heard the voices down below.

"Third floor," the man said quietly. "Boss said to grab her quietly."

I didn't stick around to hear more. The panic swarming through me drowned the voices out anyway. I pushed back against the wall and quickly ran up the stairs, staying on my toes to keep the noise down as much as possible. I would have to get to the roof and climb down the fire escape. By the time I hit the fifth floor, I was already out of breath. But I pushed on, getting to the roof just a minute later.

My harsh breaths sounded like a freight train in my ears, which only ramped up the panic growing inside me. If they

heard me, there would be no escape. I pushed at the door, nearly crying out when it didn't budge. I quickly looked over my shoulder as tears pricked my eyes. They weren't there.

I shoved once again, but still nothing happened. I spun around, pressing my back to the door as I tried to fight the fear long enough to figure out what to do. I pressed a hand to my mouth, muffling the keening noise flowing from my lips.

"Think, think, think!" I muttered, looking around the room. There was nothing to help me. I needed another way out.

I crept back to the stairwell and leaned over the railing just enough to see if anyone was there. It was clear. They had to be in my apartment, which meant I didn't have long. Pushing back into the hall, I spotted the window at the end of the hall with the emergency exit sign hanging above.

I ran down the hall at full speed, then unlocked the window and used all my strength to push the massive thing open. With no time to spare, I swung my leg over the window ledge and found my footing on the railing outside.

"You can do this," I repeated to myself as I started the climb down. But one look down was all it took for me to cling to the rung for dear life. My knuckles turned white the longer I stayed there, praying that Sinner would magically appear and save my life. "That's not going to happen. No man is going to save you. You have to save yourself," I reminded my body as it quaked with fear.

After that little pep talk, I quickly finished the climb down, jumping the last few feet. My whole body was shaking from the experience, but I knew I couldn't sit around and give myself time to get over it. I took off down the street, sticking to the shadows as much as possible. I just had to make it to OPS. I met a few of the guys there. They helped me when I first moved here. Red was the most helpful after Sinner went back to Pennsylvania, but I wasn't sure he would even remember me after all these years. I had distanced myself from everyone, sure that I could do this on my own. And I had up until three days ago when my whole world changed.

It took forty-five minutes to get to the building, but what I found left me in shock. It used to be lit up at all hours. There was always someone working, but now, the place was dark. I ran to the door, pulling hard on it, but it didn't budge.

"Oh God," I whispered, taking a step back. I looked up at the sign again, making sure I had the right place. I did, but maybe they shut down. Maybe they didn't work here anymore. And if they moved, how would Sinner find me?

I turned and pressed my back to the building, my breath hitching in my throat. What was I going to do now? I was all alone, and with my luck, I would die that way.

RAE

“I want a family,” I said in a low voice, mocking Duke. I snorted as I shook my head. “Who the hell does he think he is?”

Like I was really going to have a baby right now. That was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard. I wasn’t the baby type. It wasn’t that I was totally opposed to it, but I loved my job. I liked having the ability to go on long runs and work out at the gym. And how would I go on jobs if I was pregnant? No person in their right mind would want a pregnant woman protecting them.

But I could also see how much Duke wanted a baby. It nearly killed him when he found out his son wasn’t actually his. And when that child was kidnapped, he blamed himself for not doing more when Carolyn left. For a brief time, he was a father. And then it was all snatched away.

I knew this day would come, that he would ask me to have a family with him. I just didn’t know I would get so angry at the thought of giving up my job to have a child. I knew I didn’t have to totally give it up, but at the same time, I wasn’t sure I would ever be able to fully focus on the job if I had a child waiting at home for me.

And would one baby be enough? Once I had that cute bundle of joy in my arms, the inevitable second child would follow, and I would fall in love with him just as much. Or her.

I smiled to myself as I thought about a little mini me running around. She wouldn’t be prissy like other small girls.

No, I'd teach her to be just like me. I could already imagine Duke trying to deal with two of me. She'd be hell on wheels. Of course, I would be just as screwed if I had a son. A little Duke running around, fixing cars like his dad...he'd probably have Duke's devastating good looks and beautiful smile.

"What are you doing?" I asked myself. "Stop imagining how your kids would look. You're not having a baby!" I shoved the truck door open and got out, slamming it shut. "At least, not until Duke stops complaining about his leg," I muttered under my breath.

That was another problem I had. Duke was having phantom pains in his leg, and he was letting it rule him. I knew it was hard for him, but I could no longer sit back and watch as he rubbed his leg, acting like he was never going to be the same. He was. He just needed a kick in the ass. I just wasn't sure how to provide that yet.

I shoved the door open to the OPS building and strode over to the elevator, bypassing Cash's office. I pressed the button, hoping I could get down there before Cash got his ass out of his chair, but sadly, that was not my luck today.

He came running around the corner with that look on his face, the one that said he had a job for me and I wasn't going to like it.

"No," I said, not bothering to face him.

"You didn't even hear what I had to say."

"I don't need to. Your face says it all, and I'm not in the mood."

"But I need you on this one."

"You always need me." The bell dinged and the doors opened. I stepped inside and pressed the button, hoping that would be the end of it, but he joined me, shoving his hands in his pockets as he smirked at me.

After many tense moments of him staring at me, I heaved a sigh and turned to him. "What?"

“Nothing,” he grinned. “It’s fine. I’m sure you’ll be much happier staying here with Fox.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared at him. “Why? What does this have to do with him?”

“Oh, you know how it is when you have a job to do that you know Fox will love.”

I rolled my eyes, already dreading what he was about to say. “And Fox will be doing what?” I asked, getting off the elevator. I headed to the IT room as he trailed behind me.

“Helping Zoe out with her new screenplay.”

I blew out a harsh breath. I really didn’t want to be around for that, but I had no clue what this other job was either. It could be even worse, for all I knew. I spun around as soon as we were in the room and locked us inside. “Tell me first.”

“You’re gonna like this one.”

“I highly doubt it. If I liked the job, you would have just given it to me.”

“It requires your expertise.”

“In computers?”

“As a woman.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Where am I going?”

“To the Caribbean.”

“Ha!” I barked out. “To the very place where half our guys almost died?”

“Died is putting it a little...”

“Mildly?”

“Scottie won’t be flying.”

“Then how am I supposed to get down there?”

“Commercial airliner. Then you’ll have to take a few boats to your destination.”

I still didn’t trust what he was saying. I was missing something. “Why am I going?”

“To retrieve an asset.”

“Female?”

“No.”

“Military?”

“Ex.”

“For the company?”

He cocked his head to the side. “That depends if he can get sober.”

I knew exactly who he was talking about, and I wasn't interested. “Sorry, Cash, but I'm not into flying with reckless egomaniacs that lay around an island drunk all the time.”

I turned to leave, but he grabbed me by the arm and sent me a pleading look. “I'll send Eva with you.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked curiously.

“She's worn out. She needs a break.”

“She's driving you crazy,” I corrected.

“That's what some would say.”

“What would you say?” I asked.

“I would say that she's my wife and I love her, and I would prefer she not want to use my nuts as a punching bag. Again,” he added, clearing his throat.

I managed to barely hold back the laugh that threatened to burst free. “And when did that happen?”

“Last night.”

“What did you do?”

“I said she looked tired.” He widened his eyes as he shook his head. “I guess that means something else when you're a new mother. But I have no idea what.”

“So, did you actually want this guy to work for us before? Or is this just a way to get Eva out of your hair?”

“I'm pretty sure that's a question I shouldn't answer.”

“I’ll do it, but I’m not taking Eva with me,” I said, walking over to my computer. “Learn to deal with her in a manner in which you don’t send her away. I’m going to have to do some research first. Write down his name and information.”

“Max.”

“Max what?”

“Huxley.”

“And he knows I’m coming?” When he didn’t answer, I glanced up at him. “Cash?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then how do you know he even wants the job?”

He rubbed his hand along the back of his neck, a sure sign he wasn’t telling me everything.

“Cash, what aren’t you telling me?”

“He sort of tagged along for a ride, and since he wasn’t part of the job, I sent him back with Scottie and forgot about him.”

“Jesus, Cash! How do you even know he’s someone we want around here?”

“That’s what you’re here for. You know what I like.”

“And you think a drunkard will be a good fit?”

“He flies.”

“He also crashed the plane everyone was in.”

“It was an old plane,” he said as an excuse.

“And he was drunk while flying it!”

He ran a hand across his jaw. Cash tended to fidget when things got really intense and he didn’t see a way out. He definitely didn’t need to hire anyone else, so why was he acting like this was a done deal that he was about to puke over?

“Look, the insurance company...they’re not exactly thrilled with the number of insurance claims on the aircraft...”

“So, you need someone to replace Scottie,” I surmised.

“And I’m not ready to replace anyone on the teams. So, I figured this guy would probably be okay with just flying everyone around. End of story.”

“And you think Scottie’s going to be okay with that?”

He shrugged. “He doesn’t like to fly anyway.”

“Yeah, but the minute you tell him you’re replacing him with this guy, I can guarantee he’s going to have a problem with it.”

“Look, this is the job. Go down there, break him out of jail, and get his ass back here.”

I barked out a laugh. “Oh, so now I also have to break him out of jail?”

“Why do you think I said I need your skills? Dicks aren’t going to get the job done.”

I smirked at him. “Well, I’m glad to use my boobs to get the job done any time you need them.”

“Thank you,” he said, releasing a huge breath.

“On one condition.”

He groaned, tossing his head back. “I knew there would be a stipulation.”

“Duke comes with me. He’s been sitting on his ass too long. It’s about time he gets up and moving again with some real action.”

“Duke doesn’t want to see real action,” he said in confusion.

“He also wants to start a family. Let’s just say I’m hoping to scare the shit out of him on the trip.”

“Well...I guess do whatever you have to do.”

“Oh, I will. And Cash?” I said as he turned for the door. “Thanks for the job.”

TATE

I pulled up to the OPS building and shifted into park. Resting back, I stared at the building and wondered what the fuck I was actually getting myself into. I had a good job out west. I never should have been in the middle of fucking Kansas, but I lost my job helping out Fox. I didn't regret it for an instant, but everything I had built was washed away in a single night.

I was lucky to have a guy like Fox on my side. He would never leave me hanging, and he hadn't. His boss helped me get the job in town, but once again, Fox called and I ran to his aid at the cost of my job. Now here I was, sitting outside the OPS building with only one option.

I shoved the door open, but then yanked it shut, slamming my fist into the steering wheel. "This cannot be happening!" I shouted.

I took a deep breath, convinced that this time I could do it. I could join Fox and his crazy misfit band of protection agents. It would be no big deal. So what if I was leaving the job I loved behind? It was just a job. Just like this was.

I shoved the door open again, but even as I put a foot on the ground, my stomach churned. I slid back in and slammed the door again, yelling at the top of my lungs. Only the banging on the window startled me out of my misery.

I jerked at the sound, only to stare at the crazy fucker that caused all this. He was grinning from ear to ear, waving at me like a lunatic. This was probably for the best. If he dragged my

ass inside, at least I could say I didn't go willingly. He pulled the door open and practically hauled me out.

"Tate!" he said in a low voice, almost like he was cheering me on. "Man, I knew this day would come. It's gonna be just like old times!"

That's what I was afraid of. I got reckless when I was with Fox. I did things I regretted later, if only because I felt it went against some code that I should be upholding. Fox had a way of pulling the darkness out of me, morphing me into a version of him.

And that was a dangerous way to live life.

"Man, I am so stoked you're here!" He grabbed me in a bear hug, lifting me off the ground.

I patted him on the back, wincing at how tight he was holding me. "Yeah, it's great." He started bouncing me in the air until I shoved at his shoulders and he set me down. "Does anyone say stoked anymore?" I asked once my feet were on the ground.

"Well...I say it all the time."

"That doesn't mean you should," I grumbled as I headed for the door.

"The team is back together! I mean, aside from Cole and Bernie. And Willis, but he's in the ground, so...I guess he can't join us."

"I talked to his wife the other day."

"Yeah? How's she doing?"

"She told me to fuck off and hung up on me."

He frowned, staring at the ground. "Maybe I should pay her a visit."

I winced at the thought. "I'm pretty sure that's the last thing she would want."

"Why? I'm a likable guy. I have a way of bringing out things in people."

“Yeah, a need to murder you,” I muttered under my breath.

He pulled the door open and stepped aside like I was a special guest. Just walking into this place gave me hives. Not because I didn’t like it here, but because it represented me taking a step I never thought I would.

Working with Fox again.

Cash walked out of his office, smirking at me when he saw how excited Fox was. “Fox, they need you on set.”

“Oh, sweet!” He slapped me on the back and started for the elevators. “I’ll catch you later! You, me, and the best shawarma you’ve ever tasted!”

He left a wake of silence as the elevator doors closed, and for just a moment, I could pretend that I wasn’t working with him again.

“So...I can see you’re thrilled to be here,” Cash laughed.

“Look, I don’t want to sound ungrateful—”

Cash waved me off. “I get it. Don’t worry, I won’t stick you with Fox unless I have to. Besides, he’s not actually supposed to go out on jobs.” He turned and started for his office, so I followed. “I was thinking of sticking you on one of my teams that just recently lost someone.”

“Lost as in dead?” I asked, taking a seat across from him.

“No.” His eyes dropped to the desk as he waged his words. “He...lost his wife on a job.”

“Asher,” I said for clarification. I didn’t know the details, but I knew he walked away.

“Yeah. Actually, Patrick and Chase left a few days ago to check on him. I’m not sure when they’ll be back. So, until they do return, you can learn the ropes around here. He handed over a packet, nodding at me to open it. “You’ll find everything you’ll need to know about the bunker. The codes constantly change and you’ll find the instructions inside. There are also exit strategies in the event that we’re attacked or a fire starts.”

I frowned as I stared at the packet in my hand. It was so old school, but everything around me was filled with technology. It didn't make sense. I glanced in the corner and saw his filing cabinets, probably filled with cases. And then there was a pad of paper and pencil on his desk that was well used. Cash didn't trust technology, that much was clear.

"Is there something going on around here today?" I asked, remembering Fox running off because he was needed on set.

"Zoe, Red's wife, is a screenwriter. The producers like to see a live-action production type thing before they accept the script."

"Is that normal?"

"No," he grinned. "But it gets her the job and I think they like what they see."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I had no doubt I'd find out soon enough.

"Also, while it's not necessary for you to live on the property, we do have builders working on our own little subdivision. If you're interested, let me know. I'll get you their information."

I nodded and stood, not wanting to take up any more of the man's time. I held up the packet. "I'll go through this and let you know if I need anything."

"Just take the elevator down to level three. You'll find the break room where you can go over everything."

"Thanks."

He held out his hand to me and I reluctantly took it. "Welcome to the team."

"Thanks."

I had a feeling I was going to regret this.

"And Tate," Cash called out as I was about to leave. "I want to hear about Fox soon."

I was afraid he was going to say that.

After going through all the paperwork, I tossed it aside and leaned back in my chair. Glancing around the break room, I was glad for the reprieve from company. I wasn't sure I was really in the mood to be around people right now. I was still pissed about being let go from my job, but in reality, it was probably for the best. It was a small town where nothing ever happened. I was bound to get bored, and then I'd probably go looking for trouble.

This couldn't be my life. After all these years being away from Fox, here I was, back in the thick of it with the very man who had the power to upend my life. I tried to think of the positive, like the fact that I had a job, or that someone in this town was a friend. But in the end, I kept going back to the fact that I had landed myself right where I tried not to be.

"Hey," Anna said, walking into the room and smiling at me. "It's so good to have you here."

"Yeah, great," I smiled, trying to seem happy about the whole thing.

She grinned and sat down across from me. "Why do you not seem happy?"

I rested my arms on the table, leaning in closer to her. "You do remember Fox, right?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm married to him."

"And you remember that psycho buried deep down inside."

"That psycho saved my life."

I grunted and leaned back. She had a point. "He saved my life too."

"And how did he do that?"

"The usual," I answered. "Crazy guy with a bomb gets to you. Crazy psycho friend steps in and saves the day."

“And how did he do that?”

A small grin tilted my lips. “He talked the guy to death.”

“No,” she said, laughing slightly.

“Totally. Just annoyed the fuck out of the guy until he dropped dead of boredom.”

“Why do I not believe that?”

Because it wasn't true, not even slightly. But I wasn't about to rehash shit that happened to me in war. “So, how's the hand?”

She held it out, stretching it a little. “It's...a hand.”

“Functioning?”

“Well enough. Fox makes me do a lot of exercises.”

I could only imagine. Her skin was all gnarled from the spike that was driven through her palm. I wasn't sure if they were able to reconstruct her hand fully. There was a lot of damage, but she still used it, so it couldn't be as bad as when Fox found her.

“And how has he been lately?”

“Well, I would be lying if I said he was one hundred percent normal. He's always going to have a darker side. But it's something I've come to live with.”

“Because you love him.”

She eyed me carefully. “Because he wouldn't be Fox if he wasn't a little on the scary side. I accept his past as much as I accept who he is now.”

I nodded, liking her answer. There weren't many people who could easily accept that Fox had killed someone when he was just a kid or that he had stalked Anna for most of her life. But she was okay with it.

Now, at least.

“So, what are you up to now?”

“Really?” she asked, cocking her head to the side. “Are we going to do the whole chit-chat thing?”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not why you’re here.”

“I don’t know—“

“You know exactly what I mean. You didn’t come down to catch up. So, what is it?”

She bit her lip nervously, her eyes flicking away in thought. “It’s just...with this friend of his missing—“

“Dead,” I interrupted. “He’s not missing.”

“But to Fox, he’s missing. And he’s getting obsessed with it.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“You could pull him back.”

“From the ledge?” I snorted. That was hilarious on the best of days. “Nobody pulls Fox back. Maybe you.”

“And Zoe’s mom, but she’s gone.”

I nodded. I heard about how she died, how Fox fell apart and didn’t have meaning. That’s what led him back to Anna. “And what do you expect me to do? You know there’s nothing I can say to convince him the guy is dead.”

“No, but maybe you can distract him.”

“I just started here. I don’t even have a case yet.”

“No, but I’m sure you could think of something. He’s talking about running off to chase another lead on FNG.”

“That’s what he does.”

“Then go with him,” she insisted. “Don’t let him run off and leave you behind.”

“Anna—“

“I need him,” she said forcefully. “I need him here with me. I know he’s capable and can take care of himself. But I couldn’t stand it if he fell into that black hole again. I need you to promise me you’ll make sure he stays above water.”

I had never seen her like this before. She was really fucking worried about him. I leaned forward, seeing now what the real issue was. “He’s not gonna fall apart,” I reassured her. “He has too much to lose.”

She dropped her eyes. “I’m not sure I’m enough.”

“Are you kidding? Do you know how many times I heard about you? I mean, he never said a word until one night. It was pretty bad. We lost one of our guys, and all he could think about was getting back to see you.”

“He never told me,” she said, listening intently.

“We were on leave at a bar. Our last deployment was bad. We lost one of our guys, and his wife just had a baby. He never even met his kid.”

Just thinking about it made me depressed as hell. Willis was one of the best, but that’s one of the reasons he was no longer with us. He protected us with his own life, even knowing he would never see his wife and kid again. It should have been me or Fox, but he was closer. He didn’t even think twice as he looked back at us for just a split second before jumping on that grenade.

The memory shook me to the core. But it was the same for all of us. It never should have gone that way, but Fox took it the hardest, especially since he didn’t think his life was worth saving like that.

“Nathan?”

I looked up at Anna and shook my head. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You know, Fox gets that look sometimes too.”

“He would,” I admitted. “Anyway, it was that night at the bar that I heard about you for the first time. I was the only one he ever told. You were his obsession, the woman he could never get out of his head. So trust me when I tell you that there is no way Fox would ever do anything that would take him away from you. He already tried it once, and he failed miserably.”

She sighed heavily. “I never should have pushed him away after what he told me about his mother.”

“Yes, you should have. Every guy needs a kick in the pants from time to time. You reminded him that nothing is guaranteed in life—that his actions have consequences, and I can guarantee you that he’s thanking his lucky stars to this day that you took him back.”

“Well, he grows on you like mold,” she grinned.

I stood and walked around the table to her side. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Thank you.”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in for a hug. Fuck, I already broke my first rule for accepting this job.

Never work with Fox again.

ZOE

“Alright, let’s get started!” Dash shouted over the bullhorn.

I rolled my eyes, wondering why he was taking over my movie. Seriously, this was ridiculous. All the men thought they could just come into my life and take over, especially where the films were concerned. I was pretty sure they took this more seriously than I did.

Eli came walking over to me, holding the script in his hand. “Zoe, I’m not sure how I’m supposed to play this.”

“What do you mean?”

He turned it to face me, pointing at the first line. “What is my character’s thought process here?”

I looked over the line and then up at him questioningly. “You walk into the bar and order a beer.”

“Right, but am I sad? Lonely? Should I play it cool and relaxed?”

“You’re just there to get a beer. Nothing has even happened yet. This is where you meet the girl for the first time.”

He nodded, his brows pinched. “Right, but did I have a hard day at work?”

“It was just a normal day.”

He snorted. “On the police force? I doubt there’s a normal day.”

“This was a normal day,” I said, not sure what else to tell him.

Again, he nodded. “Cuz I was thinking, what if something really drastic happened? Like, say my partner just committed suicide and I’m here to drink away my cares.”

“But your partner appears in this scene later on.”

“Right.” He frowned hard. “So, what if it was my boss?”

What was it with these guys? Why did someone always have to be killed? “Eli, is there some reason you want to deal with suicide?”

“No, I just think it would really add to the feel of the movie. You know, bring out the emotions.”

“It’s a comedy,” I said bluntly.

He rolled his eyes. “Life isn’t always a comedy.”

“No, but this script is,” I said slowly.

He sighed dramatically. “I guess it could work.”

What part of this wouldn’t work? It was a romantic comedy. Most of those didn’t begin with a suicide, unless it was a dark comedy, which this one wasn’t. I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying desperately to keep my anger under control. Getting mad wouldn’t help anything right now.

“It will work. It’s what the studio signed up for.”

“Oh, and we just have to do what the studio wants,” he huffed.

“We do when they’re paying for it,” I reminded him.

Dash walked over, arms crossed over his chest. “I’m sorry. Am I interrupting your time?”

“No,” I smiled, biting back my anger. “We’re all ready for you.”

He glanced at his watch, clearly not happy with how long this was taking. “Because we have a lot to get done today. We can’t afford to have these delays.”

I nodded as he walked away. The guy was being so dramatic. Eli was just a few steps away, going over his lines with complete concentration. I took the opportunity to slip away before he cornered me and tried to come up with any other silly questions.

Luckily, Red was waiting for me at my director's chair, which really wasn't mine since Dash took over. "How's everything going?"

"Well, we're not moving fast enough for Dash, and Eli is trying to turn this into a drama instead of a comedy."

"It could be worse. At least there are no bombs in this one."

"I'm not sure the guys will go for that."

He shook his head. "It's not like they can just insert one into a scene."

"Are you sure about that?"

Truthfully, that was my biggest concern right now. How was I going to keep them from turning my whole movie into a disaster like they did the last one?

"Alright, enough chit chat!" Dash shouted. "I'd like to get this scene in before lunch!" He walked over to plop down in his chair beside me and muttered under his breath, "Amateurs."

I choked back a laugh and waited as Eli walked onto the set, his shoulders slumped as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He sat down at the bar and held up a finger to the bartender.

"What'll it be?"

"Gin. Whiskey. Does it really matter when your life is falling apart?"

Dash jumped up, yelling, "Cut! Eli, what the fuck was that? You went completely off script!"

"I was just thinking how much better this would be if the guy had a lot on his mind, you know? And then when he meets

the woman, she draws this intensity out of him and it explodes when they get back to the hotel.”

I waited for Dash to lay into him, but instead, he nodded his agreement. “I like the way you think. Go with what feels right.”

“Hang on,” I said, jumping out of my chair. “This is not the script I wrote.”

“Honey,” Dash said in a patronizing tone, “let the professionals do their jobs.”

My jaw dropped at the way he spoke to me. “Now, hold on —“

“Alright, people!” He spun, completely ignoring me. “Let’s take it from the top.”

“But-“

“Let’s just roll with it and see what feels right!”

I stared at him in shock, baffled that not only he took over, but was changing the way things were going. I turned to Red, but he looked just as confused as me. “What am I supposed to do?”

“When do you need to get this to the studio?”

“They want it by Friday!”

He snorted. “That’s not going to happen with Dash running things.”

I sat down, plopping my head in my hands. “Things were supposed to go differently this time. I was going to make this amazing film for them that was totally different from the last one!”

“Yeah, but they liked the last one.”

I glared at him, irritated that he wasn’t taking my side. “I don’t need OPS taking over and changing my script again. This is so horrible!”

“It can’t be that bad,” he said, trying to placate me. “I mean, nobody’s done anything too horrible.”

I jerked my gaze to his. “Yet. There’s still plenty of time for him to screw up my movie. I saw Fox this morning, and he was telling me that he really thought I should add in a scene with him stripping someone of their flesh and then eating shawarma later so that people would think he was a cannibal in the movie.”

Red frowned. “What does a cannibal have to do with the film?”

“Absolutely nothing! It’s supposed to be a romantic comedy! The studio wants to bill it as the next big Christmas comedy!”

He glanced around at the green grass, then back to me. “It’s kind of the wrong time to film a Christmas movie.”

I growled under my breath in frustration. “Again, this isn’t the actual movie. They just want to see it laid out first.”

“They want to see us doing it,” he grinned. “The first time, I understood. I think they liked what we did and decided they should run with it.”

I looked at him in horror as it all came together in my mind. The phone calls where they told me they needed another preview. The idea of having the guys do the film again...it was all because they wanted OPS. “Oh my God. I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not, baby. So you have to jump through a few hoops to get where you’re going. It’ll only help you in the end.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. In fact, I was pretty sure now that the only thing they wanted was something very different from the script I sent in. And the easiest way to give them a comedy of errors was to introduce these guys into the mix. Everything I worked so hard for was going down the drain fast.

“There has to be some way to save the film.”

Red wrapped his hand around mine. “I think the best thing to do is hold on for the ride, baby.”

That’s what I was afraid he was going to say.

JANE

I just finished in the shower when IRIS flung open the curtain and grinned at me. “God, I love seeing you naked.”

I blushed hard, still reeling over the fact that I was with him. He was handsome, sexy, and so much different than Alexander Pierce. Looking back, I couldn’t believe I was so obsessed with him, not when I had this amazing chemistry with IRIS.

“Maybe you should join me,” I teased.

“Maybe I will.”

His hands slid down to his pants, flicking the button before he lowered the zipper. I watched with rapt attention as he jerked his pants down over his already hard cock. I licked my lips, doing my best not to attack him in the shower. I had to show some self-control. After all, look at where that got me with Alexander Pierce.

He stepped right into my space, his hands resting against the wall on either side of my body as he set his trap. I nearly started giggling like a schoolgirl as his breath danced across my skin, eliciting goosebumps from me. I swallowed hard, as he leaned in closer, daring me to make the first move. He had this way of seducing me, making me nearly fawn at his feet without even touching me.

His lips were just a hairsbreadth from my own, and that’s when I finally felt his erection against my belly. I was dazed, barely standing on my own two feet. The room swayed around me as the temperature in the room skyrocketed. His lips

captured mine in a searing kiss. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he pulled me in closer.

“Jane,” he whispered, sliding his hand around my neck. “I love you.”

I smiled against his lips, kissing him harder. “I love you.”

“Baby...” He gripped my hip, pulling me against him. “I —”

The shrill ring of his phone stopped him from whatever he was about to say. “Don’t,” I begged him.

We were interrupted way too often by work. I just wanted him here with me this morning.

He groaned when I wrapped my hand around his thick cock and started slowly jacking him off. I would win him over. There was nothing more important than me. At least, that’s how I needed to feel in this moment.

And I almost won. Almost.

“Hey, jackass!” Slider called from downstairs.

I groaned, leaning my head back against the wall. “Don’t do it.”

He sighed, kissing me hard before stepping away from me. “Let me get rid of him.”

“No,” I said, grasping onto his hand. “Tell him to leave you alone. Tell him you have rabies.”

“Rabies? Baby, I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“You don’t even have work this week,” I pouted. “Forget about him.”

“I wish I could, but—”

“Hey—whoa! Holy shit, bro. Put on some fucking clothes,” Slider snapped, turning away as he covered his face.

“Why don’t you stay the fuck out of my house?” IRIS said, pulling up his pants, but stayed in front of me so I wasn’t exposed. I took the opportunity to grab my robe off the bathroom hook and slip it on. After tying it in a knot, IRIS

finally stepped away from me, but made sure to give Slider a death glare just in case he tried to peek.

“What do you want?”

“Me? You were supposed to be downstairs an hour ago. Dash is pissed and yelling at everyone.”

“Shit, I forgot all about that.” He turned to me and I knew just by the look on his face that I had lost him. “Baby...”

“Go,” I sighed.

“You’ll be okay?”

“Sure, why not? I’ll find something to do.”

He gave me a swift kiss on the cheek before turning and running out of the room like a little kid. I walked into our bedroom and plopped down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Maybe it was for the best. I really had to get working on my next book, but my inspiration was fleeting. I needed something to get me going like I used to.

Being here with IRIS, you’d think I’d have plenty to keep me going, but IRIS was all about keeping me out of danger, despite the fun we had together working on the murders surrounding my books. And now I was left here to write with nothing to go on.

I sat up when a brilliant idea struck. What I needed was a muse, someone who didn’t mind leading me around and filling me in on what he was doing. And that someone just happened to be here. And I knew for a fact that he was bored.

I quickly dressed, not even bothering to dry my hair before tossing it back in a ponytail and rushing out the door. With any luck, I would be on the trail of a new murder mystery by the end of the day. Then I could get this book published and move on.

I waved to people, refusing to talk as I passed. I only had so much time to find him. I was pretty sure IKE was planning on taking off so he didn’t have to be around any of the filming. Besides, the few times I saw him, he looked bored out of his skull. Surely, he could lead me to some crime-fighting fun.

I nearly walked right past him. He was hiding in the break room behind the fridge. Well, technically, he wasn't hiding. He was looking in the fridge for something. "IKE!" I hissed, hurrying inside and shutting the door behind me.

He looked up, grinning at me as I rushed over. "Hey, you look...wet."

I frowned, but then looked down at my shirt that had traces of my shower in all the wrong places. I crossed my hands over my chest, burying them under my armpits just to make sure I wasn't showing anything off.

"So, do you have any plans today?"

"You mean, besides going to the great filming?"

"You're not really doing that."

He huffed. "Not a chance. I thought I'd take the opportunity to get back to my..." He trailed off as he stared at me. "No."

"No, what?"

"You're not coming with me."

My jaw dropped open. How did he know? "I never said anything about coming with you."

"You didn't have to. You haven't been writing and you need inspiration."

That was amazing. "How do you do that?"

He grinned down at me. God, he was beautiful. Not that I was thinking about leaving IRIS, but a girl could admire a gorgeous man. "I can read you like a book, but the answer is still no. Besides, I'm not your muse anymore. I heard you killed me off."

He turned and started to walk away. "What if you're not really dead?" I said, running after him. "What if it only appears that you're dead, and you make a reemergence in the next book?"

He stopped and turned around, eyeing me warily. "You'd do that?"

For inspiration? Hell yes, I would. “I never said you were dead. I only implied it. Besides, I think the character of IKE needs more page time.”

“He does,” he nodded. “It’s really not fair that you killed me off the way you did. Really? I got killed by IRIS’s bomb?”

I rolled my eyes. “He said it had to be that way.”

“And you have to do everything your little boy toy says. Just like Alexander Pierce.”

“What? That is not true. Take it back.”

“Not a chance.”

Now I was really fuming. It wasn’t fair. IKE was a great character for my book. And as much as I wanted IRIS in my books too, I needed someone to give me what I needed.

“I do not let IRIS walk all over me.”

“Prove it,” he challenged me.

“Well, he wouldn’t approve of me tailing you,” I smirked.

He lifted his chin slightly as he stared at me. “Nope. Not happening.” He turned and walked away.

“But you just said I had to prove it. Now you’re telling me you won’t let me?”

He stopped suddenly and I ran into his back. His very muscular back which I had felt many times before when I was out with him. Not that I was thinking about that. I loved IRIS. Not that I needed the reminder.

“Look, IRIS already doesn’t like me.”

“Since when has that stopped you?”

He sighed heavily. “There’s a difference between irritating him because it gives me pleasure and purposely doing something to piss him off. I’m not looking to make any more enemies.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re always looking to make more enemies.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it. “Okay you have me there, but I won’t do something to piss him off. That would only work against me.”

“In what way?”

“Um...I take you with me, he gets mad at me, I lose my job.”

“You don’t like this job anyway. You want to leave and you know it.”

He didn’t argue with me on that, and it made me sad to think of him disappearing from my life.

“Come on,” I whispered. “One last job.”

For just a moment, I thought I had him. That mischievous smile tilted his lips and he actually seemed to be considering it. But then his eyes dimmed and he shook his head. “As much as I would love to, I can’t. Not on this one.”

My ears perked up at that. “Why not this one?”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“Right, more dangerous than some of the others? What about the time with the guy and the knife?”

“That was child’s play.”

“Okay, then the one with the mobster and the guns?”

“I had you covered the whole time.”

Frustration built as I tried to come up with a better example, and then it hit me. “Fine, how about the time with the Chinese prostitute? You can’t tell me that wasn’t dangerous.”

He said nothing as I stared at him in victory. I had him. He couldn’t deny that it was above and beyond dangerous.

“That doesn’t mean we should repeat it. The answer is no.”

I grabbed his arm as he tried to turn away. “Ike—”

“The answer is no,” he said, jerking out of my grasp. I watched him walk away, giving the appearance of being angry,

but it was all a lie. He wanted me to come just as much as I wanted to join him. He just didn't realize it.

I followed him outside and when he went to grab gear, I popped the trunk of his very nice sports car and climbed inside. It was a little hot and stuffy, but I wasn't worried about it. The adventure was on.

MIRANDA

I dabbed a little extra lipstick on, knowing that today I was going to meet some of the hot men around OPS. I didn't exactly think that I was going to find the perfect man for me here, but it was better than the boring life I was leading in Chicago. There were only so many rich men a girl could go out with before the monotony of fancy dinners came to a head.

That day the bomb went off sent a spark down my spine, urging me to move on with life. So, I packed up my things and headed with Sarah to Kansas. I didn't actually give her a choice. We'd known each other for a little over three years, and I wouldn't call us best friends, but I liked her a lot. And I liked her even more when I found out about how many hot guys would soon be in her life.

"Perfect," I said, staring at myself in the mirror. Blowing a kiss, I walked out of the bathroom, nearly running into one of those very fine men. Batting my eyelashes at him, I smiled coquettishly. "I'm so sorry..." I waited for him to provide his name.

With a grin, he rested his hand on the wall next to my head, leaning in so we were just inches apart. "Brock."

"Brock," I whispered breathlessly. My hand moved of its own accord, sliding up his chest and coming to rest on his very muscular shoulder.

"You're Miranda," he grumbled. His hot breath fanned across my face, sending tingles down my spine.

"I am."

“Tell me, Miranda, why did you move from Chicago all the way to Kansas?”

I smirked up at him, ready to take him back to my room and have my way with him. “I heard the men were better here.”

“Better in what way?”

“Handsome, muscular...” My fingers trailed down his chest until I brushed the top of his pants. “Rougher.”

“Is that what you’re looking for?” he asked, his voice coming out slightly choked.

I swallowed hard as he leaned in closer, his lips brushing across my cheek. “How rough do you want it?”

I was pretty sure he was testing me. Living in a mansion with no other single women had to be hard. But I was never one to back away from a challenge. I gripped the waistband of his pants and tugged him in closer. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

His lips slanted across mine in a bruising kiss and his hands cupped my ass, hauling me up in his arms. I crossed my legs behind his back as my vagina did a happy dance. I could already feel the power in his hold. This was going to be amazing.

“Bedroom,” I said, tearing his lips from mine.

I gestured down the hall, latching my mouth onto his neck and sucking hard. He turned and stumbled into the wall, nearly making us fall. He pushed off the wall and practically ran down the hall, pushing open the first door he found. I wasn’t sure if it was my room or not, and I didn’t care.

He tossed me down on the bed, and covered my body with his, notching his knee between my legs. I spread wide for him, waiting to finally see his package. He took my mouth in his again as he started tearing my shirt up and over my head, only breaking long enough to fit the fabric between our faces. His hands immediately cupped my breasts, strumming over the thin material of my bra.

My eyes rolled back in my bed as my whole body stood up and sang. It had been too long, and a good fuck was what I needed to welcome me to this new community. I grasped his pants, tugging him closer, tearing the zipper down. I used my toes to pull the jeans down his body, a handy trick I learned in my early twenties during my college days.

“Baby,” he groaned when I gripped his thick erection.

He hauled me up and pressed me to the wall, tearing my pants from my body. I was so ready for this, ready to finally feel what it was like to have a man like this doing such dirty things to my body. I was tired of the rich lovers who only cared about getting off, and not about a woman’s pleasure.

“Take me,” I cried out as his fingers brushed against my pussy.

They slid inside and I nearly cried out from the intense pleasure that rushed through me. But it quickly died when the door burst open and a woman stood there, staring at me like the hussy I was.

“Really, Brock?”

He was breathing hard, his fingers still inside me as he stared at the woman.

“Is she...” I winced as the woman’s eyes narrowed on me. Shit, I didn’t know he was with someone. “I didn’t know.”

“That he was a player?”

“No, that you...and him...”

“Ew, oh, God no,” the woman said, wrinkling her nose at me. “Gross.”

His fingers slipped from my body and he slowly lowered me to the floor. I was sad for the loss, but honestly, the spark was gone the minute she walked into the room.

“Thanks,” Brock grumbled. “Thanks for the compliment, Quinn.”

“Hey, I’m just saying, you don’t do it for me.”

“You don’t have to shout it to everyone,” Brock muttered, snatching his pants off the ground. “Do you have a reason for being here?”

“Yeah, you’re wanted on set.”

“On set?” I asked, curious about what was going on.

“Yeah, Zoe’s making a film and everyone helps out. You should watch. It’s quite entertaining,” she grinned. “Oh, and I’m with Scottie, so you don’t need to worry about me interfering in this,” she said, motioning between me and Brock.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that anyway,” I sighed, taking in Brock’s shocked expression. I stepped forward and patted him on the chest. “I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

“Wait, why is it not meant to be?”

“Well, I’m a firm believer in signs. And someone interrupting you during sex seems like a pretty big sign that things aren’t meant to be.” I patted him on the cheek and walked toward the door.

“But, it was bad timing!” he shouted as I walked away.

I chuckled. “That’s the story of my life.”

“So, what is this all about?” I asked as I walked up behind a group of what looked like director’s chairs.

“Well, Zoe is a screenwriter, and the first time she tried to sell her screenplay to a producer, they said they wanted a sort of film to give them a better idea of what she was doing. Honestly, from what I heard, it sounds like they were just trying to put her off. But these guys did it and made a complete mess of it.”

“As men normally do,” I sighed.

“Yeah, but the producers ended up loving it. So she’s worked on a few more, and this time, the producers asked for another film.”

I grinned as she shot me a knowing look. “And the guys are making sure that happens.”

“Of course, so it should be fun to see what they come up with.”

I glanced around, wondering which guy she belonged to. There were so many good-looking guys, and I didn’t want to accidentally hit on one of them. “So, which one is Scottie?”

“Oh, he’s not here. Apparently, he had to fly someone down to the Caribbean.”

“Ooh, a pilot. I likey.”

She sighed heavily. “He does look totally hot...when he’s not vomiting.”

“Sorry?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t like flying.”

“But he’s a pilot,” I said, biting back a laugh.

“Ooh!” she pointed. “It looks like they’re starting.”

She pulled me over to an empty set of chairs and sat down. “Now, see those girls over there?” she pointed to another area of the set further away. “That’s Anna and Eva. They’re super nice and like making friends. Stick with them and you’re good to go.”

“Why can’t I just stick with you?”

The look of horror on her face nearly had me backing away. Was it me? Had I said something to fuck this up already?

“I don’t do friends.”

“Um...I’m not sure what that means.”

“I was just being friend-ly. Not expecting we would actually be friends. I don’t even know you!” She stood suddenly, backing away from me like I had leprosy.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “We don’t have to be friends. I was just asking why, and you explained. It’s all good. I will not expect any kind of friendship from you.”

“Or coffee. I don’t do coffee dates, so don’t ask.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“And don’t ever ask me to go somewhere with you. I don’t like doing things with other people.”

Man, this chick was weird. And if she could get a guy, I was certain I could. “No problem.”

She reluctantly sat down again, watching me carefully. I faced forward, doing my best not to look at her, but it was so damn hard. That was a seriously bad reaction to friendship. Peanuts? Sure. Dander? Who doesn’t have that issue from time to time? But making friends? Wow.

“So, is it me?” I asked, turning to face her. “I mean, I’m not pushing to be friends, but I need to know what I did wrong.”

“See, that, right there,” she pointed at me. “*Is it me? Why won’t you be friends with me?*”

“Wanting to know why you so vehemently hate making friends? That’s because I asked a question?”

“No, it starts with a question,” she clarified. “Then you reassure me you won’t ask me for coffee or to watch your kid.”

“I don’t have a kid.”

“And then before you know it, I’m stuck at home watching your toddler while you’re out ‘working’. Well, I don’t play that game anymore! I have a spine. I will not be walked over!”

I let out a low whistle. Damn, this broad was crazy.

But then she suddenly winced and bit her lip. “Was that too much? Did I go overboard?”

“I’m confused. Was that an act? Did you want to play a part in the film?”

“No, I just don’t like confrontation. I’m working on standing up for myself.”

“Against friends,” I nodded.

“They’re the worst. They always take advantage of you and want all your time. It’s horrible! Why can’t I stay home by myself and be content with that?”

“But you have Scottie,” I asked in confusion.

“Right, of course, he’s there,” she said, waving me off, but I was sure even he was an afterthought.

“So, this has happened before, I take it.” She nodded. “And you have trouble telling people no.”

She pursed her lips, but almost like she was more upset with herself than the situation. “I ran away from Scottie when I met him. Like legit picked up and moved to another state because he said he was coming back the next weekend to spend time with me.”

Okay, that was even weirder than I thought, but no judgment here. After all, I did move to another state to be around a bunch of hot men. “Then this should work fine because I only moved here to find a man.”

“So, you’re not going to ask me out for coffee?”

“I promise to never do that.” Then I added. “Or call you to babysit if I ever have a kid.”

Her shoulders sagged in relief at my admission. “Thank God. You never know. People can be pretty crazy about the whole...not wanting to be around other people thing. They’re so weird about it.”

I laughed and nodded, but internally, I was wondering what it would take for me to get away from this psychotic woman. But then I remembered she didn’t want to be friends and just got up. “See you around.”

“Bye!”

Well, that was only slightly weird.

LOCK

“I can’t believe I’m doing this again,” I muttered as I got my hair and makeup done. Slider slipped into a chair beside me, grinning as he ate a donut. I glared at his chocolate covered face, wishing I was anywhere but here. “What do you want?”

“Nothing,” he mumbled around his food. “I just thought I’d check on you, see if you’re holding up okay.” He grinned and then coughed out, “Royal.”

I squeezed the armrest, doing my best not to let my fist fly right into his face. “You’re really funny.”

“I know,” He laughed. “did you ever think this day would come?”

“And what day is that?”

“The day you’d get that gorgeous hair on the big screen,” he answered, waggling his eyebrows at me. “Those locks are just so damn soft and shiny. I really thought you’d cut them all off after your modeling days.”

“Juliette likes it,” I muttered.

He leaned in, lowering his voice. “Does she pull on your hair during sex? You know, like she’s pulling on reins?”

This time, I let my fist fly, slamming into his jaw and snapping his head to the side.

“Fuck, what was that for?”

“That was because you sat down next to me. If you stick around, I’ll show you what happens after you stay too long.”

He shoved up out of his chair and walked away. “Fucking lunatic.”

I grinned to myself and waited patiently for them to finish my makeup. Twenty minutes later, I was dressed up like a fucking idiot, wearing makeup that was definitely not my color. “I look ridiculous.”

“You look amazing,” Juliette said, wrapping her arms around me from behind. “And Emilio is dressing you, so you know you’ll look wonderful.”

Thank God for little favors. “I can’t believe I got roped into this again. I swore I was never going to do anything like this after our wedding.”

“Hey, if I can do it for your friend, you can too.”

I didn’t like that she fit in so well with everyone around here. Just for once, I wanted her to not get along with someone so we could have some peace and quiet.

“Are you ready for your scene?” Dash asked, glaring at the way Juliette was draped over me. “Cuddle on your own time. We have work to do.”

When I didn’t immediately move, he snapped his fingers at me like a dog. Juliette hid a smile as she pressed herself against my back, and I felt her laughter as Dash walked away.

“Any chance you’ll pretend you don’t know anything if I kill him and drop his body to the base of the silo?”

She smacked me playfully, then gave me a push. “Go get to work, Mr. Forsythe.”

I stumbled onto the set, holding the script in front of me as I cleared my throat. I had stage fright, despite being only in front of a few people. I cleared my throat several times as Thumper came onto the set and stood across from me.

“Ready for this?”

“Like a bullet to the head,” he grumbled. “I tried to break my prosthetic.”

“Didn’t work?” I asked since he was standing here in one piece.

“Bree caught me,” he grumbled. “She said this would be good for me or some shit.”

“Same,” I scoffed. “Juliette thought it would help to loosen me up.”

“Alright, let’s get started!” Dash shouted, narrowing his eyes at me. “And let’s try not to make a meal of it.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” I asked Thumper, who just shrugged.

“And, action!”

I looked down at my script and read the lines as they were written. “Gosh, this snow is coming down hard.”

“Right?” Thumper responded. “I’m freezing my tootsies off.”

I frowned, wondering if he said that right. That’s what the script said, though. I cleared my throat and continued. “At least I have a nice woman to snuggle up to tonight.”

“She’s a real looker,” he said woodenly. I wasn’t feeling it at all, but what the fuck did I care? “I bet you’re gonna have fun...shaking the sheets.” He stopped and looked up at Dash. “What is shaking the sheets?”

“It’s another way to say fucking. Can we continue?”

That was one I hadn’t heard before, but it wasn’t my script. “Corn nuts! Someone will hear you.”

“What’s wrong? Afraid someone will hear that you’re sending out for sushi? We all know you like to play hide the sausage.”

I turned to Dash this time, wondering what the hell was going on. “Alright, are we in Britain or something?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This script,” I held it up in the air. “Nobody talks like this!”

“The people in the movie do,” Zoe said, walking over. “The producers wanted to keep it PG-13.”

My eyes widened in shock. “The language may be PG-13, but everyone will know what the fuck we’re saying. It’s implied!”

“Yes, but it will satisfy the audience, which is all we need.”

“So, this is the way we’re going to be speaking through the whole thing?”

Zoe grinned and nodded at us. This had to be some kind of horrible joke. No person in their right mind would watch this.

“Hey, we don’t have time to sit around while you complain about the script. We need to get to work!”

“You let Eli change the script,” I muttered under my breath.

“Because Eli had good ideas,” Dash retorted. “Now, let’s get a move on.”

I stuck my tongue out at him as he turned his back, then tried to get back into character. I cracked my neck and shook out my arms, but none of this felt right. I was used to working with a team that knew how to get me in the mood, how to bring out exactly what they wanted from me. This work environment just wasn’t conducive to getting me in the mood.

“What are you waiting for?” Dash shouted.

I spun around and glared at him. “This is not a professional set. Would it kill you to play a little mood music?”

“Yes, it would,” he shouted, getting out of his self-appointed director’s chair. “Because this is not a professional set and you are not a fucking model anymore!”

“Then why is Emilio here to get me ready?” I argued.

“Because you’re a pretty boy that needs to be pampered! Now, get to the script!”

I tossed my hair as I turned back to Thumper. “This is ridiculous. Emilio never would have made me work under

such conditions.”

“Everyone’s a fucking drama queen around here,” Thumper muttered.

I ignored the jab and got to work. “Gadzooks! Did you see that woman?”

“Where?”

“Over there. Point beyond his shoulder.” I frowned, realizing that was a direction, not a line. I lifted my hand and repeated it. “Over there.”

He turned and held his hand over his eyebrows, squinting into the distance. “Oh, ship. She is fly.” Thumper dropped his hands and shot Dash a scowl. “Fly? Are we back in the nineties?”

“I didn’t write it,” he argued. “Christ, how did FNG ever put up with any of you?” He spun around, searching for someone. “Can we get the girl over here? Who’s playing Girl 1?”

“Ooh, I can do it!” The woman who arrived with Sarah raised her hand, jumping up and down as she ran to the set. I hadn’t been introduced to her yet, but hell, it didn’t really matter at this point. I just wanted this job over. This was worse than modeling.

She snagged the script from Dash’s outstretched hand and walked over with a grin on her face. “Hi,” she waved. “Miranda. Sarah’s friend. Single and ready for a good time,” she winked at me.

I held up my hand. “Lock, happily married.”

She frowned. “Well, that sucks. I really love your hair.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I said the first thing that came to mind. “Thanks. I grew it myself.”

She winked at me, then sashayed over to Thumper, running her hand down his chest. “Baby, it’s so cold outside. Maybe we should head in and snuggle by the fire.”

But instead of Thumper responding, he shifted uncomfortably, prying her hand from his chest. “Maybe we should—”

“What’s wrong? Am I playing this the wrong way?”

“No,” Thumper laughed nervously. “It’s—”

A blur of hair and angry woman ran past me, yelling like a banshee. “Get your hands off my man!”

She tore the woman away from Thumper and tossed her to the ground.

I flipped through the pages, frowning. “This isn’t in the script.”

ZOE

I watched in horror as Bree attacked the new woman on the set. This was not at all the way this was supposed to go. It was supposed to be funny and romantic, but between the cry of the banshee and the men failing miserably while reading their lines, this was ending up more like a B-rated movie. In my head, they were supposed to add inflection in their tone to make it a light script. But they all sucked at acting. And now Bree was tearing this woman a new asshole for doing what she was supposed to do.

“Bree!” I shouted, running forward into the fray. I stepped in between them, my eyes going wide as Bree’s fist came right at me. I ducked just in time, but unfortunately, the woman behind me caught her fist right in the nose.

She screamed, falling to the ground. I spun and rushed over to her. “Oh my God! Are you okay?” Blood poured from the woman’s nose as she tried to stem the bleeding. So, no romantic comedy and no B-rated movie. This was turning into the set of a horror film.

“No, I’m not okay! She broke my nose.”

“It’s not broken,” Thumper said, not bothering to move to help.

“How would you know?” the woman sneered. “Aren’t you going to help me?”

He glanced between Bree and the woman, then shook his head. “I aren’t.”

I screamed as I was hit by what felt like a Mac truck, stumbling to avoid landing right on this new woman. I fell hard, my hands skidding across the ground and tearing up my palms. I narrowly avoided hitting my face and rolled to prevent myself from being squished in the event that Bree lost her shit and decided to attack again.

I gasped as I saw Bree straddling the woman, slamming her fist into the woman's face. Lock and Thumper stood over them, watching with mild curiosity as the woman was attacked.

I stumbled to my feet, ran over to Bree, and grabbed her arm. "What are you doing?"

"She was hitting on my man!"

"It's a screenplay!" I argued, my hands basically being flung around as she pulled back again and tried to hit her again.

"I was just doing what the script said to do!" the woman yelled. "I wasn't hitting on him!"

Bree was about to hit her again but stopped at the last second. "You...weren't?"

"No!" the woman shouted, looking a little worse for wear. "He," she pointed at Dash, "said he needed a person to play Girl 1. I volunteered. I just wanted to have some fun!"

Bree bit her lip, her face flushing bright red. I had never seen her so animated in all her time here. And the one time she finally let loose, she attacked an innocent person. "Oh." She pulled her lips between her teeth, then looked at me. "Oops."

She very gracefully stood, holding out her hand to Thumper, who took it and helped her step over the bloody woman. She cleared her throat, pushing some hair that got loose behind her ear. "It seems I was mistaken. Sorry for... making you bloody."

She held out her hand to the woman, who reluctantly took it. Once on her feet, the woman swiped a hand under her nose, grimacing at the blood. "It's okay. I know plenty of people that attack a woman for no reason."

“I can be a little territorial.”

The woman reluctantly held out her hand. “Miranda. Newly arrived.”

“Bree.”

The women shook hands and I felt relief surge through me. “Well, now we can get back to work.” I spun around, ready to get back to filming when I saw Dash glaring at all of us. “Sorry, they’re ready.”

“What the hell?” he said, but he was glaring at me.

“What?”

“Why did you break it up? That was great!”

“It wasn’t in the script!”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, staring at the ground for a moment. “Zoe...when the actors do something like that, you just have to roll with the punches. No pun intended.”

“But it wasn’t in the screenplay!”

He tossed his hands up in the air, turning and stomping away. “I can’t work like this! Everyone take five!”

I stood there, mouth gaping, unable to come up with a single thing to say. Once again, someone was taking over my screenplay, and it was going to be a disaster. The producers wanted a romantic comedy, and I was giving them...well, I wasn’t sure what I was giving them at this point. All I knew was that it was a disaster.

As everyone scattered, I pulled out my phone and FaceTimed Lark. She immediately answered, looking nothing like she used to. Of course, since we had our first screenplay picked up, she was always busy running around Hollywood, making friends with producers and getting us the best deal she possibly could. That’s why she stayed there, she was the haggler.

“I’m just about to walk into a meeting. What’s going on?”

“Everything’s going wrong,” I said, pressing a hand to my forehead. “The guys are terrible actors. There was a fight on

set, and Dash wants to keep it in because...because he's Dash! I need you here."

"I can't make it out there until this weekend. I'm packed with meetings."

"But—"

"Did you know that we have a chance of landing Royal Forsythe for the picture?"

And that broke the tension I was feeling. I bit back a laugh, wondering how she didn't know that Royal was Lock. "No, how did you find that out?"

"Apparently, he's some really hot model. I've never seen him before, but he's apparently a sexy stud. He married that model...what's her name."

"Juliette."

"Yes! Oh my God! We need someone cast like that right now. I would literally give my liver to have him in our film."

"I don't know that you can live without your liver."

"Right, well, part of my liver. I think they regenerate. Anyway, I'm going to talk with someone who knows him and see how we can ensure his place in our film."

"I think that's going to be more difficult than you can imagine."

"Babe, trust me. I've got this covered."

"Would it help if I told you I could hook you up with him?" I asked, making my way over to Lock.

"How? You're in the middle of freaking Kansas! Who could you possibly know that I don't?"

"Lark, say hi to Lock," I said, flipping the phone around. "Or as you know him, Royal Forsythe."

Her face dropped as she stared at the sexy man. "*That's* Royal?"

"Christ, I hate that name," Lock muttered.

“Wait, you’re married to Juliette Cassinelli? No fucking way!”

“It’s true. We have the wedding footage,” I grinned.

“Wait, so is he up for doing the movie?”

“Not a fucking chance in hell,” Lock grumbled.

“But we can pay you really well. I mean, really well for poor people.”

“I don’t do movies,” he said, narrowing his eyes at her.

“Sorry,” I grinned. “But hey, at least you can say you know him.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s going to be such a winning argument when I see the producers today and tell them Royal Forsythe is a no-go because he’s actually a bodyguard.”

“In the meantime,” I said, walking away from Lock. “What are we going to do about the film? It’s complete chaos! They’re never going to go for it!”

“We’ll just title it *A Not So Merry Christmas*.”

“That’s a terrible name. It’s supposed to be a romantic comedy!”

“Trust me, you throw in a couple of bombs and put one of the girls in danger and you’ll have a romantic comedy the producers will love.”

“That’s not what this was supposed to be,” I argued.

“Girl, you asked the men of OPS to help you with the production. What exactly did you think would happen?”

She hung up as I winced. She had a point. These guys only did one thing, and if I was hoping for something different, I must have had blinders on. The only thing I could do now was hold on to my panties and hope for the best.

SCOTTIE

I was about to head over to the set where everyone was hanging out for the day when I saw Rae packing up a minivan. I watched her carefully for a good ten minutes as she hauled supplies inside. What the hell was she up to?

Casually, I walked over to her and jerked my head to the back of the van. “Taking a trip?”

“You could say that.”

“With guns?”

She grinned, but continued to pack, refusing to look at me. “That’s the best kind of trip.”

“Funny, I don’t remember Cash mentioning any jobs.”

“Yeah, this one’s for me and Duke.”

Cash wouldn’t send Rae on a trip, not with Duke in the condition he was in. “And where would that be?”

She stopped and swiped a drop of sweat from her brow. “Why are you so interested?”

“Because you never do anything without a very good reason. And I can’t think of where you would take Duke. He’s still recovering.”

“Maybe he needs the push,” she shrugged.

“Or you’re on a special job and you don’t want anyone to know what’s going on. That’s why you’re packing in secret.”

“Scottie, I’m in the open. That’s hardly ‘in secret’. And besides, what I do isn’t your business.”

“I work here. How is that not my business?”

“Because if Cash wanted you to know, he would have told you.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, wondering if she was baiting me or if she was being serious. “How are you getting there?”

“Flying.”

“Bullshit,” I said, calling her out on her lies. “If you were flying, Cash would have told me about it. I’m the pilot.”

She rolled her eyes, heaving a sigh. “Fine, if you must know, I’m going to grab an asset.”

“By yourself with a gimp?”

“That gimp is my boyfriend,” she snapped. “Watch what you say.”

“I’m just saying, he’s not up to the job. Where is this mysterious asset, anyway?”

“The Caribbean,” she answered with a smirk on her face.

The Caribbean. Flashes of traffickers, pirates, and crashing planes played on a reel in my head. But there was only one person I could think of that would be an asset hiding out there.

“No fucking way. You’ve got to be shitting me. He’s replacing me?” I asked incredulously.

She stopped again, thrusting her hands on her hips. “You don’t even like to fly.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not capable. Is this because of all the tactical vomit? Because that’s come in handy a few times.”

“I highly doubt he’s replacing you because of your questionable stomach.”

“So, he is replacing me,” I said, cursing under my breath. “I knew it! You give a guy all you have, and then he replaces you because of a little vomit.”

“Maybe it’s because of the number of planes you’ve destroyed.”

“Hey!” I snapped. “You’re making it sound like I crashed because I was incompetent. I’ll have you know that it wasn’t my fault even one of those times.”

“I know.”

“And he’s still replacing me. Fuck, I should have known this day would come. And with a drunk, nonetheless. What does he have that I don’t have?”

“A clean flight record?”

“And that’s where you’re wrong. He crashed into the ocean. I know because I was on board with him.”

“Okay, what do you want me to say?”

“Nothing,” I said, snatching the keys from where she set them. “But if Cash thinks he’s going to send you to the Caribbean alone, he’s sorely mistaken. No one’s going to bring another pilot home unless I’m there too.”

“Scottie—”

“No,” I said, spinning around. “If you’re going, I’m going too. End of story.”

“But—”

“Rae, I’m not going to sit here while someone else takes my job. Even if I hate it, I will not be replaced by some guy that spends his days getting drunk on an island where he refuses to take anyone else’s time into consideration.”

“It’s not a simple pickup.”

“It never is.”

“He’s in jail.”

I snorted at that. “Let me guess, he got drunk and passed out in the street.”

“Actually, he got thrown in jail when he returned to the island. Apparently, helping you guys out didn’t put him in a good position with the locals.”

I sighed heavily, knowing where this was going. “And Cash feels responsible.”

“Either that or he just wants a pilot that won’t ruin five of his planes in the span of four years.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” I shouted. “You were on the plane with Duke. “How unlucky am I that a flock of birds flew right into the engines! It’s a big fucking sky. They couldn’t move over a few feet?”

“I’m not arguing with you on that.”

“And when someone is shooting at a plane and we don’t have any ammunition, what exactly am I supposed to do to defend my aircraft? I told Cash we needed a fighter jet, but he told me they were too expensive.”

“They are.”

“Like that’s any kind of excuse,” I huffed.

“Right, well...I have to go, so have fun talking to Cash about that.”

“Oh, no. You’re not just slipping out of here. I’m going with, and I’m flying you down there.”

“But I don’t have a parachute packed.”

“Ha ha,” I glared at her. “You’re so funny.”

“At least someone thinks so. Alright, let’s get going, Crash.”

“It’s Scottie Dog,” I clarified. “You know this.”

She headed for the passenger seat but turned around to grin at me. “And when you stop crashing planes, I’ll stop calling you Crash.”

We stopped by Duke’s house to pick him up, but instead of laying on the horn, Rae got out.

“What are you doing?” I shouted out the window. Christ, was she really going to baby him by helping him with his bags?

“Duke doesn’t know we’re going,” she shouted over her shoulder.

Oh, well, that was a different story. I shoved the door open and got out. I wasn’t about to sit in the van while Duke moped around about his leg. Someone needed to light a fire under his ass. I strode up to the door, catching it before Rae could close it, then walked straight for the coffee pot.

“What are you doing?” Bowie asked, walking into the room.

“Getting coffee.”

“Sure, help yourself,” he muttered. “Duke’s having a baby, you’re getting coffee—”

I nearly choked on the first sip. “What?”

“What?” he asked, shooting me a funny look.

“Did you just say Duke’s having a baby?”

He rolled his eyes dramatically. “Well, not him personally.”

I ran my hand over my jaw. “Shit.” Now it all made sense. Rae was on the nest, and that’s why she wanted to take this trip. One last hoorah before she was swallowed up by the constraints of motherhood. But was it even safe? I was going to have to be at the top of my game on this flight. I couldn’t risk her safety, or that of her unborn child.

Duke hobbled into the room with a pissy look on his face. “And I suppose this was your idea?” he snapped. “Well, you can fuck off. I’m not going.”

“Uh...” I glanced behind him to Rae. There was no fucking way he wasn’t going. With Rae on the nest, he needed to be there for her more now than ever. And the fact that he was too caught up in his own shit to see what she needed really bothered me.

“Uh...” he said mockingly.

“Hey!” I snapped, tired of his attitude already. “There are other people in this house who care about you, who need you. It’s been too fucking long that you’ve been moping around, crying about your leg. Thumper only has one leg, and he manages to get along just fucking fine. He pushed himself and made his body into a machine. Why don’t you put your energy into that instead of whining about a few twinges in your leg. Get some fucking perspective and realize this is not the worst thing that could have happened. Your wife needs you, so man up and be the guy she fell in love with.”

Silence filled the room until Rae had to go and ruin my awesome speech. “We’re not actually married.”

I rolled my eyes, tossing my hands up in the air. “Thanks for helping.”

Duke, at least, had the decency to look properly chastised. He ran a hand over the scruff of his neck and sighed. “I’m sorry. You fucking know I am. I just—”

“Don’t even start this shit with me right now,” Rae cut him off. “I’m glad you’re sorry, but that won’t get you out of this trip. We have a job to do.”

“Yeah, so do I,” he retorted. “Remember? I own a business?”

“Yes, I do remember. One that you’ve been letting Bowie run for the last year, so stop your whining and grab your shit.”

“And your gun,” I added quickly. The last thing I needed was to be the only gun on the island. Not that Rae couldn’t hold a weapon, but what were the implications of handling a weapon while pregnant? This wasn’t something I had to worry about yet, and none of the other guys allowed their women to handle weapons while they were pregnant. Shit, this was going to be a terrible trip.

I hustled outside, calling Cash to give him a piece of my mind. As soon as he picked up, I laid into him.

“I know—”

“What the fuck are you thinking, sending Rae down there with only Duke?”

“I was thinking that she requested it, so I allowed it,” he said slowly.

I scoffed at his piss poor excuse. “And you didn’t think to send me?”

“Scottie, this isn’t about you.”

Again, I scoffed. “I beg to differ.”

He sighed heavily. “You have to understand, the insurance company needs a second pilot on file, or they’re going to drop us.”

“I don’t give a shit about that. After all Rae’s been through with Duke, and the position she’s in now, you didn’t think it was important to send her with backup?”

“Um...Rae has never needed backup. You know this. I don’t understand what the problem is.”

And then it dawned on me...he didn’t know. I glanced behind me and lowered my voice. “Rae’s pregnant, boss.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. And you want to send her with Duke? He’s so fucking lost in his own head that he can’t do jackshit to protect her.”

“Well, he’d better get that out of his head real fucking fast,” Cash snapped. “She’s my best asset—”

“Hey,” I said, a little hurt by that, but Cash just kept going.

“—and there’s no fucking way I’ll let her deal with this on her own. You go down there, Scottie Dog, and you make fucking sure that nothing happens to her.”

“I thought you said she was your best asset,” I grumbled.

“I’m trusting you,” he said before hanging up the phone.

“Who was that?”

I spun around, nearly having a heart attack when I saw Rae. “Uh...Cash. I was...giving him a piece of my mind.”

She scoffed and shoved past me, hauling Duke's bag to the minivan. I snatched it out of her hand, earning me a glare. "What are you doing?"

"I'll get the luggage. You get your husband...boyfriend. Whatever the fuck he is." She eyed me warily. "You know, you should really fix that."

"Fix what?"

"The whole...marriage thing."

She cocked her head to the side. "Are you alright, Scottie?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You just seem...on edge. Are things okay with Quinn?"

"Of course," I scoffed. "Why would you even ask that?"

"Well...it's been a while since you built that fire. Shouldn't the flames be roaring at this point?"

"They are," I replied a little too defensively.

"So...isn't it time to take the next step?"

"Oh, you're one to talk. Shouldn't you be getting married?"

"Not everyone needs to be married. Besides, Duke's a little gun shy after the last time."

Yeah, I could understand that, but it didn't seem right, not with Rae in her condition. She should be married when she delivered that kid.

"Here he comes," she grumbled. "I'm determined to light a fire under his ass on this trip."

"If you don't, I will."

She turned back to me. "Why does it matter so much to you?"

Shit, I needed to keep my mouth shut. "Because...because I'm going to be flying the plane. And everyone knows the pilot can't be the backup and the...person flying the plane."

She squinted as she studied me. Yeah, it didn't make sense to me either. I scratched the back of my neck, then jerked my thumb to the trunk of the minivan. "I'm just gonna go arrange the bags."

Without another word, I turned and hustled to the back. There was nothing to arrange. Rae was the most organized person I knew. I set the bag down and waited as she yelled at Duke to get his ass moving. By the time he reached the van, I shut the door and headed to the driver's seat. Only, Duke was in the front with me. Fucking great.

I slammed the door and started the engine. When I looked over at Duke, it was clear he was less than thrilled about the trip. Well, same went for me, double.

"I can't believe I'm willingly getting in a plane with you again."

"Hey, there were birds," I snapped. "You can't control what birds do."

"Seems you should be able to swerve around them," he grumbled.

"It was a fucking plane! Not a bicycle. You can't just swerve!"

"Boys!" Rae snapped. "Can we get through this trip without tearing each other apart?"

"I can," Duke muttered. "If he doesn't kill us first."

I was about to yell at him when I saw Rae glare at me in the rearview mirror. So, I bit my tongue and kept driving. Just because I couldn't kill him didn't mean I couldn't imagine all the ways he could die a very painful death. And right now, death by shark was looking pretty appealing.

JASON

I rolled over, refusing to get out of bed. It didn't fucking matter anyway. There were no jobs at OPS this week, not unless it was an emergency. Apparently, doing that fucking film for Zoe took precedence. I informed Cash he could fuck off if he thought I would take any part in that disaster.

"Hmm, big boy," the woman beside me moaned.

I shoved her hand away as she reached for my cock. I wasn't interested in repeating what happened last night. I used her to forget, but that was last night. Today, I was clear about what I needed, and it wasn't her.

She pouted as I stood, flinging the covers to the floor. "Baby, I'm cold."

"It's time for you to leave," I said, not bothering to even look at her. It didn't matter. I knew she wasn't the woman I wanted to see. She didn't have her beautiful, stormy eyes, or that fiery attitude. She was just a prostitute I picked up on the way home last night.

I heard the sheets rustle as she shifted on the bed. "Leave? And how do you expect me to leave when you picked me up in the city?"

I ran a hand over my tired face, regretting the whole fucking trip. Nothing was accomplished other than to remind me what I could never have. But it was a weak moment. I had nothing but time on my hands, and the guilt over Jack being in prison was weighing heavy on my mind. I just wanted to see her, to remember what it was like to see that beautiful face.

But instead of finding the woman I desired, I saw her hugging another man, wrapped around him like a fucking koala bear. It took everything in me not to storm up to her house and yank her out of his arms. But then I reminded myself that I could never have her, that it was dangerous for her to be involved with a man like me. My job didn't allow for personal connections, and it would only end up with her dead on my doorstep.

“Jason!”

I turned to face the woman in my bed, grimacing when I saw the caked-on makeup smeared on her face. Fuck, I was messed up if I didn't realize what a mistake this was last night. I stormed over to my dresser and grabbed my wallet out of the top drawer. Pulling out a few twenties, I tossed them at her.

“Get yourself a cab.”

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “A cab? You think this is going to get me back to Kansas City?”

She was right. It was way too fucking far. But there was no way I was driving her home.

“And what about my pay for last night?”

“I paid you when you stepped into my truck,” I spat.

“It wasn't nearly enough for what I let you do to me last night,” she argued.

She might have been right about that. I got a little out of control, taking my frustrations out on her body. Though, I was pretty sure she enjoyed every second of it.

“Fine.” I pulled out a few hundreds and tossed them at her. Her eyes lit up and she scrambled from the bed, skipping over to me, but I instantly blocked any advances. She wasn't upset, though, having raked in more money than she probably saw in a week.

“Call me anytime you want,” she winked at me, then turned to grab her clothes.

The last thing I wanted was for her to touch me again, but I didn't dare step into the shower until she was out of my house.

I watched her carefully as she got dressed. I didn't trust her not to steal from me. And when she was ready, I escorted her to the door and locked it as soon as she was on my doorstep.

Leaning back against the door, I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes, groaning at my horrible choices. But my moment of self-reflection was cut short by pounding on the door. I knew from the sound of it that it wasn't her. I swung the door open, knowing immediately who was on the other side.

“What do you want?”

“I can't believe you brought that woman home,” he grumbled, shuffling past me.

Sighing, I closed the door and watched as Johnny made himself at home in my house, walking through to the kitchen. He dug around until he found what he needed, then put on a pot of coffee.

“Is there a reason you're gracing me with your presence at this ungodly hour?”

“It's ten o'clock in the morning, and you didn't show up to work.”

“Yeah, I told you I wouldn't fucking be there. I'm taking time off.”

“Everyone's taking time off for that fucking movie thing.” He sat down and stared at me like he was waiting for an answer. And when I didn't give it, he laid into me. “Why'd you do it?”

“Don't fucking start.”

“You said you can't have her. Why are you torturing yourself?”

I gritted my teeth, not even sure of the answer myself. The truth was, it was a moment of weakness. I should have been stronger. I should have forced myself to stay away, but I couldn't.

“If you want her, go get her.”

“I told you, it wouldn’t fucking work. Our lives aren’t compatible with relationships.”

He scoffed at my shitty explanation. “Is that what you think of what I have with Tahlia? Because it’s the best fucking thing in the world that’s ever happened, and I wouldn’t trade it for a goddamn thing.”

“Even after all the shit that went down with Rafe?” I crossed my arms over my chest, leaning against the counter. “The fact is, he fucks up everything. And maybe you have a good thing going right now with Tahlia, but how long will it be before he uses her against you?”

He turned and walked over to my cabinet, pulling down a mug. “I’ve taken precautions.”

“Against Rafe?” What a fucking joke.

“I can’t keep living my life like this,” he sighed, staring down at my counter. “It was different before her. I could do what needed to be done, no questions asked. But after everything that happened...it’s not that simple anymore.”

“And what are you going to do when Rafe comes calling for our help?”

He finally turned around and stared at me. The resolve in his eyes told me all I needed to know. “I’m out. Our team is already broken. Jack’s in prison and we can’t get him out. Rafe put him in an impossible position. The things he did...it’s not like we can do anything about that.”

“We could break him out.”

“Which would put him in more danger.”

“And you don’t think he’s in danger in Beaumont? That place is fucking violent as hell. I can’t even fucking sleep knowing he’s locked up in there.”

“Do you think it’s any different for me?” he spat. “I don’t like it any more than you do, but we’re out of options. Rafe as good as left us in the dark. He’s had more contact with Fox than he has with us. The man that used to be on our side is gone.”

I laughed at that. “He was never on our side.”

“Which is precisely my point. It’s time to move on and live our lives. This crusade is only going to get people killed. We’ve followed him blindly for long enough.”

“That doesn’t mean we can just move on,” I said, gritting my teeth. “The moment any of us tries to, he’ll pull us back in, whether we agree or not. Look at Tahlia. She didn’t exactly agree to be set up like that. You got fucking lucky.” I shook my head, knowing there was no way around it. “I won’t pull her into my shit. It doesn’t matter what I want. This is about keeping her safe and out of this world.”

He sighed, finally relenting. “So, you’re just going to be alone for the rest of your life?”

“Better that than fall into the same pit Asher’s in right now.”

RAE

“I can’t believe you kept it in the air the whole flight,” Duke grumbled as we got off the plane.

“Hey, I happen to have a very good track record. Or, at least, I did until I started flying for OPS,” Scottie grumbled.

“Yeah, it was only then you started crashing.”

“I’ll have you know—”

“Hey!” I spun around, shutting them both up. Christ, they were both bickering like brothers since we picked Duke up. I wasn’t sure what got into Scottie, but he seemed to be pissed at Duke for some reason. I knew why my significant other was acting like a baby, but this was unusual for Scottie.

“He started it,” Scottie glared at Duke.

“Can we please get on with the job?” What the hell was with these guys? I thought for sure that Scottie would be good, especially since he showed up without being invited. Of course, that was probably the problem. He was struggling with the fact that Cash was getting another pilot. Well, there was no way around it. We needed to get the job done and get the fuck out of here.

“Alright, Max is in jail on the far side of the island. Scottie, you need to stay with the plane. I have a feeling this is going to be a hard takeoff.”

“No fucking way,” Scottie said immediately. “You need backup.”

“And why is that?”

“Uh...because...Just trust me. I’ve been here before. It’s best if we stick together.”

Whatever. I wasn’t about to argue with him. I just wanted Duke to get back in the action and stop acting like he was useless. “Here’s the plan. We’ll get over to the jail, pull a Halligan, then haul ass out of here.”

“And what is a Halligan?” Duke asked.

“It’s...You know, it’s better if you just go with the flow.”

“Sounds good,” Scottie said, sliding his sunglasses on. “Oh, and this island is big into trafficking women, so all eyes on Rae.”

I cocked my head at him. “And why would all eyes need to be on me?”

“Well...you’re a woman. I thought that was clear.”

“And since when can’t I take care of myself?”

“Since you...you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” I snapped. “That’s the point.”

Scottie shifted uncomfortably, glancing at Duke. But I didn’t have time to decipher his unusual behavior. I just wanted to get Max and get the hell out of here. The drive over was easy enough, but standing outside the jail, I knew this wouldn’t be as easy as I thought. Guards were posted everywhere, but instead of the lazy men I thought we would encounter, these men seemed to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“Alright, plan B,” I said, taking off my gun and handing it to Scottie. “Duke and I are going to get caught.”

“Right,” he said, grabbing my gun, then pausing. “Uh...are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“And why would it not be?”

“Because...you know.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, tired of all the mind games he was playing. “No, I don’t. This is the only good way in. We

can't start a war from the outside. We'll never win."

"Sure," Duke nodded, staring up at the sky. "It's a nice day to go to jail in a foreign country. Why not?" He sighed and pulled out his own gun, handing it over to Scottie. "I hear medical treatment is really shitty here. I'm sure when my leg starts—"

"Would you shut up about your stupid leg?" I snapped. "I have done nothing but listen to you whine about your leg since you were stupid enough to get shot. Your leg is fine. You just need to buck up and remember what it's like to use it."

"I do use it," he argued.

"Not nearly enough."

"Because it twinges."

"My leg would twinge too if I didn't use it," I argued. "Now, are we going to do this, or do you want to stay with Scottie and listen to him bitch about being replaced?"

"Oh, he's going with you. As much as I love to complain about things, there's no way I'm letting you go in there alone," Scottie cut in.

That wasn't the first time today he'd referred to me as being incapable of handling things, and I was getting tired of it. But I'd deal with him later.

"Okay, I'm going to cause a scene. Back me up."

Duke rolled his eyes, but followed me over in front of the jail. I was about to turn around and slap him for no reason when he gave me the perfect opportunity.

"I don't know why you even need me here," he muttered under his breath.

I lost it, turning around and slapping him hard across the face. I would have punched him, but I needed him to be able to see out of both eyes.

"What the fuck?" he shouted.

"Would you stop whining? All the time, that's all I hear from you! My poor leg! I can't do anything because I'm

crippled!”

“I am crippled!” he shouted. “Do you want to see the evidence?”

“I see it every night!” I argued. “Do you think I’m not aware that you almost lost your leg? I was with you every fucking minute of the day!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to have been a burden, you know, while I was saving your fucking life.”

“I never asked you to. In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t need a man.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing with me?” he retorted.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and kept the fight going. We were getting close.

“Believe it or not, I’m with you for more than a good time, which I haven’t been getting very much of lately.”

“I tried to give you a good time this morning. You walked out,” he snapped.

“Because you asked me about a family during sex,” I yelled, throwing up my arms. “Who does that?”

“Someone who wants a family with you,” he argued.

“Take it somewhere else,” the guard interrupted.

I turned to him, giving as much attitude as I could. “Would you fuck off? I’m having a conversation with this guy.”

I turned away, but the guard grabbed my arm in a bruising grip. I almost started fighting back, but Duke’s whole body went tense. This was just the kick in the ass he needed.

“Get your fucking hands off her,” he growled.

The guard pulled out his baton and swung, but Duke was faster, swinging hard and hitting the guard with one hard punch to the face. His grip on me was gone in a second as he crumpled to the ground and remained there unmoving.

“Shit,” Duke murmured, taking my hand in his. “Let’s move.”

He started moving away from the jail, but it wasn't long before we were surrounded. I hoped Duke realized this was exactly what I intended and didn't fuck this up for me. He turned to me, quirking an eyebrow in my direction. With a grin, I told him all he needed to know.

I threw my elbow back, planting it in the face of the guard approaching me from behind. Spinning, I kicked another man in the chest just as two men tried to take me from behind. Climbing the man's chest, I flipped over, ripping my arms from the men who had me from behind. I felt Duke grab me, spinning me away as he slammed his fist into another's face.

But when a gun pressed against my head, I stopped fighting, despite feeling like I could go a few more rounds. This was the plan after all. And even though it felt amazing to take out my frustrations on these men, it wasn't the endgame.

I held up my hands, watching out of the corner of my eye as Duke did the same. For just a moment, he seemed on board with my plan. Now he just looked irritated. It wasn't enough to get him going, but I had a feeling by the time we were done, he'd get back into his rhythm.

DUKE

“Inside!” the man said, shoving me from behind. I stumbled into the cell, catching Rae as another man shoved her. I glowered at him, but there was nothing I could do as he slammed the door in my face.

“Well, that went well,” I said, walking over to the bench and sitting down. I rubbed my thigh where it started to twinge. I shouldn’t have gotten into that fight. All it did was make things worse.

“I think so.”

“Good plan. This is so much better than breaking him out of jail. I wish I had thought how brilliant it was to get myself thrown into jail to—”

“Can you stop complaining for five minutes?” Rae snapped, staring at me like I was the one with the problem.

“I’m sorry, do you not see how this is worse?”

“This was the plan!”

“To get thrown in jail?” I asked incredulously. “That was your big plan?”

The man in the corner with his hat pulled down over his face spoke up. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but other people are trying to sleep.”

I glared at the man, irritated that I had to be in here because of him. He didn’t even seem to care that he had been tossed in jail. “So, what’s the plan now? How do we get out?”

“Do you want to keep your voice down?” Rae hissed.

Like any of that mattered. We were in jail in the middle of the Caribbean, and the only way we were getting out was if someone rode to our rescue, and I was pretty fucking sure Scottie wasn't going to come in here and save my ass.

She strode over to the man snoring in the corner and kicked his legs. He jerked awake, and Rae snapped her fingers in his face. “Be ready to move.”

“Sure,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest as he closed his eyes.

“Brilliant plan,” I muttered under my breath.

“Can I have some water?” Rae shouted. “I don't feel so good.”

“Shut up!” a guard yelled.

“Please...I—” Her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the floor. I jumped up and ran over to her, patting her cheek as I watched in horror as she started to convulse.

“Help! Someone help!”

What the fuck was going on? I turned her on her side, praying she didn't choke on her tongue. I had no clue what to do, and now we were trapped in this fucking cell.

I heard the jangling of keys as the guard rushed over, shouting out orders as he unlocked the cell. The door was flung open and he knelt beside her, rolling her onto her back.

“Is she—”

Her fist shot up, slamming into his throat. She grabbed him and tossed him over her body, then jumped up as if everything was perfectly fine.

“What the fuck was that?” I snapped.

She rushed over and grabbed his keys and gun, tossing me the keys. “Be ready.”

“Ready for what?” I asked, still holding the keys like a bomb in my hand.

More guards rushed at us, and it wasn't until they ran into the cell with their guns raised that I realized what she meant. I kicked my leg out, tripping one of them as I held my hands in the air. He tripped over my foot, landing just feet from his comrade. The second man yelled at me to raise my arms, but just as I did, Rae fired a shot, hitting him in the shoulder. I caught him and lowered him to the ground, wincing at the pain he must be in.

“Sorry about that. I know it hurts like a bitch.”

“Duke!” Rae shouted. “What the fuck are you doing?” she asked as she ran over to Max and hauled him off the bench.

“Right, sorry,” I said, jumping to my feet. I ran out of the cell, holding the door open as Rae ran through with Max, then slammed the cell shut and locked it. “I really am sorry about the gunshot. Put some pressure on it,” I yelled as I turned and ran after Rae.

She turned the corner as she ran out the front. I was right behind her, but then so were more guards. I tackled the first to the ground, punching him until he passed out. When I saw his gun, I knew what I had to do. “Hell, I’m already down the rabbit hole,” I muttered.

I stood and turned, aiming the gun at the men rushing toward us. I really didn't want to shoot them. It was wrong. They were just doing their jobs. When I saw the propane tank out of the corner of my eye, I knew what I had to do.

“I’m so going to hell.”

I fired two shots, penetrating the tank, then fired a third to graze the tank and create sparks. The whole tank exploded, engulfing the men in flames. Shit, that was worse than just shooting them.

“Duke!” Rae shouted.

I turned to face her, watching as she argued with Max, then turned back to me. “We have to go!”

We got lost in the chaos and crowds gathering, slipping away until no one was looking at us, but the flames that were engulfing the jail. It wasn't until I was nearly a half mile from

the jail that I realized I was running unassisted without a single pain in my leg. In fact, there wasn't a single fucking thing wrong with me, and I had Rae to thank for helping me realize that.

She spun around and I caught her up in my arms, sealing my mouth over hers. The screams and sirens drowned out around us as I got lost in her lips. I was too stuck in my own head to see that she was only trying to help me out, and she did that in true Rae fashion, the only way she knew would kick my ass out of the depression I was stuck in.

“Well, it's about time you fucking kissed her,” Scottie cut in.

I broke the kiss and turned to grin at him, but that was cut short when Max saw him.

“Oh, hell no. What's he doing here?” Max asked.

“He flew us here. We came to break you out,” Rae answered.

“Break me out? For what?”

“You're coming with us,” she ordered. “In exchange for us getting you out of jail awaiting trial, you're coming home to be our pilot.”

He stared at her, then turned to Scottie, then back to her. “Hell fucking no. Do you realize I already spent way too much fucking time with this guy? It's not gonna happen. I'll go back to my jail cell and await my fate before I step on one more aircraft with him.”

He turned to leave, but Rae stepped in front of him. “Don't make me do it.”

“Do what? You're like a buck ten. I think I can handle it.”

Famous last words.

SCOTTIE

“He’s so fucking heavy. Did you have to knock him out?” I snapped at Rae as we dragged his body to the plane. We only had about fifty feet to go, but this fucker was heavy.

“Stop whining and pick up the slack,” Rae snapped.

“You shouldn’t even be doing this,” I said, finally losing my shit. “You’re fucking pregnant!”

“You’re pregnant?” Duke said, stopping in place and turning to face Rae.

“I’m pregnant?” Rae screeched.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” Duke shouted.

“Yeah, why the fuck didn’t you tell him?”

“I’m pregnant?” Rae shouted again.

“We already know that. You know it too, so why the fuck are you standing there acting like this is news to you?” I snapped, hoisting Max’s heavy weight onto my shoulder.

“Because this *is* news to me!”

“How can it be news to you? Are you seriously telling me you didn’t know you were pregnant?”

“I think the question is, how the fuck do you know?” Duke snapped.

“Can we get him on the plane?” Rae shouted over the chaos.

We all spun around as the sound of police sirens filled the air. They were barreling straight for us, just like last time. Was I ever going to catch a fucking break with this place? I was never coming here again, not even if my teammates were stranded here with no way to get home. They'd have to fucking swim.

“What the fuck is it with this island?” I shouted, hauling ass to the plane. We ran as fast as we could while carrying the hulk of a man between the three of us. By the time we got to the stairs, I dropped his weight and ran up the steps to get the plane started. As the engine roared to life, I quickly went through my pre-flight check, knowing I wasn't going to be able to get it all done before we had to take off.

“All I'm saying is you could have told me!” Duke shouted, hoisting Max's body inside the plane.

“I would have told you if I was pregnant.”

“But you didn't.”

“Because I'm not pregnant,” she argued.

“Then why does he think you're pregnant?”

“Why don't you ask him?” Rae shouted as she unceremoniously dropped Max's body on the ground.

“Why do you think she's pregnant?” Duke asked.

“Because Bowie said she was pregnant.”

“Fucking Bowie. Why would you believe a goddamn thing he says?”

“Because he's your roommate,” I snapped. “If anyone would know, I thought it would be him.”

“Why would he know? If anyone would know, it would be me!” Duke shouted.

“But you didn't know!”

“Because she wasn't pregnant!” he argued.

Rae shoved him aside and leaned over the seat. “Where are we?”

“Doesn’t really matter. We’re leaving in two minutes whether we’re ready or not.”

Max groaned, rolling over on the ground. His body thudded as his head slammed into the floor. Maybe I should feel bad, but he was kind of mean to me.

“Make it thirty seconds,” Rae said, pointing out the window.

“Shit,” I swore, watching the cops talk to the pilot from another plane. “I don’t like the look of this.”

“I don’t like the look of it either,” Duke grumbled.

“I would buckle up if I were you.”

As close as I was to ready, we finally started moving, but it wasn’t going to be fast enough. Thankfully, it was a small airport with little room for other planes to land. I picked up speed and pulled back on the yoke, clenching my jaw hard as the plane shook with the steep climb of the plane.

“Holy shit!” Duke shouted, stumbling back into his seat.

“I fucking told you to put your seat belt on!” I shouted over my shoulder.

“Rae’s not buckled.”

“Rae has a death wish,” I shouted over my shoulder.

We finally were high enough and I leveled out, but only seconds later did I see the issue. I tapped the fuel gauge and winced. “That’s not good.”

“What’s not good?” Rae shouted.

“Uh...we don’t have enough fuel to get home.”

“What?” she screeched. “I fucking told you to stay behind! You were supposed to be ready!”

“I wasn’t leaving you alone. You’re pregnant!”

“I’m not pregnant,” she retorted.

“I didn’t know that at the time! I was looking out for you!”

“Yeah? And who’s looking out for us now?”

“Shit!” I yelled, turning the yoke as another plane flew way too fucking close for comfort.

“What are they doing?” Duke shouted.

“Get away from them!”

“Do something!”

“Everyone shut up!” I shouted, maneuvering the plane as best I could. “Why does everyone feel the need to yell at me when I’m flying?”

“Why the fuck am I on a plane?” Max grumbled. “Shit, did I get drunk and pass out again?”

“Yes,” Rae snapped, holding onto the back of my seat as I took the plane higher.

“What the fuck is this guy doing?” I asked as the plane turned around and came right at me.

“Is he playing chicken with you?” Duke asked.

“Don’t you dare chicken out,” Rae snapped.

“Chicken out,” Max said. “This plane can’t take it.”

“I can’t take it,” Duke argued. “Think about me! I just got my leg back!”

“You always had your leg,” Rae snapped.

The plane was closing in fast. I didn’t know what to do, and with everyone arguing around me, it made it impossible to concentrate on anything. My palms were sweating and my hands were shaking. I took a deep breath and focused on the problem ahead of me. He wanted to play chicken? I could do this, and beat him a thousand times.

I was Scottie Dog.

“What are you doing?” Duke yelled.

“Do it, Scottie, do it!” Rae yelled over him, shoving him back.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Max groaned.

“Don’t get dead. Don’t get dead,” I muttered over and over again.

My eyes widened as he came closer.

“He’s not gonna move,” Rae muttered.

“He’ll move,” I said. “You’re not gonna get dead.”

“You’re gonna get dead!” Rae shouted. “Hit the brakes!”

I shouted as I held my ground, refusing to move. The other plane dove at the last second and I flew over him, but the plane started to rattle and alarms sounded. We started falling fast, heading right for the ocean.

“Not this again,” Max shouted. “I’m not spending three more fucking days in the ocean with you.”

I grabbed the yoke hard, pulling with all my strength. The water was spiraling in front of me, taunting me with her pleasing blue calm. I screamed loudly as I finally lifted the nose at the last second. I was pretty sure the wing of the plane skimmed the water as I pulled her out and headed for the skies. We broke through the clouds as the sunlight beamed across the plane.

“I. Am. Scottie Dog!”

MAX

I leaned against the window of the plane, still groaning as my stomach churned. We were on solid ground now, but my head was still spinning. This had never happened before. No one flew better than I did, but one ride on the plane with Scottie as the pilot, and I was ready to leave it all behind.

“Time to move,” Scottie said, trying to get me to leave the plane.

Fuck that, if I moved, I’d vomit all over the place.

“You go. I’m staying here.”

“The plane has to refuel. We’re all grabbing something to eat.”

Just the words had me swallowing down the vomit rising in my throat. And when I turned to him and saw the expression on his face, I knew I looked bad.

“What the hell happened? I thought you were as solid as a rock in the skies.”

“What happened? I’ll tell you what happened. I got in the fucking plane with you! Actually, correction, I was knocked out and dragged onto the plane. I was happy in my jail cell. I was living the life!”

“As a prisoner? Are you fucking serious?”

“Hey, don’t tell me how to live my life,” I snapped. “I was happy on that island. I didn’t have anyone telling me what to do or where to go. It was my life and my choices.”

“You were in jail,” he repeated slowly.

“I’m not fucking deaf,” I spat. “And what business is it of yours where I choose to hang up my hat?”

“Because my boss needs you, so you’re coming with me.”

“Like hell I am,” I grumbled. I leaned back in my chair, adjusting my pink Hawaiian shirt as I settled in for a snooze. But just after I closed my eyes, something latched onto my ear and pulled me out of my chair.

“Ow, ow, ow!” I shouted, opening my eyes to find Rae standing next to me, staring at me like I was a piece of shit. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Dragging your ass off the plane,” she said, then started pulling me down the aisle by my ear. I was bent over, trying to keep up with her as she dragged me further and further from the seat I was about to take a nap in.

“Alright, alright!” I shouted. “Let me go and I’ll follow you.”

“Do you swear?” she asked.

“Fine!” I lied. I just needed her to let go of my ear so I could escape from her. After all, I didn’t want to hurt a woman. She stared at me intently, then released me. She turned and led the way off the plane. With no other choice right now, I followed her down the stairs, but as soon as my feet hit the tarmac, I took off running.

What I didn’t count on was that little sprite of a woman to chase me down and jump on my back. I fell forward, smacking my face on the ground. I could feel blood dripping from the wound on my head, and road rash covered my hands when I attempted to catch myself.

“I thought you said you were going to cooperate?” she said, just before dragging my ass off the ground and shoving me back to where Scottie Dog stood.

“This is kidnapping,” I grumbled.

“Do you have any idea how many people say that to us?” Rae asked. “I think that line is way overused.”

“I say we drop him here and say he drank himself to death,” Scottie grumbled. “I think I more than proved my abilities today.”

“That doesn’t mean the insurance company will let you fly again,” Rae countered.

“Are we going to get food?” the other man asked. “I’m starving.”

I grunted in agreement. Since I had been deprived of my morning drink, my late morning drink, my lunch drink, and my afternoon drink, I was starving also. It was amazing how hungry a person could be when they weren’t drunk, though I preferred my lunch to be liquid. Now that I was off the plane, I might as well check out the local cuisine and see what trouble I could get myself up to.

“Are you good?” Rae asked me. “Or do I need to kick your ass like I did last time?”

I glowered at her, not that she was at all intimidated by me. What was with this chick? She was some kind of Xena Warrior Princess, and that was hot, but not when she took it out on me, or when she interfered with my drinking.

“Let’s just go,” I grumbled, heading in the direction of the vehicle they had acquired.

“As long as you behave,” she muttered.

“Give me a stiff drink and I’ll do anything you ask,” I grinned at her.

IRIS

With my feet kicked up on the table, I watched as Dash ruled over everyone on set. I chuckled to myself as I tinkered with a little bomb I was working on. It was meant to fit in a pocket, disguised as a container of Tic Tacs, with tiny little bombs inside. I wasn't sure yet if it would be useful to anyone at OPS, but it sure would be fun to play with.

Kavanaugh walked over and slumped into a chair beside me. "This whole thing is fucking stupid. If anyone's going to be the guy in the bar, it's going to be me."

I tweaked the wires inside the case, watching it carefully so I didn't blow myself up. "Sad you missed out this time around?"

"Please, like you're not itching to get on set and blow something up."

I shrugged. I wasn't so sure about that. Right now, I had bigger things on my mind. "I wouldn't say it's a priority of mine."

"Since when? You blew up a car last time."

"Yeah, but last time I didn't have a woman."

"And she's making you give up your non-EOD ways?"

"I wouldn't say that. I just don't find today as interesting as I did last time."

He jerked his head at the device in my hand. "What exactly are you doing?"

I held up the case and grinned. “Tic Tac bomb.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “That’s a bomb?”

“Do you like the orange color? Nice touch, right?”

He snorted. “Yeah, until you decide to eat one of these and blow into a million pieces.”

I paused and thought about that. “Yeah, maybe I made it a little too realistic.”

“So, what is this for?”

“Ah, I’m glad you asked. I was thinking it would be great for jobs where we might need a bomb. Or for when we’re on a job and it could turn dangerous. Or in the event that we’re in a movie theater and someone has a bigger bomb.”

“In a movie theater,” he repeated.

“You never know. It’s bound to happen.”

“And you’re going to blow them up with Tic Tacs.”

“Ah, very explosive Tic Tacs.”

He shook his head. “So, basically, you’re making them because you want to.”

“Definitely.”

“So, where’s Jane? I thought she would be all over this. Isn’t this like a mystery writer’s dream?”

I stopped working to stare at him. “Movies aren’t her thing. She gets wrapped up in the real life aspect of it all. Besides, I was interrupted this morning just as I was about to ask her something very important.”

He snorted. “What could be so important?”

I quirked an eyebrow at him. “We were alone. I was about to make love to her...”

“Okay, and you thought that would be a good time to...”

“To ask her to marry me,” I said, tossing a spare wire at him.

He sat up straight, staring at me like I was insane. “Whoa, what are you doing?”

“In this moment or in general?”

“You can’t ask her to marry you. Are you insane?”

“Insanely in love with her? Absolutely.”

He scoffed, looking away from me. “You’re all insane. What is with you guys? Don’t you know you’re all stepping into a trap?”

“Yes, I’m stepping into a love trap.”

He rolled his eyes, not liking my flare for words. “I’m serious. Why does everyone have to get married and have kids? Pretty soon, I won’t be able to walk around here without spitting on a woman.”

“I really wouldn’t do that. Spitting on people is considered rude.”

“You know what I mean. It’s like the band is breaking up.”

I leaned forward, looking at him intently. “I’m not sure if you know this, but we’re not in a band. This is a security company. See, we protect people here, and if you’re looking for music, you’ll have to see the psychopath singing show tunes.”

“I was turning a phrase,” he grumbled. “Why do you have to shit on everything?”

I grinned at him, thoroughly enjoying myself. “Because I can. I’m in a great mood. Life is good.”

“Yeah, except you said you were going to propose to her. What happened?”

“I was interrupted,” I grunted. “And now the mood is gone. I’m trying to figure out a new way to propose.”

“Go big or go home. Take her up in a hot air balloon.”

“Really? You think taking her up in one of those death traps is the way to go?”

“Think about it,” he said, getting way too excited about this. “Not that I recommend the institution of marriage, but if you’re going to do it, go big or go home.”

“I’ll go home and propose there.”

“What’s with you? You live for danger.”

“Yes, the kind of danger I can control.”

“Ha! Tell me one thing about bombs that gives you control and I’ll maybe buy that line of bullshit.”

I opened my mouth but realized he had a point. “Well—”

“Exactly, you have no answer to that. The truth is, you were in the moment, and now you don’t know how to get it back.”

“I could take her to a nice dinner,” I said, thinking out loud.

“Please, do not become one of those men that sticks a ring in the tiramisu.”

I scoffed at that. “Why would I do that? If we’re going to have dessert, it’ll be much better than tiramisu.”

“Better than tiramisu. Are you kidding me?”

“It’s not sweet and delicious. What’s the appeal?”

“It’s a caffeinated dessert. Do you understand that?” he said, stressing every word.

“Look, I don’t get the appeal. Just like with the hot air balloon. What’s the point?”

“The view,” he snapped. “Just imagine how beautiful it would be.”

I laughed at the ridiculousness of his idea. “Yeah, a great view of cows. That sounds like the way I would go. Sorry, did I ruin your idea for a proposal?”

“No, because I’m not getting married, so I don’t have to think about stupid shit like where to propose.”

“Seriously, if it were you and you finally shoved aside all of your family crap—”

“I don’t have family crap,” he said defensively.

That was a bunch of bullshit and we all knew it. Kavanaugh’s old man was a senator, the worst of the worst. He smiled sweetly for the crowd and played up his charm to his supporters, but he was an asshole and a cheater. That was the reason Kavanaugh would never settle down. He didn’t want to end up like his old man. The fear of turning out like him was too much for him to ever consider a real relationship.

“Okay,” I said mockingly. “But let’s say that you finally found that woman. Let’s say she was everything you ever dreamed of, that you couldn’t picture spending a day without her. Blonde and—”

“Brunette,” he corrected. “I fucking hate blondes.”

Probably because they reminded him of the women his father whored around with. “Alright, she’s a redhead. Fucking gorgeous and everything you’ve ever wanted. She understands you, sees beneath the man you’ve become to the man that first ran from the life you were destined to be part of. When she looks at you, your whole world stops. Just her smile could melt your sad, hardened heart. And you know that if you ever let her go, it would be the worst day of your life. You’d never be the same after that.”

He watched me carefully, almost as if he was trying to imagine a life like that. “And that’s what it’s like for you and Jane?”

“No, I don’t have your tragic story,” I grinned. “I just fell for the woman of my dreams the moment I saw her.”

“She was a slob from the moment you saw her.”

“Touché, but she’s still the woman of my dreams.”

He stood up, sighing heavily. “I’m afraid I can’t help you out with this one. I wouldn’t now, nor will I ever ask a woman to marry me. It’s not in the cards for me.” He slapped me on the shoulder. “But good luck with that.”

He turned and walked out of the room and I grinned. I was going to have so much fun fucking with him when he finally found her.

After spending way too much time watching the shittiest performance anyone at OPS had ever given, I headed back to Jane. I hadn't seen her all day, which was difficult as hell to deal with. There were so many fucking days that I had a hard time not going home to see her. If I wasn't on a job, I just wanted to be in her pants.

God, I was turning into such a pussy. Maybe Kavanaugh was right on some level, but I didn't really care. Jane was the other half of me. No proposal was too grand for her. Now, I just had to figure out what to do to make up for what happened this morning. It seemed a little underwhelming to ask her during lovemaking now that I thought about it. I needed a grand gesture, but maybe a hot air balloon was going too far.

"Hey!" Thumper shouted, hobbling down the hall. "Wait up."

I watched with mild curiosity as he moved at a much slower pace than usual. I hadn't seen him like this since we were in the tunnel and I used his leg as a torch.

"What happened to you?"

"What happened to me?" He scoffed. "Fucking Edu ran into me with a car on set."

Okay, I hadn't been expecting that. "Like, on purpose?"

"Who fucking knows. Now my leg is all fucked up. I need someone to take me in tomorrow for repairs. It's too late tonight."

"Yeah, sure. Let me see it."

He finally stopped just feet in front of me and bent over, pulling up his pant leg. I winced at the crushed metal right at the knee. "What about Bree?"

"She doesn't like seeing this shit."

"She's going to be with you for the rest of her life," I said in confusion. "Why is this a problem now?"

“It’s not a problem for her, so much as me. She gets all teared up every time she sees it. I can’t fucking stand it.”

I nodded. “Because you don’t know how to handle the tears.”

“No, because I fucking hate her looking at me like I can’t hack it. I dragged her ass out of the fucking desert. I saved her fucking life when she was about to be murdered. And I had my skull bashed in,” he scoffed. “Now she acts like my leg is some sort of liability.”

That didn’t really sound right to me. I had never known Bree to look at him that way. So, why was it happening now? “She’s never looked at you like that before.”

“Yeah,” he scoffed. “It’s fucking pissing me off.”

“When did this start?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t write it down in my diary,” he snapped.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I was just asking a question.”

“The messenger? You’ve got your phrases messed up.”

“Whatever. I’m just trying to understand why this is a problem all of a sudden.”

“I’d like to know too, but I don’t need you trying to decipher my problems.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fuck, you’re so dramatic. Is it that time of the month for you?”

“Don’t you start with me too. I had to deal with Bree acting like this for the past month. Fuck, I thought PMS was supposed to end!” he practically shouted.

“Wait, did you say over the past month?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, *clearly*, you need a fucking calendar.”

His jaw clenched hard as he stared at me. “You want to say that again?”

“Yeah, check your fucking calendar.”

“I swear to God, if I have to hear the word clearly one more time, I’ll fucking shoot someone. Even without FNG around, Dash still uses it to memorialize the fucker.”

“And while your hatred of the word clearly is so fascinating, I was referencing the fact that your woman is pregnant.”

He barked out a laugh. “She’s not pregnant.” But the longer he stared at me, the more his grin faded. “What are you talking about?”

“An abnormally long amount of time for a woman to be crying in her Cheerios? Weeping at the sight of your metal leg? PMS symptoms that never abate?”

“Look at you using big words,” he muttered, but I could see him doing the calculations in his head. “She can’t be.”

“Oh, I had no idea you had a platonic relationship with her,” I jeered.

He shook his head, running his hand over his head as he stumbled back a step. “No, it’s not...she can’t be.” He turned to me, grabbing my shirt in his fists. “She can’t be fucking pregnant. I’m not ready to be a dad.”

“Um...I don’t think it has anything to do with that.”

He released me and wobbled again. I almost reached out to steady the guy, but I wasn’t sure he was ready for anyone to be near him, not when he was so clearly freaking out.

“If she’s pregnant...” He trailed off, staring at the ground in disbelief. I wasn’t sure if I should stay or go. He seemed to be working through something, and while I should be a good friend and stay, I wasn’t sure this was really my thing. Plus, I had to figure out how to propose to my woman. Actually...

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to know a good way for me to propose to Jane, would you?”

He slowly looked up at me, his face paler than usual. “I...”

“You what?”

“I...”

“I’m going to need more than that. I can’t read minds.”

“I...”

I sighed. I’d lost him. This was going nowhere fast. I slapped him on the shoulder and he fell into the wall, just barely catching himself. “Well, this has been fun. Let me know how it all pans out.”

I turned to leave, feeling slightly bad about clearing things up for him, only to abandon him, but what was I supposed to do? I couldn’t just stand out in the hall all day with him while he had a midlife crisis.

I whistled to myself as I made my way back to the house. By this time of night, Jane should be done writing, as long as she wasn’t hooked on a new part of her book. Then it would be impossible to drag her away. Not even a proposal would get her attention.

I nodded to a few of the guys who’d already made it back to the house and headed straight for my room, despite being starving. Maybe I should just surprise her and take her out for a really nice dinner. I mean, if I could find a dinner jacket that still fit me. I couldn’t exactly propose to her in tactical pants.

I swung the door open but didn’t immediately see her. “Jane?” When she didn’t answer from the adjoining room, I walked over there, sure she was inside. But she wasn’t there either. I called her phone but got no answer. I went in search of her. She was probably hanging out with the girls, but the few I saw straggling around hadn’t seen her all day. She was here when I woke up, so where the hell was she?

THUMPER

Pregnant.

I still couldn't wrap my head around it, but now that IRIS pointed it out, everything made sense. She'd been extra weepy lately—not that I would ever call Bree weepy. She was, but if she knew I thought that, I'd get a kick to the nuts. Not by her, but by one of the other girls for making her cry.

Bree was a special woman, completely unlike everyone else at OPS. While the other women loved to kick ass and learn about the latest weapons, Bree didn't care about any of that. In fact, the last thing she ever wanted to see again was a gun. Our time on the run really shook her up. I was surprised that she wanted to have anything to do with me by the time all was said and done.

There was no denying how much we loved each other. While others saw Bree's dislike of weapons as a hindrance, I saw it as a miracle. She was the one person I could see at the end of the day and not have to discuss work with. She didn't want to talk about it or ever think of me being in danger. And I loved that she filled me in on her latest investment opportunities. I didn't understand half of what she was saying, but she was just so damn beautiful when she was in her element. I loved the way her eyes lit up when she talked about finances.

But that could all change with a baby. She was probably worried about me never coming home and seeing our child again. And the thought of me losing my other leg was most likely more than she could handle. It wasn't going to happen. I

had never been in better shape. Having only one good leg would do that to a guy.

The amount of strength it took to walk with a robotic leg was more than anyone could imagine. People saw this metal piece of machinery and assumed it made my life easier. Sure, it did when I compared it to not having a leg at all, but the energy used to move even a few feet with this thing was something no one would ever understand. As a result, I became a beast, training harder and building other muscles to compensate for what I was lacking.

But she didn't realize that. She understood a little, giving me massages and helping me when things went sideways, but it just wasn't the same.

I paced outside the house on the porch, trying to figure out how to get her to tell me what was really going on. She was extremely emotional, probably volatile, and her hormones were out of control. Right now, Google was my friend.

I pulled out my phone and started researching ways to talk to a pregnant woman. But just one link into the violent acts a woman could commit while pregnant led me down a rabbit hole I wasn't sure I could claw my way out of.

High sexual activity, mood swings so great that a woman could commit murder, bleeding gums, lightning crotch pains... the further into my research I got, the less I wanted her to tell me anything. I wasn't sure I was equipped to deal with the side effects I was reading about. And I definitely didn't want to be murdered for asking the wrong question.

I glanced inside and saw her staring at me through the window. The tears on her face were evident. She was crying, probably having some horrible meltdown. I couldn't stay out here any longer. I needed to go inside and get this over with.

I swung the door open and smiled at her nervously. "Hey, I..." I tried, but the words wouldn't come. Everything I wanted to say was on the tip of my tongue, but refused to actually leave my mouth.

"Yes?"

She looked at me so hopefully that I just couldn't say anything yet. I wanted to keep the illusion of things being normal for a little while longer. "I was thinking we should go out for dinner. Someplace nice."

"Yeah?" she asked, her voice full of hope. She swiped at her tear-stained face and gave me a beautiful smile. It wouldn't be long before that smile morphed into something ugly and hateful. And then I would only have the guys to save me.

"Yeah," I laughed nervously. "I'll get cleaned up and we can go."

"Okay, I'll wear something nice."

I nodded and hurried upstairs, rushing into the room and shutting the door behind me. Not that it mattered. We shared the same room. My space was hers. Her space was mine. She would eventually come in this room and demand to know why I locked her out. Then I would have to say something to explain my erratic behavior and she'd catch on. It wouldn't be long before she'd be yelling at me and threatening my life. Pregnancy did crazy things to a woman.

And apparently, a man too, because I was hiding in my room like a scared twenty-something that got my girlfriend pregnant instead of a grown-ass man that took care of shit. Shaking my head, I walked to the bathroom and quickly slipped into the shower. I sat down on my bench, resting my head in my hands as I contemplated how this night would go. If I got through it in one piece, I'd consider myself a lucky man.

"Hey."

Her voice jerked me out of my thoughts, terrifying me and turning me on all at the same time. She was standing before me naked, beautiful as ever. And when she walked toward me, I almost forgot my terror over this whole situation. I let my eyes roam over her body, trying to find any sign that she was pregnant. Her hips might be a little wider, but it was hard to tell. And the only way to check her boobs was...well, I stared

at them, but really, a guy needed a good handful—just to be sure.

She stepped between my spread thighs and wrapped her arms around my neck giving me a front row seat to her beautiful breasts. I was right there, in the perfect position to take her and have my way with her, but I couldn't do it.

Those breasts were no longer mine. They now belonged to the kid growing inside her belly. Panic gripped me, making it impossible for me to do anything. I was paralyzed with fear, with the idea of confronting my own mortality.

Okay, that was taking things a little too far.

But the fear was real, and if I stayed in the shower with her, I was bound to blurt out something stupid, effectively ruining this state of denial I was in. I pushed off the bench, wobbling as I stood on only one leg. Bree gripped my arms, a look of confusion on her face as I laughed nervously and reached just beyond her, shutting off the water.

“You know, we should go so we don't miss our reservation.”

“But—”

Reaching out of the shower, I grabbed the bar for support and hopped out of the bathroom, narrowly avoiding falling on my ass. I could feel her disappointment searing into my back, but now wasn't the time to talk. I needed to wrap my head around the impending arrival and come up with a good reaction before I blew our relationship apart. If I didn't, I stood no chance of coming out of this alive.

I guided her to the table, nearly falling on my face when I was so distracted that I almost fell into the waiter standing at a nearby table. I was a bundle of nerves, sweating profusely as I thought about what she would say to me when I confronted her. This was the best place to do it—in a restaurant where she couldn't lose it and yell at me.

I held out her chair for her, if only to give myself a few more seconds before I had to stare her down for the rest of dinner. Clearing my throat, I pulled at the tie strangling me and casually walked over to my chair. At least, I thought I was being casual.

“Is your leg bothering you?”

“No,” I said, pulling out my chair. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re just...walking weird. We don’t have to do this if you’re not feeling up to it.”

And here we went with the pity and concern. It was starting already. She was worried how I was going to carry a baby around with only one good leg.

“No, I’m fine.” I smiled and grabbed my water, chugging it like I’d just run a marathon. No matter how much I drank, I just couldn’t get the thought of her belly growing larger out of my head. I stared at her stomach with every swallow, wondering just how large it would get.

“Thumper,” she said, waving her hand in front of my face.

“Hmm?” I asked, setting my glass down.

“Why are you being so weird?”

“Me?” I laughed. “I’m not being weird.”

“Yes, you are. You’ve been acting strange all night. Did something happen on the set?”

“The set?”

God, I couldn’t even focus. All I could think about was this baby and how it would ruin everything. It wasn’t that I didn’t like kids. In fact, when I imagined my life with someone, Bree was surrounded by kids.

But that was fantasy and this was reality.

I wanted them so much, but knowing they were actually on the way was daunting. I couldn’t do this. I wasn’t father material. I would fail miserably. I’d end up as one of those bad puff pieces in the news about the guy who let his kids go on the metal slides, only for their skin to burn off in the summer

heat. That was exactly how I remembered my childhood. You just weren't living as a kid if you didn't have third-degree burns on the backs of your thighs.

"Thumper, I know we've been a little...distant lately."

I reached for my glass, but it was empty. With nothing to distract me, I sat back and pretended everything was good. "Really?"

"Yes, and...If there's something you want to tell me, I promise to keep an open mind."

She promised to keep an open mind... How would that go? I'm freaking out about having kids and I've decided I'm just not ready. Can you return the one in your belly?

"No, there's nothing."

Her eyes dropped to her lap as she fidgeted with her napkin. She was clearly distressed, and was no doubt wondering about how to tell me she was pregnant. I couldn't take it anymore. I was just about to take her hand in mine when she looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

"I know I'm not the same woman you met out in the desert. Things change and I know that's hard."

"Relationships are work," I said, trying not to make this any harder on her.

"And I know I've put on a few pounds recently. The truth is...I've been binging on chocolate a lot more lately."

I knew that, but I didn't care. I liked the curves on her body. But that wasn't the reason she was gaining weight.

"Look, a few extra pounds are nothing."

Her head snapped up and she glared at me. "They may be nothing to you, but I know what a few pounds does to a relationship."

I scratched my jaw, unsure how to walk around the bomb ready to explode. "Bree, a few pounds is to be expected when something like this happens."

"So, you admit it."

Bingo, I was caught. “Yes,” I said, taking a deep breath. “And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

She scoffed at that. This wasn’t going to be easy. “You’re sorry? Do you have any idea what this is doing to me?”

“Yes, in fact, I did a little research. I know exactly what you’re going through.”

“Oh, well I’m so glad you did research so you would know how I feel!” she snapped.

I glanced around the restaurant, chuckling as I waved to the people staring at us. I had to find a way to keep things down. “Bree,” I said through clenched teeth. “Let’s try not to make a scene.”

She tossed her napkin on the table, furious with me now. I thought this would be the perfect place to talk about this, that it would keep either of us from doing something stupid. Then she picked up her glass of water and tossed it in my face.

Apparently, I was wrong.

I shoved the chair back as she turned and ran for the door. “Bree!” I shouted, chasing after her. All of this over a pregnancy. Imagine if something was really wrong.

I shoved my way through the restaurant, catching up to her just outside on the sidewalk. I spun her around, catching her hands as she swung at me. “Hey! Knock it off!”

“You two-timing bastard!”

I opened my mouth to yell at her when I realized what she said. “Huh?”

“I know about the other woman, alright?”

“The other...Bree, what the hell are you talking about?”

Tears dripped down her face and she refused to look at me. “I know, okay? I should have figured it would happen. It’s not like I had a choice in moving out here, but I really thought we had something special,” she cried.

“We do. What are you talking about?”

She looked up at me, sniffing and swiping at her nose. “I heard the voicemail, okay? I didn’t mean to look at your phone, but it just happened.”

“What just happened?” I was so confused. I thought back to every phone call I’d ever had, but nothing jumped out at me.

“The other woman!” she snapped. “Candy.”

“Candy?” I said incredulously.

“Yes, the bimbo Candy. I know about her, okay? I know you slept with her!”

I burst out laughing, which was probably the wrong thing to do, but it was just ridiculous. “Bree, I don’t think I’ve ever even been alone in the same room with Candy.”

“Then why is she leaving you dirty messages on your phone?”

“Uh...I have no fucking clue. I haven’t heard any of them.”

“That’s because I erased them! Do you really think I wanted you to hear the things that skank said to you?”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her into the shadows. I felt like the entire restaurant was watching us through the front door. And I was confused enough as it was without other people staring at me and making this harder. “Baby, Candy is with Bowie. I mean, I think he’s getting an annulment, but she is definitely not with me in any way.”

She looked up at me in confusion. “Then why did you say you understood? That you knew how I felt?”

I ran my hand over my mouth, chuckling at the absurdity of it all. She wasn’t fucking pregnant. “You were gaining weight because you thought I was cheating on you,” I laughed.

“Is that funny?”

“No, but I thought it was much worse. I thought you were pregnant!”

I couldn't stop the laughter. I was so fucking relieved. After a day of panic, I was finally free. "Yes!" I shouted up at the sky. "Fuck, I thought my life was about to end."

But my laughter stopped when I saw the downcast expression on her face. "You don't want a baby?"

"No, it's not that at all. I just...you know, with everything going on, you've been crying a lot and when you look at my leg...baby, I just don't want anything to change between us. I'm happy just as we are."

Her face crinkled up and tears poured down her face.

"Bree—"

"I'm fucking pregnant, you jackass!"

She turned and stomped away as I clutched my heart, sure that I was about to expire right there on the fucking pavement. Pregnant. IRIS was right, and I was the biggest asshole of all time.

SCOTTIE

“We made it.” I sighed in relief as soon as we were in Florida, ready to refuel.

“Yeah, I could have gone for a less eventful plane ride,” Duke said, getting to his feet. “You want to open the plane and get us out of here?”

I spun around in my seat to face him. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to be a little more grateful. What you just saw was flying unlike anything you’ve ever imagined.”

“You’re right about that. I never imagined I would nearly die in a plane with you. Twice.”

“That doesn’t count,” I said, unbuckling my belt. “You weren’t even conscious for the last plane ride.”

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t almost die.”

“Stop whining, you big baby,” Rae said as she walked past Duke and opened the door. “You survived then and you survived now. You’re really getting too bent out of shape over the whole plane thing.”

She was just about to lower the stairs when she stopped and stared out into the fading light.

“What is it?” I asked, stepping up beside her. “Oh, shit.”

There were at least ten men standing at the bottom of the plane, all of them wearing badges.

“That’s not good,” Rae said.

“Any ideas how to get out of this?”

“We could always shoot our way out,” she suggested.

“If IRIS was here, he could build a bomb.”

She turned and raised an eyebrow at me. “Build a bomb on the plane?”

“What? You can’t tell me with the small amount of jet fuel we have left that he couldn’t do it.”

Duke stepped up behind us and peered out. “We could always ask what they want.”

Max groaned, sitting upright as he held his head. “What the fuck happened?”

“We saved your life.”

He sighed heavily. “You know, when I got out, I was gonna see Lolita.”

“You’re not gonna see Lolita,” I said, walking over to him and hauling him up from under his arm. He stumbled around until he finally looked outside. “Well, that’s not good.”

“Does anyone have an actual solution?” Duke asked. “Maybe we should just ask them what they want.”

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “I bet they want my plane.”

“Do we have enough fuel to get out of here?”

“Not enough to get to Kansas,” I muttered.

Rae bit her lip as she thought things over. “I have a bad feeling we’re being set up.”

“For what?”

“Drugs,” she answered. “Trafficking. You name it, they probably think we have it.”

“Fuck,” I groaned.

Duke spun around and jabbed a finger into Max’s chest. “This is all your fault.”

“How is this my fault? I was in jail!”

“And we had to bust you out. I bet the police aren’t too happy that we got away.”

“Or that we kicked their asses,” Rae added.

Max scratched the back of his head. “Yeah, you might not want to let them on board.”

“And why’s that?” I asked, turning to face him.

“You couldn’t have had anything on you,” Rae said. “You were in jail.”

“No, but I have something on some very important people in the Caribbean. Why do you think they locked me up?”

“Because you told us you were arrested for fleeing the last time,” I snapped.

“Yeah, I may not have been entirely truthful. Let’s just say I’ve flown some people around to locations they may want to keep hidden. And if those locations came out, so would the enterprises they’re running.”

“But why now? Why come after you when they could have shut you up a long time ago?” I asked.

“Because he was a drunk on the island before,” Duke answered. “They didn’t think they had anything to worry about.”

“And then you went and defied them the last time you flew us off the island,” Rae surmised.

“And now they’re asking for cooperation from the Florida police department to detain you,” I said. “That’s just fucking perfect.”

He shrugged. “So...anyone have any good ideas how to get out of this?”

We were all silent for a moment, and then I turned to Rae with a grin. “How about a Lucky Seven?”

“It could work,” she nodded. Then she turned to Duke. “You’re with me.”

“Wait, where are we going?” he asked.

“Max, we’re about to commandeer us a fuel truck.”

Rae turned back to him and ran her fingers through his hair. “We’re going to distract them.”

“With what? Our charming good looks?”

“Just don’t end up in jail,” I reminded Rae.

“Please,” she huffed. “Like I would ever allow that.”

“It would be easier if we just gave them Max,” Duke grumbled.

“Which would defeat the purpose of this whole mission,” I said, shoving him toward the stairs. “Give me twenty minutes.”

I slapped him on the shoulder, giving him an extra shove toward the door. I could already hear Rae talking to the men as she lowered the stairs. If this didn’t work, we were all going to end up in jail.

I hurried to the back of the plane and hoisted up the door on the floor of the plane. “Are they gone?”

Max waited another minute, then gave me the thumbs up. I lowered myself down, jumping to the ground, then made a run for it. Max was hot on my heels as we sprinted across the airport. It was a smaller one, which made it more difficult to acquire what we needed, but also allowed us to move around without so many people watching us.

“There!” Max said from behind me.

I glanced behind me and followed the direction he was pointing. Except, that fuel truck was currently occupied. I ran up the side of the truck, staying as far away from the side mirror as possible. Pulling my weapon, I motioned for him to go around to the other side and wait three seconds. As soon as he took off, I pulled the door open and climbed up the step, slamming my fist into his face. I shoved him further inside and slid into the driver’s seat, shutting the door behind me.

“Sorry about that. We need to borrow your vehicle.”

“You can’t just steal my truck!” he said, scooting across to the other side. Max flung open the door and stepped up into the truck, shoving the guy back inside.

I put the truck in drive and headed back to the plane. “We just want to refuel our plane.”

“You’re gonna have to wait like everyone else.”

“That’s not an option,” I said, shooting him a winning smile. “I swear, we’re the good guys. We just need to borrow this vehicle and then we’ll be on our merry way.”

“This is kidnapping! You can’t do this. You’ll get arrested.”

Was this guy serious? “Not likely. And this isn’t kidnapping. You’re just taking a ride with us.”

“Yeah, that’s what all the mafia guys say. Then the police find my body buried in the woods months later after it’s been ravaged by wild bears.”

“We do not look like mafia,” I said, almost offended by that.

“Yeah, and why would the mafia bury your body in the woods?” Max added.

“Right? We’re right next to the ocean.”

“Not to mention that there is no such thing as a wild bear.”

“Exactly. All bears are wild,” I agreed.

“But if we were around bears, say in the middle of the woods, you know what would make this so much better?” Max asked.

“Zebras?”

“Whiskey.”

I shrugged. “I would think the distraction of a zebra would be better, but what do I know?”

I screeched to a halt beside the plane and flung the door open. “I’m gonna need you to come with me.”

“I’m not helping you!” the guy spat.

I looked at Max and shrugged. Then I swung my gun at his head and knocked him out. “You know, you try to be a nice guy.”

“Nobody would be that nice in the Caribbean.”

“Right? I was just asking for a little fucking help.”

I jumped down and got to work connecting the hose to the fuel tank. Meanwhile, Max was back inside, getting us ready. We didn't have long to get this thing refueled and get us out of here. If anything went wrong, we'd all end up in jail, and I was pretty sure the guy I just knocked out in the truck wouldn't be on my side.

The ping of metal on metal had me running for the other side of the truck. Once I had cover, I peeked out around the corner. A single cop was making his way toward me, and like the idiot he was, he fired again at me.

“Hey! Do you realize you're shooting at a gas truck?” I shouted.

More bullets pinged off the metal around me. “Enough of this shit.” I ran to the middle of the truck and got down on my belly, watching for his feet to come into view. I fired off two shots, hitting him just below the knee. He cried out, falling to the ground as he curled in a ball and held his leg.

After clearing the area, I ran over to the man to check on him. I wasn't a total meanie. “Why the hell would you fire at a fuel truck?”

“You stole it!”

“And so you fired at it?” I grabbed the gun out of his hands. “This is not a toy.”

I shoved it in the back of my pants but got to one knee as soon as I heard more shots. Three more men were running toward me, all of them in the clear line of sight with the truck, yet they all fired. Were they trying to blow us up?

I fired off a few shots to get them to back off, then ran for the plane. Max was readying the plane in my fucking seat, but we'd argue about that later. “How's it looking?”

“You mean aside from the fact that people want to kill us at the airport? Mostly good.”

“It could be worse. We could be in the air right now.”

“I’m not sure this is what Cash intended when he sent you to get me.”

“Yeah, well, when I started working for Cash, I didn’t intend to start flying planes again. I guess nobody gets what they want.”

“Think you can get them off my back for five fucking minutes?” Max asked.

I grinned, knowing exactly what I would do. “Yeah, I’ve got this.”

RAE

We followed security into their offices at the airport. It had been ten minutes, not nearly long enough for Scottie to do what he needed. Duke walked beside me, unsure of what my plan was. As of this moment, my only plan was to keep them distracted, but that could change depending on what they intended to do.

“Can you tell me what this is about?” I asked as they led us further into the airport.

“You came from the Caribbean where there’s a hotbed of drugs.” He turned to face us. “And you didn’t file a flight plan.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about that. You’ll have to speak to my pilot.”

“Oh, we have someone on their way to question him.”

“Then what exactly do you need from us?”

“What were you doing in the Caribbean?”

“Just picking up a friend,” I answered with a smile.

“And you?” he asked Duke.

“Along for the ride.” He placed his arm around me, pulling me in close. “I’m her husband.”

That was a stretch, but given the situation, I let it go.

The cop smiled at him. “And this friend, does he have a name?”

“I never said it was a he,” I said congenially.

“My apologies. I assumed.”

“Well, you know what they say about assumptions.”

He nodded with a knowing smile. “See, the thing is, I received an alert from the police down there, and they said you left quite the mess when you left.”

I turned to Duke, looking at him in confusion. “Did you forget to shut the water off at the hotel?”

“I’m pretty sure you did that, baby.”

“Shoot, that must have been it.”

“That wasn’t it, Ms. Dennon.”

The fact that he knew my name without asking for my ID was to be expected. As was the rattle of the cuffs coming from behind me. I sighed, wishing it didn’t have to be this way.

“I think we both know what happened down there.”

“Yes, it’s just a shame you didn’t do more research,” I said just as the man behind me grabbed my arm.

I twisted out of his grip, then turned and slammed the heel of my hand into his nose. He stumbled backward, blood gushing from his face as he stared at me in horror. I pulled my gun as I spun back around, firing two shots at the men Duke was fighting.

They dropped to the ground, crying out in pain as they held their wounds. Neither of them would be following us now.

Duke shook his head at me. “I had them.”

“Yes, but now I have them.”

“You didn’t need to shoot them,” he sighed, grabbing my hand as we took off for the entrance.

“I didn’t need to, but they were pissing me off and wasting my time.”

“I thought that was the whole point?” he argued as we shoved the doors open and ran outside. “They’re cops. They’re

just doing their job.”

“Oh, it was just a little leg wound. They’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“You could have just punched them in the face,” he argued.

“Yes, but this is less embarrassing for them. Beaten up by a girl is way more humiliating than getting shot.”

I ducked down at the sound of gunfire and hid behind a luggage cart. Duke and I peeked over the top, watching the scene play out in front of us. Scottie fired off a few shots, then ran for the plane.

“There!” Duke pointed to our right.

“Three of them. That’s not so bad,” I said, checking my gun.

“How about now?”

“What?” I looked up again, and this time there were five more men running out of the building, right for the plane. “That only makes it more fun.”

Duke sighed heavily. “You know, sometimes I wish you were just a normal woman.”

“And what fun would that be?” I asked. I fired at the men running toward the plane.

Scottie got into the truck moments later and drove straight at the men. Gasoline leaked heavily from the truck, leaving a trail in its wake. I ejected my magazine and slammed another in place, then aimed at the wet line running toward the airport.

“What are you doing?” Duke shouted.

“Lighting it up.” I fired three shots, igniting the gasoline that led straight to Scottie’s truck.

“He’s still in there.”

“He’ll get out. Come on, let’s go!” I started running for the plane, but as I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Duke wasn’t following. He was still staring at the plane. “Duke!”

“Scottie’s still in there!”

I rolled my eyes. He was being so dramatic. The truck swerved toward the airport, and then I saw Scottie roll on the ground after he jumped from the truck.

“Happy?”

“You know, it’s just slightly disturbing how cavalier you all are with each other’s lives.”

“Run!” Scottie shouted just as the flames caught up to the truck.

I took off at a dead sprint, Duke hot on my heels. I looked over my shoulder, and that’s when the world exploded. We were tossed in the air by the force of the explosion, hitting the ground hard. I gasped but sucked in no air. Then Duke was leaning over me, shouting at me before hauling me up into his arms and tossing me over his shoulder.

The position I was in did nothing for my lack of oxygen, and it wasn’t until he set me down at the foot of the stairs that I was finally able to draw in a breath. I would have collapsed if it weren’t for Duke holding me upright.

“Was that what you had in mind?” he asked.

Scottie shoved between us as he hit the stairs. “No time to talk! Let’s move!”

I hurried up the stairs on shaky legs. Scottie pulled the stairs up and shut the door, then rushed to the cabin. “Cash is gonna kill us when we get back!”

Duke hastily shoved me into a seat and started to do up my buckles, but when I saw the look of concern on his face, I shoved his hands away, tearing off the belt.

Looking out the window, I saw men running at us. “Scottie, get this bird in the air!”

He spun around and glared at me. “I’m going. Just keep your pants on!”

“Scottie, we don’t have—”

“I fucking know!” he shouted. “Talk to Cash about it. I told him we needed a fucking fighter jet!”

The plane started moving, but not fast enough if we were going to get away from these guys without a few bullets in the engine.

“I’m stepping outside,” I said over my shoulder as I rushed to the back. I grabbed my bag and dug around inside until I found what I was looking for.

“You’re what?” Duke shouted, getting to his feet. “Rae, we’re on a moving plane!”

“I’ll only be a minute!” I yanked open the hatch and slid down feet first until I was balancing on the landing gear.

“You don’t step outside when a plane is about to take off! This isn’t *Mission Impossible!*”

I popped back up and grinned at my dear boyfriend. “You’re right. It’s Mission Possible.”

I pulled the pin on the grenade and launched it across the pavement. Just as I was pulling the pin on the second, the first exploded. I slipped and I would have fallen from the landing gear if it weren’t for Duke laying on his belly just inside the plane, holding my shirt in his fist.

I grinned up at him and he rolled his eyes. “Fine, throw it.”

I tossed the second and scrambled up with the help of Duke hauling me up by my pants. The second explosion ignited just as my feet cleared the hatch. He shoved the door back in place and locked it tight.

Panting hard, he shook his head at me. “You and I are gonna have a talk about stepping outside when the plane is moving.”

I K E

I pulled up to the hotel after the long drive and shut the car off. As nice as this car was, it was killer on my legs. I needed room to stretch out and this didn't provide it. I walked inside and paid for my room, then went back out for my bag.

I was just about to slam the car door when I heard a muffled sound coming from my trunk. Pulling the gun from the holster at my hip, I very carefully walked to the back of the car and pressed the key fob to pop the trunk. I jerked it open, holding my weapon on the person inside.

"Shit," I breathed out. "Jane, what the fuck are you doing in there?" I almost had a heart attack knowing that I pulled a gun on her. IRIS would have killed me if something had happened to her. Not that it would have gotten that far. I would have put a bullet in my own head if I had shot her. Jane was the one person I would never let anything happen to.

She winced as she tried to get out of the trunk, and I held out my hand, grasping onto hers as I pulled her out. She cried out when she stretched out her leg.

"Oh my God! That hurts so much."

"That's what happens when you hide in someone's trunk. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that you should have brought me along and the only way to make that happen was to go on my own," she snapped. "And I wouldn't be hurting if you weren't going a hundred miles over the speed limit and hitting every pothole along the way."

“I wasn’t hitting every pothole. Do you know what that would do to my car?”

“No,” she said, sticking her tongue out at me. “And it doesn’t matter. You should drive more carefully.”

“Says the woman who snuck into my car so she could tag along while I do something dangerous.”

“I wouldn’t have had to sneak around if you had just brought me.”

“I didn’t bring you because this trip isn’t at all what you think.”

“But you said you had a job.”

“No, *you* said I had a job. I didn’t correct you.”

She opened her mouth, then glared at me. “So, if you’re not on the job, what exactly are you doing here?”

I sighed, not wanting to tell her. I did have a job. That much was true, but it wasn’t the only reason I came out here. And I didn’t really want her around for the second reason.

“Look, you’ll just have to stay here tonight. I’ll call IRIS and he can pick you up.”

“Like hell he will,” she said, stomping past me toward the building.

Was I missing something? Why was she so insistent on staying with me? Maybe this was more than just needing inspiration. Maybe she was fighting with IRIS, which pleased me greatly, but didn’t help me out for the trip. She needed to go home.

I turned and followed her, grabbing my bag on the way. She really wasn’t going to let this go, which didn’t surprise me at all. She was tenacious like that. When I stepped inside, she was already waiting for me at the elevator. I whistled for her, pointing down the hall.

“You’re not staying on the third floor?”

Yeah, I always stayed on the third floor, but they didn’t have one available. “Not tonight.”

She watched me warily. “Are you okay?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, you’re not staying on the third floor and you don’t want me around.” She gasped, stepping back. “Oh my God. Were you going to meet a prostitute?”

“You know, I think I’m a little offended by that.” I shook my head, wondering where that came from. “I’m not staying on my usual floor, so I must be meeting a prostitute?”

“And you don’t want me around,” she argued.

“Because you’re with another guy. It’s just wrong.”

“You never cared before.”

“I like to poke at IRIS. That doesn’t mean I want you to disappear overnight without letting him know where you are.” I stuck my keycard in the door and shoved it open, allowing her to enter first.

She rushed past me into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. I heard her moans as she released her bladder. With all those hours in my trunk, she must be starving. I walked over to the telephone and ordered room service from the restaurant attached to the hotel. Just as I was finishing, she walked out, wiping down her face with a washcloth.

“Feel better?” I asked, hanging up the phone.

“Much. That trunk looked so clean when I got in. But spending all day in it reminded me of something very important.”

“Tight spaces aren’t easy to breathe in?”

“That, and it’s hard to go to the bathroom when you can’t get out without being caught.”

She sank down on the bed and groaned. “I need a massage.” She glanced over at me and batted her eyes.

“Oh, no,” I huffed out a laugh. “I’m not falling for that. The second I start giving you a massage, IRIS will burst through the door and put a bullet in me.”

“He doesn’t know where I am.”

“I sort of figured that, but it doesn’t mean that he didn’t figure out your little escape.” I took out my cell phone and held it out to her. “Call him.”

“Not a chance.”

“If he thinks you’re missing, do you know what he’ll do? I don’t want to be responsible for him burning down the town to find you.”

“He wouldn’t burn down the town,” she muttered, lying right to my face.

“Like hell. You know him. And as much as I don’t like the guy, he loves you. He would go to the ends of the earth to protect you.”

She sat up and crossed her legs. “Why don’t you like him? You never told me.”

I walked forward and bent down until I was in her face. “Because he won you.” I turned and walked away, needing my space from her.

“What do you mean?”

I grabbed a water out of the mini fridge and opened it, chugging the contents. I didn’t think she really needed the explanation. Then again, she was naive when it came to Alexander Pierce. It was very possible she had no idea what she meant to me. But I wasn’t about to get into that with her right now.

I turned around and dialed IRIS. If she wasn’t going to do it, I would. I raised the phone to my ear and waited, but it didn’t take her long to figure out what I had done.

“Don’t you dare!” she said, leaping off the bed.

“Hello?”

“It’s IKE. I don’t suppose you’re missing something.”

“How could you?” Jane gasped.

“Goddamnit! She’s with you?”

“Got into my trunk. I didn’t realize she was with me until I got out at my hotel.”

“She’s at a hotel with you?” he yelled.

I handed the phone over to a very pissed-off Jane. “I think he’s upset. You might want to calm down before he comes out here and kills me.”

She glared at me, snatching the phone out of my hands. I didn’t bother to listen as she tried to talk him down. I slid the door open on my patio and lit a cigarette. I needed it if I was going to make it through the night.

Between the job ahead of me and the pitstop I had to make along the way, the last thing I needed was Jane at my side, digging into my life in a way I’d never allowed before. We didn’t have that relationship because I’d never let her in. I knew she was dangerous for me.

At first, I thought she was a nuisance. But she was cute and fun to be around, so I allowed her to follow me. After a while, I looked forward to her finding me, to seeing this mess of a woman searching for inspiration. Then she put me in her books, writing me in such a way that I wanted to be that man in the books. She wrote me as a man in search of justice, misunderstood, and desperate to right wrongs at any cost.

If only I really was that man.

I took another drag of my cigarette, stiffening when I heard her come outside. “Does he forgive you?”

“He’s coming to get me,” she grumbled. She snatched the cigarette out of my hand and inhaled deeply, which was a mistake since she wasn’t a smoker. She started coughing hard, blowing the smoke away from her face.

Grinning, I took the cigarette from her and put it between my lips as I rubbed her back. “Okay?”

“How do you smoke those?” she asked, wheezing hard.

“I’m used to it.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Then why did you try it?”

“Because I wanted to know what it was like.”

Just like me. She wanted to know what it was like to walk on the wild side. But I knew she wouldn't like what she saw. My life wasn't anything like IRIS's. I wasn't the good guy he was. I didn't work in the name of justice as she thought. My allegiance could be bought for the right price, which was why I was shocked that I allowed myself to be talked into working for Cash.

It was because of her. I wanted to be close to her, to remain in her life.

No, that was wrong, I wanted *her* to remain in *my* life. I needed her. Something about her purity made me want to be the man she pictured me as, even if I knew it was never going to happen.

“You should get some sleep,” I said, turning away from her and taking another drag of my cigarette.

“Wait, what are you going to do?”

“Work.”

“But it's night,” she laughed.

“Yeah, the perfect time to take care of business.”

She put her hands on her hips, standing her ground. “If you think you're going without me, you're mistaken.”

“Jane,” I sighed. “I can't do that. Trust me when I say that you don't want to go with me on this one.”

“I do,” she insisted.

“No, you think you want to, but once you see what I really do, you won't even want to talk to me,” I snapped.

Her eyes lit with fire the longer she stared at me. I knew I wasn't going to win this one, which probably worked out for the best. She didn't have any purpose in being around a guy like me, and the sooner she saw that the better.

“Fine, you want to come?”

“That’s why I hid in your trunk.”

I gritted my teeth, knowing I was going to regret this.
“Fine. Let’s go.”

“Stay in the car.”

“But—”

My head snapped in her direction, effectively cutting off her argument. I watched her throat work as she swallowed down her fear. It was about time she started realizing who I really was. As much as I hated this new look of fear, I knew she would thank me one day for opening her eyes.

I flung the door open and stepped out, slamming it behind me. Buttoning my jacket, I strode across the lot to the building where my guy was working. He didn’t know I was coming or that I was sent to send a message. But as soon as he saw me, the game would be up.

I opened the front door and walked past the desk as if I owned the place. The woman started to stand to stop me, but with one look, she knew not to interfere. I walked straight into the back where the suppliers sorted their shipments. Across the room, Andrew stood with a clipboard barking out orders. As soon as he turned my way, his face paled considerably.

He looked around for someone to help him, but he knew there was no way out. I didn’t bother taking out my gun yet. It shouldn’t be necessary. Unless he did something stupid.

“Ike...I need more time.”

“You’re out of time,” I said, walking straight up to him and slamming my fist into his face.

He turned with the hit, nearly falling to the ground.
“Please! I just need a little more time!”

“Time isn’t something Moreno is willing to give.”

I hit him again and again, watching as blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. But I wasn't nearly close to being done. With the fourth punch, he dropped to his knees. I slammed my foot into his gut, watching as he doubled over on the ground.

In truth, Andrew was a good guy who just fell behind on his payments. He wasn't trying to cheat Moreno out of his money, but it wasn't up to me to decide how he wanted to run his business. After another hard kick, he fell to the ground, crying out in pain. Everyone around me had stopped moving, not trying to interfere. They knew it was not only pointless, but would only get them in trouble with me.

"Andrew, you knew this was coming. You should have taken steps to ensure this didn't happen."

He coughed, spitting blood from his mouth as he tried to push off the ground. "I'll have it for him with this shipment. I just need a little time."

I sighed heavily. I hated when these guys got into bed with Moreno. They were regular guys that tried to walk on the dark side, but ended up in over their heads. And that wasn't just with Moreno. Drugs were a dangerous business if you crossed the wrong person. On the best of days, I took five or six of these jobs, but I tried not to do too many of them. It was the shadier side of my business and I didn't like to fall too deep into this side of the job.

"Andrew, you know time is up."

"Please!" he shouted. "Give me two days. Tell him I'll have everything plus interest. I swear!"

It wasn't often that I went out of my way for one of these guys. Having sympathy for someone who willingly broke the law wouldn't do me any favors. But I happened to like Andrew, which was why I didn't bring out my gun from the start. Scaring the shit out of him could be just as effective. Still, Moreno wouldn't let this go with just a slap on the wrist.

I unbuttoned my jacket and pulled out my gun. His eyes went wide the moment he understood what was happening. Or

what he thought was going to happen. “Andrew, you know I can’t let you just walk away. Moreno wants blood, and that’s what he’s going to get.”

“No!”

I spun, pointing my gun at the very person I didn’t want to see me like this. The terrified look on her face was precisely what I needed but hoped I’d never see.

“Get back in the car!” I commanded.

She ran over to me, grabbing my arm as she stared at the man lying on the ground. “IKE, what are you doing?”

“Taking care of business,” I said without an ounce of regret in my voice.

Her gaze flicked up to mine and the tears in her eyes made me weaken. They weren’t tears for this man, but for me, and I fucking hated that. “IKE,” she whispered. “Don’t do this.”

I shook her off. “This is my job. I told you not to come.”

Her lips parted, trembling slightly as she stared at me. “How could you do this?”

“With very little remorse,” I admitted.

“But—”

I shoved my face right up to hers and lowered my voice. “Get. In. The fucking. Car.”

She took a step back, then another, swallowing hard as she glanced one last time at the man, then spun on her heel and ran.

But as I turned back to the man, all I could see was the look of disappointment in her eyes. Disappointment that I hadn’t turned out to be who she hoped. But that wouldn’t change anything. She knew who I was now, and this obsession with her could finally be put to rest.

I turned back to Andrew and aimed for his knee. “Don’t miss the next payment.”

Then I fired and walked away as he wailed in the background. When I got in the car, the only sound I could hear was her sniffles coming from the seat beside me. I had just ruined everything with her. She would never see me the same way or hang around me the way she used to. IRIS would be happy about that one.

I sat there for a moment, trying to figure out what to say to her. I wasn't done with my trip yet, but doubted she would want to stay around for it. The hard part was done, but now I had to do something that I really didn't want her to see. It was a part of me I refused to share with anyone.

“Jane...” That was as far as I got. What could I really say that she would understand?

“Take me back to the hotel.”

I didn't say anything else, just put the car in drive and pulled onto the road. With any luck, IRIS would be here soon and he could take her home. Then we could all move on. She would go back to her life, and I would go back to mine.

JANE

I still couldn't believe it. He was going to kill that man over money. And it wasn't even his money! I just couldn't believe it. I kept repeating that in my head because...

Well, I couldn't fucking believe it!

I threw back the covers, still trying to wrap my head around what I just saw. The man I knew was dangerous and mysterious, but a killer? How had I not seen it? I always thought IKE was working on his own for a special brand of justice.

"Jane," he sighed from the corner of the room where he sat in a chair. His elbows rested on his knees and his shirt was unbuttoned at the top from where he callously ripped his tie from his neck. "I told you not to come."

I spun around and glared at the man I considered a friend. "At no time in our relationship did you ever mention that you worked as a...an enforcer!"

"There are a lot of things I didn't mention to you," he said, not giving any hint as to what was going on inside his head.

"Is that why you brought me along? Because you wanted me to see who you really are?"

"It worked."

"Well," I huffed out a laugh. "Job well done."

"What do you want me to say? You have this idea that I'm a good guy. You ran away from IRIS to follow me. Why?"

“Because I wanted inspiration,” I snapped. “I told you that.”

He stood suddenly and walked over to me, shoving his hands in his pockets. “And why is that? Why would you come to me when you have IRIS? He’s the man for you. He’s the one you fell in love with.”

“I don’t—”

“You never should have followed me.”

“Look, I’m running low on ideas for my books and—”

“I mean, you never should have followed me all those years ago,” he cut me off. “You’re not a woman who should be around a man like me. I should have made that clear.”

I knew what he was doing, trying to push me away, claiming that he wasn’t worthy. But I knew there was a big heart inside him just waiting for someone to come along and notice. It couldn’t be me. As much as I loved IKE in a totally platonic way, he wasn’t the man for me. But for some reason, he seemed to think I was following him out of some kind of infatuation with him. It was so much more than that. He brought me to a darker world where I could really understand the criminal mind. I wasn’t lying when I said I needed inspiration for my books. I just didn’t think he would be the criminal I would be writing about.

Hours had passed since we first arrived, and all I wanted to do was go to sleep and pretend none of this ever happened. I sighed and climbed into bed. “Are you coming?”

He snorted. “Are you kidding? And get caught in bed with you?”

I glanced back at him, ready to argue, but the look in his eyes told me to leave it alone. Was it possible that he liked me? Like, liked me like that? I never got that impression from him. It was more like he put up with me because I was an amusement for him.

I slid into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin. IKE walked over and shut the light off, then sat back in his chair. I could feel his eyes on me, watching my every move. I tried to

pretend that he was deep in thought, looking into the darkness for answers, but the truth could no longer be denied.

God, I was so foolish. I was terrible at reading the signs. Just like with Alexander Pierce, I had totally screwed this up. And what would happen with IKE now? I didn't want to lose him from my life, but there was no way IRIS would be comfortable with him around. And now I understood why IRIS had a problem with IKE. He saw things I never had.

A knock at the door had me jerking in bed. In my head, visions of the mob standing outside the door ran through my head. IKE lying in a pool of blood on the floor after he opened the door and was gunned down were just the first of the horrible thoughts that occurred to me.

But when he swung open the door, I knew none of those things were true. "IRIS," I said, tossing off the covers.

He stormed inside, barely sparing a glance at IKE as he moved to me. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"It's not what you think."

"You're in bed in IKE's room. I know exactly what this is."

My heart thundered in my chest as I tried to think of a way to explain to him that I wasn't cheating on him. But would he believe me? It looked so bad.

"I was just doing research!" I shouted. "I swear, I'm not cheating on you. But you won't let me have any fun, and I need to be out there, seeing things to give me inspiration for my novels! This isn't IKE's fault. He told me I couldn't come, but I snuck into his trunk. And then I came out here and he was going to murder someone. I swear, I didn't know. I thought I was following him for a good story. But I thought he was on the good side of the story. You know, the kind where he takes out a bad guy. I swear, I had no idea *he* was the bad guy!"

I stopped talking, breathing hard as I stared at IRIS. God, he was probably so pissed at me. And I couldn't blame him. This looked so bad. And now I was in IKE's bed, in his room.

I should have never come. If I ruined things with IRIS, I only had myself to blame.

I waited on pins and needles for him to say something—for him to put me out of my misery and just say that it was over. I knew it was coming. Tears leaked from my eyes as I thought about him saying the words, of him telling me he never wanted to see me again. I just couldn't take it. I didn't want any of this, and now I had screwed things up, just like I did when I thought I wanted Alexander Pierce over him.

He strode toward me, his hands coming up to cup my cheeks. My breath caught in my chest as I stared at him and prayed this wasn't over.

“Do you really think I give a fuck about him?” he said, his voice gruff as he swiped at a stray tear with his thumb. “You're it for me. And while I don't like the idea of you going anywhere with IKE, I know he's part of your life. Just promise me you'll always come home to me.”

A smile burst through the dam of tears. I laughed a hiccuping sob as I gripped his biceps. “It's only you. It'll always be only you.”

“Good, because it would be really fucking awkward to ask you to marry me if you wanted IKE.”

My smile dropped and I stared at him in stunned silence. “You...you want to marry me?”

He stepped back and I instantly felt the loss of his body next to mine. But then he got down on one knee and pulled a ring from his pocket. I pressed my hands to my lips, shaking my head as tears blurred my vision. The pressure in my chest was enough to choke me.

“Jane, will you—”

The door to the room burst open and IRIS spun, pressing me behind his back as he grabbed his gun and protected me at the same time.

“Down!” IKE shouted, firing off a shot.

IRIS shoved me to the ground on the other side of the bed just as an explosion tore through the room. I screamed, covering my head as the lights flickered and plaster dust fell around us. IRIS popped up and fired shot after shot until his gun was empty.

“I’m out!” he shouted to IKE.

I could hear IKE still firing as IRIS turned back to me and pressed his lips to mine. “Stay here.”

Then he was gone.

I scrambled to my knees, peeking around the edge of the bed into the darkness. I couldn’t see anything, that is, not until IRIS’s hulking figure sprang out and tackled someone from behind. I could hear the grunts of the other man as he whaled on him, landing punch after punch. I couldn’t see IKE, but he had to be around somewhere.

“IRIS! We’ve gotta move!” IKE called.

He slammed his fist into the man’s face one last time before jumping to his feet and rushing over to me. In an instant, I was hauled to my feet and we were running out the door. I didn’t even have my shoes on, but in times like this, footwear was optional.

IKE took the lead, running down the hall with his gun in hand while I ran behind him and IRIS took up the rear. I had no clue what was going on, but the excitement was perfect for my book. Although, I could have done without the proposal being cut off. Then again, it did make for a more thrilling ending than just tears and a sappy *yes*.

IKE shoved the back door open that led into the parking lot at the back of the building. He swung his gun from one corner of the parking lot to the other, watching the shadows as we slowly moved down the sidewalk.

“Shouldn’t I have a gun?” I whispered.

“Not a chance in hell,” IRIS muttered.

“But what if someone attacks me?”

He pressed his gun into my hands. “Here, hold this.”

I stopped and stared at him incredulously. “But you just said you were out.”

“But you feel better now that you’re holding it, right?”

I really wanted to smack him, but that time would come later. I took the gun, grinning at how right this felt. I was going to have to get lessons on spy crap. I couldn’t deny that I felt powerful, even if I couldn’t shoot anyone with this gun.

IKE stopped at the end of the sidewalk, ducking down behind a bush at the end. IRIS and I followed suit, waiting for his plan of attack.

“Someone must have followed me from the job.”

“Maybe someone that worked for Andrew,” I said, remembering the man’s name.

IKE shook his head. “He doesn’t have anyone on his payroll that could pull this off. And Andrew wouldn’t make it. Not with only one working knee.”

“You...” I shook my head in confusion. “You shot him in the knee?”

“What did you think I was going to do?”

“Uh, kill him,” I said dumbly. “Wasn’t that why you went in there?”

“You don’t get money from the dead,” he said, staring at me like an idiot.

I’d have to remember that for my next book. But if it wasn’t Andrew, it had to be someone that was in the room. I closed my eyes and mentally walked through the room as I remembered it.

“There were a few of his workers there. Oh, and the light was on in the office. Maybe someone was hiding in there!”

“I’m not going to stick around and find out,” IKE muttered.

“Do you have a few extra magazines?” IRIS asked.

“In the trunk.”

“Wait, I was in the trunk. I didn’t see any ammunition.”

“You were in his trunk?” IRIS said incredulously.

Didn’t he hear me when I said it the first time? “Yeah, what did you think I did?”

“I thought you got in the car with him,” IRIS snapped. “Do you have any idea what could have happened to you?”

“Yes, I really had to pee. Now, can we move on?”

“Oh, this is so not over,” IRIS muttered.

“Work it out later. Let’s get to the car and get the hell out of here before they come after us again,” IKE hissed. “We move on my signal.”

IKE pressed a second gun into IRIS’s hands before turning away. Something passed between IKE and IRIS, but I had no clue what it was. Not that it mattered. I doubted I would ever write a book where two men went in and saved the day. I was a mystery writer where the heroine always saved the day, and that didn’t include men taking over. Then again, as I kneeled pressed between two men, I couldn’t deny that the possibilities were endless.

IKE motioned for us to follow and I quickly hurried behind him, gripping the back of his shirt. We hurried across the lot to his car, and we almost made it. That is, if it weren’t for the fact that I stubbed my toe.

“Son of a bitch!” I shouted without thinking.

And that’s when everything went to hell in a handbasket. Gunfire erupted around us, and I was shoved behind IRIS just as a bullet pinged off the car behind us. I screeched, completely unable to stop my fall as my body twisted as I tried and failed to catch myself. My head slammed into the pavement, making everything swim in an ocean of darkness.

I groaned, trying to roll over and haul myself up. IRIS was at my side, cupping my neck as he stared down at me with concern.

“Jane!”

But there was no time for him to worry about me. He turned and fired as I struggled to sit up. The world still swam around me, but at least I wasn't on the verge of passing out. In seconds, I was hauled up over IKE's shoulder as he turned and took off across the parking lot for his car as IRIS covered us. But as soon as IRIS turned to run, I saw someone step out from the shadows, gun raised.

Panic tore through me, and that's when I saw it. Tucked just into the back of IKE's pants, just under his suit jacket, was a gun. I didn't even think as I grabbed it and pointed at the man about to fire his weapon.

"Down!" I shouted, firing over and over until there was nothing left but the clicking of the empty magazine. I wasn't sure if I hit anyone or not. But IRIS was running after us, alive and well, and that was all that mattered.

He snatched the gun from my hands just as IKE dropped me into the back of his fancy car. My legs sprawled out in the back seat as he ran around to the other side as IRIS got in the passenger side.

"In the glove box," IKE said, starting the car and shifting into reverse. He hit the gas and my body slumped over in the seat as he tore out of the parking lot. I barely heard IRIS fire off several rounds before everything went dark.

SINNER

“Can I just point out how wrong it is to go after your ex-girlfriend when your wife is at home with the kids?” Burg said as we drove to Vira’s apartment.

The flight out here was filled with them making jokes about my short-lived tryst with Vira. “She’s not my ex-girlfriend. She’s—”

“A woman that you tried and failed to fuck,” Cazzo grinned. “Still, I can’t imagine Cara was too thrilled about any of this.”

“She wasn’t,” I admitted.

“Vira’s fucked up way too many lives. You should have ignored the call.”

“Could you have done it?” I asked. “If you knew someone was in danger, could you have walked away, even if it was an old girlfriend? What if it was Meghan?”

Burg grumbled as we continued down the road. He didn’t like me bringing up his ex. Then again, she dumped him because she couldn’t handle our life. Emma was a much better fit for him.

“Look, nothing’s going to happen with Vira. She’s way too much of a free spirit to ever be tied down to one man. I haven’t even heard from her in years. I’m surprised she didn’t call anyone at OPS.”

“Yeah, why didn’t she?” Cazzo asked. “Wasn’t she in good with Red?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I talk to them on a regular basis and ask about the woman I couldn’t get it up for.”

I pulled to a stop in front of my old apartment. It was dark in most apartments at this time of night, but there was an eerie feeling all around. It took us forever to get a flight to California at the last minute, and now that we finally arrived, I was worried we were too late.

I shoved the door open, scanning the area before I made a move. I made the mistake once of not being aware of my surroundings. It was the last time I was in California, and it nearly broke me. Everyone assumed I just picked up and moved on with my life. In truth, my time in that fucking room still gave me nightmares way more than I wanted to admit. Not even Cara truly knew how much it still affected me. Or if she did, she never brought it up.

“How do you want to play this?”

“I still have my key,” I said, pulling it out. “Let’s walk up there like we belong, try not to draw too much attention to ourselves.”

They nodded and followed me to the front door. As expected, I was able to get us in with no problems. I walked upstairs, keeping my eyes trained on everything around us, but it was silent. But when we got to her floor, it was a completely different story. People peeked out of their apartment doors, then slammed them shut as we approached. Her door was cracked open, the doorframe busted from whoever broke in.

My old neighbor must have seen me and opened the door in a rush. “Mark?”

“Hey, Sally.”

“I thought that was you. Are you here for Vira?”

“She called me this morning. Did you see what happened?”

“No, but she was long gone before they arrived. I heard them come.”

“Any chance you saw anything?”

She was an older woman, not someone attracted to trouble. I doubted she even peeked through the peephole. “I stuck firmly to the other side of the apartment. But Vira...she ran out of here in a rush. Looked like she was terrified. I almost stopped her, but she was gone before I could get the door open.”

Sally was usually the one to watch the floor for anyone who shouldn't be here, but I couldn't blame her for staying away when she heard someone breaking into my old apartment.

“Thanks, Sally. Stay inside.”

“Oh, you bet I will. It was good to see you again.”

“You too,” she smiled, shutting the door behind her.

I pushed the door in, glancing around the mess before determining that whoever was here was long gone. “I doubt we'll find any answers here, but let's take a look.”

The guys helped me scatter, looking through the destruction for any answers, but they had ransacked the place. Whatever they were looking for besides Vira was either gone or never here to begin with. And none of this would tell us where Vira ran.

“Let's head to OPS. With any luck, she went there and they took her in.”

“Cap is not going to be happy about this,” Cazzo muttered.

“When is Cap ever happy about anything?” Burg retorted.

“Maybe if you guys would stop showing each other your wax jobs, he would be in a better mood,” Cazzo suggested.

They continued to bicker as we made our way downstairs, but I was lost in thought, trying to figure out what was going on. Back when I first met Vira, it was because she was in trouble, but that had to do with her ex. We blackmailed him so he would leave her alone. If he was desperate, he might try to find the evidence we had on him. But why look at Vira's place? He had to be smart enough to realize we wouldn't leave that evidence with her.

Even though we had blackmail on her ex, her father could still be a problem. It was entirely possible something else was going on that had nothing to do with the ex. I pulled out my phone and dialed Becky's number. With any luck, she was still at work and could find something that would shed a little light on the situation.

"Yeah?"

"Becky, are you still at work?"

"When am I not at work?" she grumbled.

"I need you to dig up some information on Vira's father. Anything that might clue me in as to why she's fleeing for her life."

"Not the ex?"

"I'm pretty sure he's not involved, but check anyway."

"Sure."

"And if you can, dig into their accounts."

"You know, it's almost insulting the way you ask that. As if it's not possible. Like I'm not really capable of figuring out the smallest of asks."

"Alright, alright," I stopped her. "Geez, I won't ever say can again."

"I would appreciate that."

She hung up without another word, which I assumed meant she was getting to work. We loaded into the rental and headed over to OPS. If they didn't have any answers, I would have to hope Vira contacted me again. Finding her in this big city would take way too fucking long.

But when we pulled up to OPS, it was nothing but a dark building that didn't show any signs of life. "What the fuck?" I muttered under my breath.

"Maybe they moved locations," Cazzo suggested.

"And didn't tell anyone?" Burg asked.

“It’s not like there’s a reason we’d need to know where they are,” I said, not sure what to make of it.

“Gunfights, on the run, chasing suspects...” Burg said as he stared at the building. “I could think of at least twenty reasons we might need to know where they’re located.”

“Cazzo, get Cap on the horn and see if he knows anything. I’m gonna check out the area.”

“I’ll head the other direction,” Burg pointed toward the street.

I nodded and started walking around the building. In the dark, it was nearly impossible to see anything. Shivers skated down my spine, reminding me of a time that nearly ended my life. I slipped through the shadows, gun in hand as I searched the property. I was just peeking around the back of the building when a cat jumped off the dumpster right at my face. I nearly shot the fucking thing after batting him away with my arm.

“Stupid fucking cat,” I muttered.

“Mark!”

For the second time in under a minute, I nearly had a fucking heart attack as Vira leapt out of the shadows and flung herself into my arms. I caught her, just barely shifting my gun out of the way so I didn’t shoot her. Surprise was never a good thing, especially in the dark in an unfamiliar place.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” I grumbled, pulling back to check her out before we went any further.

She was still the same sexy woman I knew several years ago, but the hint of fear in her eyes was unmistakable. I liked to think of her as fearless, but it was clear that whoever came after her had her rattled.

“Come on. Let’s get someplace safe and figure out what’s going on. How long have you been out here?”

“All day,” she said, wrapping her arm around my waist as we headed back to the rental.

I was still on guard, my weapon in a firm grasp. Just because I had Vira didn't mean there weren't others checking out the area. But luckily, we made it to the vehicle with no problems.

“Vira,” Cazzo nodded.

“Do I know you?”

“I'm a friend of Sinner's. I've heard a lot about you.”

She grinned. “Oh, I bet you have.”

“Alright, alright,” I said, shoving her into the back seat and climbing in behind her. “Let's get somewhere safe before we continue this.”

With no place to go now that OPS was basically out of the picture, we headed to the nearest hotel, checking in under aliases Cap had set in place. Thankfully, aside from Vira's tired appearance, she was otherwise less disheveled than expected, which made it easier to slip her inside without too much attention.

After making our way upstairs and securing the room, we finally got down to what was really going on. “So, any idea why your father is after you?”

She took a deep breath as she walked over to the window. Thankfully, the blinds gave her enough cover that I wasn't concerned about her safety. “My father is dead.”

I glanced at the others, wondering what fresh hell we stepped into. “So, he's not after you.”

She turned, shaking her head. “But I guess he left me everything.”

“Everything, as in...”

She shrugged slightly. “I don't have the details. I heard from a lawyer. He informed me my father passed and wanted me to attend a reading of the will.”

“And I take it you didn’t go.”

“I told the lawyer he could shove it up his ass.” She sighed, walking over to the couch and slumping down on it. “But apparently, it’s not as simple as that.”

“It never is,” Cazzo grunted.

“And was that the last you heard from the lawyer?”

She bit her lip slightly, her worry over the situation apparent. “The lawyer suggested he fly out to see me. He said there was a lot to go over. I still don’t understand why he left it to me.”

“Your father probably put something in the will about why he left everything to you,” Burg answered.

“So, someone knows your father left you everything,” I surmised. “Which means they either saw the will before he died, or someone got to the lawyer. Any idea who it could be?”

“No. I haven’t had contact with him in years. And frankly, it just doesn’t make sense. He was so disappointed in me. I don’t see why he would want to leave me a thing.”

“Death has a way of putting things in perspective,” Burg answered. He would know. Emma almost died of cancer.

“So, what do we do now?”

“We have to get ahold of Cap and find out where OPS is. They have to be close by,” Cazzo suggested. “It’s too dangerous to drive all the way back to Pennsylvania. And if we’re going to find out who’s after you, we need resources.”

“When was the last time you had contact with your ex?” I asked.

“Not since you blackmailed him,” she answered. “I thought...”

“He shouldn’t be a problem,” I clarified. “But the stakes are higher now. We need to know exactly what your father left you so we can find out who stands to benefit the most if you were to die.”

She blew out a breath, nodding to me. There was no easy way to tell someone they could die, but she needed to be aware of what was going on. Besides, Vira wasn't a fragile woman. She could take it, and the more knowledge she had, the better equipped she was to fight whoever was after her.

"Alright, I don't have the number on me, but I remember the name of his office."

"Let's get ahold of this lawyer and set up a meet." I walked over to her as the guys slipped away. I wasn't really sure where to go from here with Vira. At one time, I called her a friend, but time had gotten in the way. Now I barely knew her. "So, is there anyone we need to contact?"

She grinned up at me. "You mean a lover?"

I shrugged. "Boyfriend?"

"Since when have I ever had a boyfriend?"

I watched her transform back into the confident woman I remembered from my time out here. It was strange how easily she hid behind the mask she had firmly in place. "I remember when you thought Sean was the one."

A huff of laughter escaped her lips as she walked over to the mini fridge and pulled open the door. She scrambled around inside until she found what she was looking for. She twisted the cap off the vodka and downed the bottle in one swallow.

"I only thought Sean was the one. He's much better off with that prissy, uptight—"

"That's my sister-in-law," I reminded her.

She shrugged as she plopped down on the couch. "Anyway, I was never meant to be with him."

"Then why put up the fight for him?"

"Who knows? A sudden desperation to not be alone?"

"Since when have you ever cared about being alone?"

"I'm only human."

“So, no lovers nipping at your heels?”

She laughed slightly. “If they were, I quickly cut them loose. I don’t know, I think growing up with my father made me incapable of really making that commitment.”

“So, you’re determined to be alone.”

“Well, I’m determined not to be trapped in a marriage where I don’t love the man. If anyone manages to snag me, he’ll have to be really special.”

“Clearly, I was not,” I said teasingly.

“But you’re so pretty. It was fun to try.”

I laughed at that. “Tried and failed.”

“Well, you were desperately in love with another woman. I can’t blame you. But seriously, it was a terrible performance.” She sighed heavily. “And I guess you’re hopelessly devoted now with no chance to prove that you really can make little Sinner work.”

I held up my finger showing my wedding band. She knew I was married, but I felt the need to prove it. “One hundred percent devoted.”

“So, you really settled down.”

I dropped my gaze, studying the ring on my finger. “She saved me.”

“Oh, God,” she laughed. “Seriously?”

When I looked up at her, the smile fell from her lips. “The last time you saw me, I was in a bad place. She dragged me out of that mindset and refused to let me give up on myself. Yeah, I’m fucking serious when I say she saved my life.”

She reached over and grabbed my hand, giving it a squeeze. “I’m happy for you. At least one of us will get a happily ever after.”

“It could still happen for you. You just have to let it.” Christ, I sounded like a sappy romance card.

The smile faded from her eyes. “I have a bad feeling it’s not going to end that way for me.”

VIRA

I sat on the couch, staring blankly at the TV as Sinner talked on the phone with his boss, tracking down leads. I couldn't believe my life had come to this. After all this time, I was still alone, still battling the same shit that I had twenty years ago. Only this time, I didn't even have Cece to comfort me.

Our friendship had fallen out over the last several years, mostly because she had a different life from me now. I was happy for her, relieved that she was able to let go of the past when I couldn't. She had this amazing life that I never wanted. And I still didn't. Which was why it was so hard to talk to her. We no longer had anything in common. The life we shared for years was no longer something she desired. But the last thing I wanted was to fall into the mundane existence my father once set aside for me. I would rather die than live like that.

“So, it looks like your ex is the one behind this.”

“What does he have to do with any of this?”

“Apparently, your father named him to inherit his money if...”

“If I were to magically disappear?” I said jokingly. “So, where does that leave me?”

“That leaves you under our protection until we can get make the hit go away.”

I laughed at that. “Wow, you never expect the word hit and your name to be in the same sentence.”

“We’ll get you out of this,” he said seriously. “I swear, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The truth was, I wasn’t all that worried about it. No, I didn’t want to die, but I was tired of running from my father. There had to be an easier way out of this. “Can’t I just sign over everything to the douchebag and be done with it?”

“That’s assuming we can make contact with him before he has us all killed,” Burg muttered.

“I thought you were good at your job,” I teased.

“We’ll take you back to Reed Security with us,” Sinner continued. “We can protect you better there and—”

“No, I’m not going back there.”

“Vira—”

“No,” I stood and walked away from him. “There is no way I’m going back to that town.”

“You’ll stay at OPS. We have safe rooms there.”

“And be around you? How do you think Cara will like that? And what about Lillian? Do you think she’ll want me around town?”

“It doesn’t matter what they want,” Sinner snapped. “This is a matter of your safety.”

“Then I’ll stay here and figure it out for myself,” I argued.

“That’s just stupid,” Sinner yelled. “What the fuck are you going to do when you’re hunted down and all alone?”

I didn’t have an answer for him, but I knew returning to my old life was a terrible plan. It would hurt everyone that I had already caused pain. No, there was no way I was going back to that.

“We’ll contact OPS,” Cazzo finally said. “Cap has been looking into their whereabouts. I’m sure he can get us something to go on.”

I gave a slight nod. It was the only way I could see out of this. A knock at the door made me stiffen, but Sinner waved

me off.

“Relax. I ordered food.”

I slumped down on the couch and pressed my hand to my forehead. This was a mess, and even worse was that I dragged Sinner back into it.

“Yeah, but this isn’t our order,” I heard Sinner say.

I glanced at the door just as I saw a gun being pulled. Sinner slammed the man’s hand against the wall, but the guy got in a cheap shot, slamming his hand into the Sinner’s throat. He stumbled back against the wall as the man advanced on me.

But he didn’t make it far. Cazzo jumped him from behind, wrapping a bed sheet around his neck and yanking hard. Burg knocked his gun away, kicking it out of the way. It slid right to my feet. I stood there staring at it as Cazzo choked the life out of him.

And I thought, how easy would it be to pick it up and just pull the trigger? I slowly bent over, my gaze locked on the weapon in front of me. I picked it up and aimed at the man, pulling the trigger without a second thought.

Cazzo jerked back, his eyes flicking to mine in surprise. I stared at the gun, surprised because I thought it would be louder.

“I wasn’t doing this for the fun of it,” Cazzo said as he let the man fall to the ground. “No shots fired means no noise.”

“There’s a suppressor,” I said, still staring at the gun.

“Yes, and now there’s blood on the floor.” He kicked the man away, tossing the sheet on top of him. “Burg, get the door and make sure Sinner’s not dead. You,” he pointed to me, “go sit on the bed.”

“Aren’t you worried about hair and fibers?”

He stared pointedly at me. “There’s a dead body on the floor. I think we’re past hair and fibers. Let’s get Cap on the phone and find out who we can contact.”

“Already got him on the line,” Burg said as he dragged Sinner further into the room and shut the door.

I ran over to him, kneeling down beside him as he rubbed his neck. “Are you okay?”

“Peachy,” he grumbled, struggling to sit up.

I winced at the bruise already forming on his neck. “How did he find us?”

“We’ll worry about that later,” Cazzo said, rushing around the room as he grabbed his things. “Grab your shit. We’re leaving in two minutes.”

I didn’t have much of anything, but I did have to pee. And there was never any assurance that there would be a convenient place to stop on the road. As soon as I walked out, we were headed out the door.

“What about the body?”

“Someone’s coming to deal with the body and the room.”

“And the gun?”

Cazzo glared at me. “You mean the one you shot the guy with? I wiped it clean. Next time you’re holding a weapon, don’t fire it if there’s someone standing behind the target.”

“Why?”

“Because bullets tend to exit bodies.”

With that, I was corralled out of the room with Cazzo and Burg in front and Sinner at the rear. We didn’t bother to check out as we left the hotel, and when we got downstairs, Cazzo led us in the opposite direction of the parking lot.

“Where are we going?”

“To get a new vehicle.”

“In the middle of the night?”

When no one answered, I kept my mouth shut. It was clear my commentary wasn’t helping things. Sinner pulled me off to the side in the shadows as Burg and Cazzo hurried further along. I didn’t understand what they were doing until they

approached a car. They were stealing it. That couldn't be good for getting away, but desperate times and all that...

With a single motion from Cazzo, Sinner pulled me over to the vehicle and shoved me in the back seat. Adrenaline pumped through my veins with every second that passed. I was so certain someone was going to find us at any moment. Either that or the police would come screeching around the corner at any second. But when none of that happened, Cazzo pulled out on the road and we drove off as if nothing had happened.

"Alright, let me see your bag," Sinner said, snatching it out of my hands.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Did you keep your cell phone on you?"

"No, it was busted when the guy broke in."

"What about any other electronic devices?"

Seriously, did these guys think I was stupid? "No, I have nothing but clothes in my bag."

He still tore it apart, searching the lining for something. But when he came up empty, he shook his head. "It's clean. No bugs. No tracking devices."

"Then how the hell did he know where we were?" Burg asked.

"He could have had eyes on her the whole time," Cazzo answered.

"But why wait? If he found her before us, what would be the point in letting her go, just to come after her later?"

"Maybe he saw us come into the hotel? It could be a coincidence," I said.

"I don't believe in coincidences," Sinner muttered. "It could be the hotel. If this guy has connections everywhere, maybe his pockets run a lot deeper than we assumed. Let's have Cap run background on everyone at the hotel. Maybe we'll find a connection."

“And in the meantime?” I asked.

“Get some sleep. We have a long drive ahead of us.”

ASHER

I had been tearing out the steps on the front porch when they pulled up. Sighing, I tossed the rotted wood to the ground and continued working. My muscles ached from lack of use, but it felt good to be doing something again. No doubt I would hear all about it the moment they stepped out of the car.

Chase was too tenacious for his own good. All I wanted was some peace and quiet. I needed time to get my head wrapped around what happened and how exactly I was going to go on living life without Jade in it. That required solitude, but I wouldn't be getting any tonight.

“How long are you going to pretend we're not here?” Chase called out.

I continued ripping up the wood with my bare hands. I should have gotten work gloves, but I needed the pain that slivers brought. Anything to make me feel like I wasn't quite as lifeless as I had become.

“You know, we drove all the way out here. The least you could do is offer us a cold beverage,” Patrick shouted.

I yanked up the last board and tossed it into the grass. Then I stomped down the steps and grabbed the hose attached to the house and threw it at Patrick, then turned it on.

He grimaced as brown water flowed from the hose. Honestly, I wouldn't drink it, but if he was so damn thirsty, that's what he would get. “Thanks. That's...exactly what I wanted.”

I hopped up on the porch, ignoring the creak as my boots thumped. I returned to my task as they stood in my driveway. Finally, Chase sighed and walked back to the truck. Relief filled me at the same time my chest squeezed painfully.

I didn't want them here. I couldn't handle the looks or the questions about how I was. But I was losing my grip on reality with no one here to talk to. Every day felt like I was suffocating just a little bit more. I couldn't blame them for leaving and not wanting to spend time with someone that was constantly in a surly mood and refused to communicate with anyone. But it said a lot about just how far I had pushed them. They didn't even want to put in the effort to stay this time. Not that I would want to stay with me either.

“So, we're ripping apart the porch?”

My head jerked up in surprise when Chase's voice sounded just a foot from me. My heart thundered in my chest the longer I stared at him. Old feelings threatened to push through and torment me the longer I maintained eye contact. It was like he could read everything I was feeling.

He clapped his hand on my shoulder before hopping up and tearing at another section of the porch. Then Patrick came waltzing over, shooting me a pissed off glare. “I expect food at the end of the day. And a cold beer wouldn't hurt.”

He didn't wait for me to answer before he got to work. Not knowing what else to do, I put my head down and continued to take out my frustrations on the porch. We worked in silence for most of the day until the sun started to set. Finally, exhaustion set in. That mind-numbing feeling took over my body as I dropped the final board and walked inside, plopping down on the couch.

“Yeah, we're good. No need to get up,” Patrick said, walking through the house.

“You want some food?” Chase asked.

But I didn't answer. The sound of their voices brought me comfort that I didn't know I needed. It only took a few seconds for me to drift off to sleep.

“Jade!”

I ran across the cemetery, hoping I was wrong, that she hadn't just gotten in that vehicle and decided to end her own life.

“Jade!”

Blood filled my vision the closer I got.

“You can't stop it,” Jade's voice whispered in my head.

I spun around, trying to find her. She was talking to me, so she had to be alive. “Jade! Don't do it!”

“Why didn't you see?”

“See what?” I asked, spinning around, trying to find her.

“You need to see. Don't miss it.”

“Miss what? Jade, where are you?”

I ran my hand through my hair, terrified that if I didn't find her, she'd go through with it. I couldn't handle it. Not again. I saw a brunette walking in the distance and took off after her. My legs ate up the ground as I pushed myself harder, fighting to get to her before it was too late. I grabbed her arm, spinning her around.

Her smile was filled with pain as she pressed her hand to my cheek. “You need to see.”

“See what?” I whispered. “Tell me.”

“It was never you. Don't let it become you.”

I slid my hand around the nape of her neck, pulling her in closer. “Stay with me. Promise me you won't leave.”

“It's my time. This was never meant to be, Ash.”

“What are you talking about? I love you,” I said desperately.

She turned again to leave, and this time when I tried to grab her, she slid through my fingers like smoke. “Never forget,” she said one final time before she disappeared.

I fell to my knees, my head hung low as tears filled my eyes. She was gone.

I sat upright with a gasp. Patrick and Chase both looked over at me, their eyes questioning so much. I ignored them and shoved to my feet, stomping into the kitchen. Pizza boxes littered the counter and I flipped one open, grabbing a slice.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, I saw that only two hours had passed. Two fucking hours of sleep was all I ever got before the dreams descended and ruined any chance of me feeling even remotely human.

I grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and popped the top, drinking practically the whole bottle just as Chase walked through the door. He had that look on his face, that he was going to have it out with me.

“Rough night.”

I rolled my eyes, not ready for this shit.

“You want to talk about it?”

When did I ever want to talk about anything? I tossed the empty beer bottle in the trash and grabbed another slice of pizza.

“Sure, help yourself,” Chase said, leaning against the counter.

I grunted, not saying anything further. I knew he wanted me to talk, to say something that might give him hope that I wasn't completely losing my shit. What was I supposed to say? Were we going to talk about the weather? Maybe I could tell him all the things I'd been up to lately. Or maybe he could fill me in on all the jobs they'd been out on since I left.

“Asher, you gotta tell me what's going on. I came out here to help.”

I knew he did. And there were even a few comments that Patrick made that almost had me smiling. But the devastation was too deep. The pain I felt throbbed consistently under the

scar tissue covering my heart. I didn't know what to say or how to even express the never-ending guilt.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked, my voice coming out in a gravelly tone from lack of speaking.

He blew out a harsh breath, rubbing his hands together. "Well, it's a start that you actually spoke to me."

Despite my depressing state, I chuckled at his candor.

"So, what exactly are you doing with this hunk of junk?"

I shrugged. "I just started tearing it apart. I guess I'll replace the porch."

"Maybe you should have started with the inside," he said, looking around my kitchen. He opened one of the cabinets and the door fell off one of the hinges. He caught it, tried to put it back in place, but gave up when the whole hinge fell off the cabinet to the counter. "Seriously, why did you get this place?"

"It was cheap."

"And in the middle of fucking Ohio. Do you know how long the drive is?"

"You can make it in one day."

"Yeah, if you don't fucking sleep," he grumbled. "So, where are we staying?"

"In your truck."

He scoffed at me. "Seriously, where are we staying?"

When I didn't answer, he stared me down like I would give in. I wouldn't. It wasn't that I didn't want them in the house. There was literally nowhere to stay. The upstairs was a fucking disaster. I wasn't even sure how to fix it yet. It definitely wasn't safe to walk up there.

"So, we drove all the way out here and there's no place for us to stay?"

"Any chance you brought your sleeping bag?"

"Fucking great."

“I’m not sleeping on the floor,” Patrick argued with Chase.

“There’s no place else to sleep.”

“We’ll get a fucking chair.”

“Sure, but tonight, we’re sleeping on the floor.”

I shook my head as I headed toward the bathroom. I found myself smiling at their antics, but as soon as the bathroom door closed, those demons came rushing into my head, reminding me exactly why I moved out here. I stared at my reflection in the cracked mirror, wondering if I’d ever see the happier version of myself that wasn’t always so angry.

All that was left was this shell of a man that once used to know exactly what he wanted and how to get there. Now, I was just hoping I didn’t wake up one morning and finally decide to pull the trigger. I didn’t want that guilt on anyone else.

I slid my hand into my pocket and felt the small plastic bottle that I always kept on me. Tugging it out, I stared at the label. It was prescribed to her mother, the very pills that killed her. I popped the lid and sprinkled the remaining pills into my palm. It would be so easy to take them, to feel what she did when she took these. But there would never be enough to erase the pain I constantly felt.

She had been taking these for weeks. They built up in her system, driving her mad. I squeezed my fist shut and looked back in the mirror. Fuck, I just wanted it all to stop. The pain, the dreams, the constant reminder that I let her down... Everything weighed on my mind, screaming at me that I wasn’t enough to save her.

“Hey!” Patrick shouted as he banged on the door. “Some of us gotta piss!”

I swiped at the tears that dripped down my face and slid the pills back in the bottle. Once the cap was in place, I shoved the bottle into my pocket and turned on the water, splashing

my face. Not even the cold water could make me feel anything other than utter devastation.

I turned and jerked the door open, glaring at Patrick as he stood in my way. He didn't step aside, so I brushed past him, slamming my shoulder into his body. Rage fueled me as I felt his eyes boring into the back of my head. My mood swings were out of control and I knew it. One minute, I was depressed and wanted to drown myself. The next minute, I was ready to kill anyone that crossed my path.

“What the fuck did I do?” he shouted after me.

I slammed the screen door open and hopped down on the dirt where the porch once stood. I clenched my fists as I stomped out into the darkness. Thunder clouds rolled overhead and lightning streaked across the sky, matching my mood.

“Why?” I shouted up at the sky. “Why the fuck would you do that to me?”

But she couldn't hear me because she was dead. She was fucking gone because she was so goddamn selfish that she didn't consider what killing herself would do to me. She was gone, and I was left here all alone to deal with the aftermath of her mess.

I stormed over to my truck, yanking the driver's side door open. Under the seat was my gun. I pulled it out and flicked off the safety, pressing the gun to my temple.

“Whoa, what the fuck are you doing?” Chase yelled, running over to me. He held out his hands, trying to tame me like a lion. But I was lost in my head. There was no going back now. The storm raged in my head, pushing me until all I wanted to do was pull the trigger and end the madness.

“Just put the gun down,” Patrick said as he walked over.

My eyes flicked to his for a moment, and that was all it took for Chase to pull his own weapon, pointing it at me. He didn't want to kill me. He wanted to stop me from doing what I desperately needed.

“Don't you dare fucking do it,” I snarled at him.

“A gunshot wound to the shoulder is a hell of a lot easier to recover from than one to the head,” he snapped.

I turned my weapon on him, determined to take him out if it meant I could go through with my plan. The surprise in his eyes couldn't be hidden. He didn't think I'd do it, but right now, I couldn't think of anything other than stopping the chaos.

“Do you think I'd shoot you?”

“No,” he shook his head. “You can't pull the trigger.”

“Don't fucking tempt me,” I said through gritted teeth. “You don't know what it's like, to constantly feel like you're losing your fucking mind. She's always in my head!” I shouted. Moisture built in my eyes with every moment that passed. My emotions were on overload, and every second that dragged on was one more moment of suffering.

“Asher, you don't want to do this,” Patrick said calmly.

“You don't fucking know what I want!”

“Then why the fuck haven't you pulled the trigger yet?”

“What?”

“If you want to do it, pull the goddamn trigger!”

“Patrick!” Chase snapped, but all I could hear were his words.

Do it. Just pull the trigger. End it all. Make the pain go away. Pull the fucking trigger.

“Don't you fucking dare!” Chase shouted as I turned the gun back on myself.

I pressed the gun against my scalp and felt a sense of calm wash over me.

“Asher!”

I closed my eyes and put my finger on the trigger, ready to finally take the last step. This was it, and then I wouldn't feel a goddamn thing anymore.

Two hundred pounds of muscle slammed into me as the gun was yanked from my hand. I hit the ground hard, immediately feeling a sense of loss.

“Why the fuck would you do that?” I shouted.

Chase knelt over me, his hands holding me down. “Why would I do that?” he shouted. “Because I didn’t want the cycle to continue! You shoot yourself and then I shoot myself and then it’s Patrick’s turn! Is that what you fucking want?”

“I want to not feel a goddamn thing!” I shouted up at him. “I want to be left alone so I can finally get the peace I need!”

The storm clouds opened up and poured rain on me as Chase held me down. The water washed away the urge to end my life, but in its wake was the reality what I had almost done. I let my head fall to the ground and stared up at the sky. The angry clouds mirrored my own feelings, letting go of all that emotion bottled up inside. But I would never truly let it go. I would carry this overwhelming sense of guilt with me to my grave. I knew now there was no getting out of this life, not without hurting those that cared about me. And I would never be free of the demons in my head.

She taunted me, dancing her sad waltz in my head. There were no smiles, no laughs, only tears and that sad expression that never left her face. I sighed heavily and let my eyes slip closed. Chase finally got off me, but I knew this wasn’t over. Far from getting them to leave, I had just ensured I would have two jailers for the foreseeable future.

PATRICK

“He’s not okay,” Chase whispered to me.

Asher was in the bathroom cleaning up. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to leave him alone. For all I knew, he had a razor blade and was slitting his wrists right now. But part of me wondered if coming out here only made things worse.

“No shit,” I retorted.

“We need to figure something out. We can’t leave him.”

“We could lock him in a psych ward,” I suggested.

“That’s not funny.”

I knew that, but I was the lighthearted one. If I lost that now, who would keep our spirits up? “What do you want to do? We can’t stay out here forever.”

“No, but we can’t leave him here either. He’s fucking falling apart.”

“Yeah, since we showed up. What if we’re causing this?”

Chase eyed me carefully. “Like we’re a reminder?”

I shrugged. “Is it that hard to believe? He walked away for a reason.”

“Yeah, because he didn’t want to do the job anymore.”

“And you really think that none of it had to do with seeing our faces every day? We were there with him. We saw what both of them went through. Out here, he might be able to

forget and move on. But with us here, it's like living it all over again."

"What the fuck are we supposed to do now?" he hissed. "We can't walk away after what just happened."

He was right about that, but I had no fucking clue how to help him through any of this. It felt wrong to abandon him like this, but if staying was making it worse, how was being here helping a goddamn thing?

The door to the bathroom opened and Asher walked out. He didn't look ashamed for what just happened. He looked... lost.

"Get some fucking pizza. I'm hungry," he grumbled, slumping down on the couch.

"Are we gonna talk about—"

I slammed my fist into Chase's stomach, telling him to shut the fuck up. Asher wasn't better, but he wasn't about to pull the trigger either. We needed to give him some fucking space. "Cheese," I answered.

"Who the fuck orders just cheese?" Asher asked, finally looking up at me. "Supreme. Don't come back without it."

Man, these fucking mood swings were going to kill me. And with Chase's obsessive need to talk shit out, I decided he was the best person to get the pizza. I turned to him and nodded. "I'll take a cheese. Get a supreme for the lazy fucker over here," I said, flopping down on the other end of the couch.

"Why do I have to go get the pizza?" he argued, but for entirely different reasons than I had. He was glaring at me, like I was going to fuck things up by staying with him. I knew better than anyone that sometimes all you needed was a joke.

"Because you're a tight ass," I shot back. "And get some fucking whiskey.

"The last thing we need is whiskey," he gritted out.

I rolled my eyes at his melodramatics. "Fine, get us a spritzer. Or better yet, light beer. How about some of that? I

know I could really go for a fucking no fun beer right now.”

Asher snorted beside me, cracking what appeared to be a smile for the first time since we arrived. Chase, on the other hand, didn't look thrilled at all with the situation. But he turned on his heel and hurried out the door, no doubt trying to get the pizza as fast as possible so I didn't fuck everything up.

As soon as he walked out the door, I felt the tension in the room ease slightly. But now I was stuck with Asher and didn't know what the fuck to say.

He sighed heavily, leaning his head back on the couch. “You don't have to stay with me, you know.”

“Yep, the gun to your head did not make a great argument for Chase. You couldn't have waited until we left? Now he'll never leave you alone.”

“Well, I didn't want to have all the fun without you guys.”

“Then you shouldn't have left. No jobs, no fun...it's just training with Fox. Do you know what kind of torture that is?”

Silence descended on the room again. “I could go for some Funyuns right now.”

I slowly turned and glared at him. “I get enough during training. If you bring them in here, there really will be a dead body to bury.”

“I should say I'm surprised you'd bring up the elephant in the room and crack jokes about it, but that just isn't your style.”

“Well, we can't all be boring.” I sat up and turned to face him. “Hey, have you seen Fox?”

He rolled his head to look at me. “Yeah, I've seen him.”

“Smartass. I meant, has he come out here to see you?”

“Why?”

“Because he landed in the middle of a job Eli was working, and he said he got the intel from you. Was this before you left?”

He shook his head. “He came out here.” He sighed heavily again. “Brought a fucking truckload of Funyuns. I had to eat them all after he left.”

“Well, that explains how shitty you look. No one but Fox can survive on Funyuns.”

“I can still taste the onion in my mouth. It’s fucking disgusting.”

“Is that why you’re craving them?” I rested back on the couch again. “So, Fox came out here.”

“Yeah, before you guys. I thought maybe you sent him out here to see me.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Fuck if I know. To cheer me up?”

“Yeah, Fox is the last person I would send to cheer anyone up. Did he sing for you?”

“*Les Miserables*,” he nodded. “I thought for sure he was hoping I’d pull the trigger.”

“Maybe he was testing you,” I grinned.

“Fuck me,” he sighed, rubbing his hands up and down his face. “Thank God he only stayed the one night. There would have been a murder-suicide if he stayed any longer.”

With all this talk about killing, I kind of felt obligated to have some sort of talk with Asher. After all, I didn’t want to put ideas in his head after we just fucking stopped him from taking that step.

“You know, it would be a lot easier to keep Chase away if you hadn’t fucking put a gun to your head.”

He snorted. “Tell me about it. I’ll never escape him now.”

“He’s trying to help.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “But the thing is, I really don’t fucking want anyone’s help. It just sucks, and it’s going to keep sucking until it doesn’t suck anymore.”

“Do you really think that’ll happen?”

He was quiet for so long that I wasn't sure he had an answer to the question. "I loved her, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

"But...I'm not sure I really knew her. And I think that's part of what's eating me up inside."

"How do you mean?"

He stared off into space, almost like he was remembering something that happened while we were living at their mansion. "She could be funny. She had this lighter side to her. I saw you bring it out in her. And it should have been me doing that."

"You had a lot on your plate," I reminded him.

"Right, but it's because I was so focused on the job that I missed the warning signs." His eyebrows shot up. "Or maybe I saw them but refused to think it was a possibility. Maybe I only ever saw what I wanted to. I saw those demons inside her head, and I was so worried about that, about the job, about getting us the fuck out of there that I didn't bother to dig deeper and find any way to help her out."

"Careful," I grinned. "You're going to give Chase ideas."

His lips quirked up at the corners. "Fuck, I miss her," he mumbled.

I nodded. "Me too."

He turned to me, his eyes showing just a spark of life. "You know, if Chase was here right now, he would say we just pushed past step one."

"What is step one?" I asked.

He glanced around at all the empty liquor bottles, then back to me. "Do I look like a drunk or something?"

The door swung open and Chase walked through, carrying five boxes of pizza and a bag. He tossed it at me, glaring the whole time. "Stupid fucker."

I quirked a smile and pulled a twenty-ounce soda out of the bag, then handed it to Asher. "This is for you."

He read the label of the soda with Funyuns flavoring and tossed it back at me. "Fuck you."

SINNER

“You’re not gonna like it,” Cap said with a sigh.

I fucking knew it. “They went under, didn’t they?”

“Sort of, but not in the way you think.”

I looked over at Vira sleeping in the seat beside me. I needed to get her to safety and end this thing. “Stop fucking around and tell me where to go.”

“Kansas,” he chuckled.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Yep, Kansas.”

“But...Cap, do you realize how far away we are from there?”

“Yep.”

“If anyone catches on—”

“Yeah, I would recommend not getting caught.”

“Oh, thanks for the advice,” I snapped. I hung up the phone and glared out the window.

“So, good news, I take it,” Burg said, turning around to face me.

“They’re in fucking Kansas.”

“Kansas?” he asked, just as baffled as I was.

“What the fuck is in Kansas?”

“Apparently, their new point of operations. But it’s on the DL, so we’re not allowed to talk about it.”

Burg shook his head. “But why Kansas? What the fuck is there?”

“Farms,” Cazzo said. “Lots of farms.”

“And that would be helpful if they were trying to become part of the FFA, but they’re a security company,” I argued.

Burg scrolled through his phone. “Okay, top attractions are the Kansas State Capitol Visitor Center—”

“Wait,” Cazzo cut in. “You’re telling me that people drive to Kansas to see a visitor center?”

“Apparently, 1.7 thousand people like it.”

I snorted. That wasn’t a very good rating considering how many people there were in the world.

“There’s also the OZ Museum. Ooh, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum.”

“Great,” I laughed. “We’ll send Claire there with Derek. They can solve book crimes.”

“Alright, but check this one out. The Boot Hill Museum. It’s like one of those towns preserved in the Old West. That’s kind of cool. They have guns at least.”

I rolled my eyes. I just didn’t get it. “Out of all the fucking places in the world, why the hell did they choose Kansas?”

“Maybe it’s because no one’s there,” Cazzo suggested. “It was so fucking crowded at the last site. Maybe they were looking to expand. Maybe they wanted to build underground like we did.”

“I just can’t believe,” I said, shaking my head. “I worked with those guys. They didn’t even say anything.”

“It’s not like you would give away trade secrets either,” Burg said.

That was true, but still, I was on Eli’s team. I almost died working with them. A little head’s up would have been nice.

“So, we head to Kansas and hope to God we don’t die between now and then,” I surmised.

“Yeah, that’s looking less and less likely by the minute,” Cazzo said. “We’ve got a tail.”

“Already?” I asked. I sighed and turned around. “I could really use a second gun right about now.”

“You didn’t pack a backup?” Cazzo asked.

“I didn’t have time. I was in a rush.”

“To see your ex-girlfriend,” Burg grinned.

“She’s not my ex, and stop bringing up shit you know is gonna get me in trouble.”

“Don’t do shit that’ll get you in trouble, and I won’t have anything to say.”

“Hold on, I think he’s just passing,” Cazzo said when his headlights got really bright in the mirror.

“And if they’re not?” I asked, looking out the window at the steep drop off the cliff beside us. “This isn’t exactly the best time to go off-roading.”

“It’s probably nothing,” Cazzo said as the vehicle picked up speed and pulled into the other lane. “Just play it cool.”

“Yeah, three guys riding around in a car together. What’s not suspicious about that?” Burg muttered.

The car jerked toward us, slamming into our side. I grabbed the handle, holding on as Cazzo did his best to keep the car off the gravel at the edge of the road.

“I guess he’s not just passing!” Cazzo shouted.

Vira roused, sitting up, but I shoved her head down just as a shot was fired. She screamed, ducking down and covering her head as I climbed across the seat and pulled my weapon, firing several shots. The car slammed on the brakes, getting behind us once again.

“Fuck, I really hate this guy,” Cazzo said as he put his foot down on the gas.

“What’s happening?” Vira shouted.

“It’s nothing. Just a guy with road rage.”

Her head jerked up and she glared at me. “Who do you think I am? Lillian?”

“Yikes,” Burg laughed. “Someone refuses to let go of her anger.”

The car slammed into us from behind, just as we were about to follow the curve in the road. Cazzo lost control, spinning toward the other lane, ramming into the car behind us. Then he hit the gas, sending the other car flying to the edge of the road. He screamed, pushing down on the gas until the other car started to careen over.

Vira’s fingernails dug into my skin as she screamed at our impending death. As the car went over, Cazzo slammed on the gas, immediately shifting into reverse. The car teetered on the edge, slowly rocking back and forth. He tried to get us off the ledge, but we were balanced too precariously.

“Stop!” Burg shouted. “Fuck, you’re gonna send us over the edge!”

Cazzo let up and we all sat still, waiting for the car to finally level out. After a few seconds, the car stopped rocking.

“Alright, I’m going to get Vira out of the car,” I said, slowly moving toward the door.

“Wait!” Burg shouted, and the car shifted once again. We all held our breath as we waited to see what would happen. When we didn’t plummet to our deaths, he continued, this time in a whisper. “If you get her out, it’ll throw off the balance of the car.”

“He’s right,” Cazzo added. “We need to move to the back and then get out.”

“I’ll go first,” Burg said, already unbuckling.

“Why do you get to go first?” Cazzo snapped.

“Because you’re in the driver’s seat. You have more stuff to maneuver around. The more weight in the back, the better.”

I was pretty sure he was making shit up, but at this point, it was more important just to balance the weight of the vehicle. Very slowly, Burg shifted his weight. I closed my eyes as the car started moving again, sliding just an inch forward.

“This isn’t good,” I whispered. “It’s never gonna hold to get both of you out.”

“What’s your plan?” Burg asked.

“Alright, Burg, very slowly, you’re going to get back here. We’ll get Vira out, and then we’ll jump out both sides.”

“That sounds like a plan,” he nodded.

“That sounds like a fucking stupid plan,” Cazzo snapped. “I guess I’m going down with the ship.”

“Of course not. And this isn’t the Titanic. We’re so much better than them. Hey, if I were Rose, I would have found a spot for you on that door.”

He quirked a grin at me. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime. You know I got you. Alright, so when Burg and I jump out, you’ll throw your door open and I’ll grab you and drag you out just as the car goes over. It can’t fail.”

It could totally fail, but there was no way we’d get him out any other way, not with the way this car was rocking.

Cazzo took a deep breath, then nodded. “Let’s do this.”

“Okay. Vira, slowly get up and sit back against the seat.”

She carefully got up, wincing when the car rocked, then continued until she was firmly against the back of the seat. I held my hand out for Burg, nodding to him that I was ready. He twisted ever so slowly. My hands were sweating, and I could feel tiny beads forming on my forehead. If we messed this up even a little, we were all going to the bottom of that mountain.

“Okay, nice and easy.”

“Nice and easy my ass,” he grumbled. “If I die, I’m telling Emma this was all your fault.”

“Why is it my fault?” I asked as he got to his knee.

“Because you had to come out and rescue your girlfriend.”

Vira sneered. “I don’t have boyfriends. And the guys I date can actually get it up and keep it up. And there’s definitely a happy ending.”

I gritted my teeth, trying not to lose my shit in this precarious situation. “Maybe we could discuss getting it up when we’re not about to plummet to our deaths.”

“Shit,” Burg muttered. “My shoe is stuck.”

“How is your shoe stuck?” I asked.

“The lace...I think it’s caught on something.”

“Try wiggling it back,” Cazzo said. “I think I can see where it’s stuck.”

Burg strained as he gently lifted his leg, but it wasn’t working. Whatever it was stuck on, he couldn’t get it on his own.

I glanced at Cazzo and he rolled his eyes. “Oh sure, I’m about to die anyway. I might as well help him out first.”

“That’s the spirit,” I said, knowing he would kick my ass for it later.

Slowly, Cazzo clicked the latch for the seat belt and gently released it. Once it was back in place, he leaned to the side, his face straining as he struggled to reach the lace.

“Almost...got it,” he said, his voice strained. His hand holding him up on the center console slipped and he fell forward. The whole car jerked from just that one simple movement. We all stayed still, hoping the car didn’t fall any further.

“Maybe...maybe we should just all move at once,” Cazzo said. “You know, after I get Burg out, we all bolt at once and pray to God we make it out.”

“Slow and steady wins the race,” Burg repeated.

“I’m not a fucking turtle, and this car isn’t going to hold too much longer,” Cazzo snapped.

“Alright, alright!” Burg sighed. “Just get me unhooked.”

Cazzo took a deep breath and hooked his finger around the shoelace. After two minutes of grunting and straining, he finally got it, releasing a tense breath. Very slowly, he sat up as Burg shifted closer to the middle seat.

I nodded to all of them, then Vira. “Okay, we’re going to do this on three. Everybody ready?”

“To die?” Cazzo asked. “Sure, just another day at the office.”

“Alright, then. One, two...” I looked at them all one last time and hoped this wasn’t the last time I saw them alive. “Three!”

Vira shoved the door open, jumping from the car. It started to shift with all of us moving at once. The car shifted forward, nearly going over the edge and I jumped for it, barely hitting the ground as the car tilted again and careened over the edge, crashing as it hit something down below. I winced, holding onto Vira as we waited for the metal to stop smashing into things. But when I opened my eyes, Cazzo was the only other person I saw.

“Shit!” I hissed, scrambling to my knees. “Shit! He didn’t get out! Burg didn’t get out!”

Cazzo was already scrambling over to the edge, looking for any sign of the vehicle.

“Stay here,” I ordered Vira, then shuffled over to the edge, lying on my belly to see anything I could.

“Do you see him?” I shouted at Cazzo.

He shook his head. “Man, I am not going to be the one to tell Emma about this.”

I glared at him, and that’s when I heard it. Shuffling down below gave me hope that Burg hadn’t crashed at the bottom. Leaves rustled from trees jutting out of the mountain, and then Burg appeared, climbing through the branches.

Breathing hard, he looked up at us with a death glare. “You know, next time we’re opening the doors first.”

I K E

“What the fuck were you thinking, allowing her to follow you out here?” IRIS yelled at me.

I took a hard right at the next light, swerving through traffic to escape whoever was after us.

“I didn’t let her come with me. I specifically told her not to come.”

“Fat lot of good that did,” IRIS shouted.

“Would you fucking relax? She’s fine!”

IRIS looked in the back seat, then turned and scowled at me. “She’s passed out. Does that seem like she’s fine to you?”

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and tried not to lose my shit on him. It wasn’t his fault. It was mine. The whole fucking time she was following me, I knew I should cut her loose, but I loved the idea of her being around. I had grown used to seeing her face, seeing the excitement she got from following me around. It was a high unlike any other. Deep down, I always knew it would wear off someday, that she wouldn’t be able to follow me wherever I went. And now she was no longer mine.

That wasn’t right. She never was mine. I was too much of a coward to ever make a move. Now she was with IRIS, a man that was right for her, that could give her everything she needed. That would never be me. I was too selfish. I could see how much he loved her, the lengths he would go to protect her. There was nothing about him that was wrong.

And now it was time to remove myself from his path. I drove until I hit the outskirts of town near an abandoned building. The area wasn't dangerous, to say the least, but it would allow me to disappear into the night and walk away from her forever.

I killed the lights and drove through the parking lot until we could no longer be seen by anyone on the road. I shifted into park and turned to face IRIS.

“What are we doing here?”

“I'm leaving.”

“Okay, to meet a contact?”

“No, I'm just leaving.”

I glanced in the back seat, my heart breaking in two as I watched my girl breathing deeply in the back seat. She was pale, and that was all because of me.

“I don't get it. What are you talking about?” IRIS asked.

I finally looked at him, really took a hard look and knew I was doing the right thing. “Look, she belongs with you.”

“I know that. She said she would marry me tonight.”

“And I'm in the way.”

It surprised me when IRIS actually looked pissed at me. “You're fucking kidding. You put her in danger, and instead of staying and making it right, you're walking away?”

“Do you really want me around?” I asked. We both knew the answer.

“You're better than Alexander Pierce.”

“Well, he was a serial killer.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “If you walk away, you know she's going to hate you forever.”

“I can deal with that,” I admitted. “It was never supposed to be me, you know?” I said, glancing back at her again. I rested my arm over the seat, pushing her hair out of her face.

She was fucking perfect, and as I stared at her, I realized what this must be doing to IRIS. I was in the way.

“It’s better this way. OPS was a pipe dream for me.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” IRIS muttered.

“And you really want me around? You want to protect her. You don’t want her going out and putting herself in danger. And I don’t want that for her either, but she has a way of manipulating me into doing whatever she wants. Just like tonight. She was never supposed to see what I did. And it changed her.” I sighed, looking out the front window. “Or it changed the way she looks at me.”

“She never looked at you the way she looks at me,” he said confidently.

“I know. And that’s why I can’t stay. She looks to me for excitement, but it’s you she wants at the end of the day. Frankly, I’m not a guy that likes rejection. It’s easier to walk away and tell myself I was doing what was best.”

I shoved the door open and got out, but the guy still persisted. “That’s it? You’re not even going to tell her goodbye?”

I leaned on the doorframe and watched him for a moment. “Tell me this...if she were awake, would you really want to see her crying as she tells me goodbye?”

I thought I knew his answer, but I was wrong.

“Yes. Because I love her. I know what you mean to her. And if I have to suffer through her tears over you, then I’ll do it every fucking time. I know who she loves. I know what her relationship with you is about. Yeah, I bust your balls, but that’s just because I can. But at the end of the day, you’re her friend. You can’t just leave her without a word.”

Unfortunately, that didn’t work for me. The only way I could walk away from her was if she wasn’t around to make me feel every ounce of what my heart was telling me was true. It had to be this way.

“I doubt we’ll see each other again,” I said, stepping away from the car. I glanced to the backseat one last time, then turned on my heel and walked away. Never in all my years did I think I would fall for a woman like that. I also never thought I would lose her to a better man. Something inside me told me I really was good enough for Jane, but I was too stubborn to change, and that was my downfall.

This was the end of the road. There was no turning back now that the decision was made. My life would never be the same without her, but I also wouldn’t have to suffer every day seeing her with the man she really loved.

And that would have to be good enough for now.

ASHER

I didn't sleep a wink. I pretended to pass out sometime during the night only so Chase would stop sending me those worried looks. It was no use. Sticking around here would only make things harder. They knew what it was like to be inside my head now, and there would be no escaping them. Well, Chase, at least.

I couldn't blame him. He knew what it was like to be inside my head. He didn't have that natural levity that Patrick had, which was sort of how we worked so well together in the past. I couldn't remember a time since we got out of the military that these guys weren't in my life. But that didn't mean I could stay. Not when it meant making the situation worse.

I grabbed the bag I arrived with and quickly stuffed what few possessions I had inside. There wasn't much I kept after walking away. I was so fucking lost that I only grabbed a week's worth of clothes. Everything else was left behind.

Except for that fucking pill bottle.

I couldn't leave that behind. It was the only important reminder I had of Jade. Some guys would choose to keep a lock of hair or a scarf. Not me. I was the person responsible for her, and I failed her hard. I would keep it on me until the day I died.

I glanced around the sparse room and sighed. When I bought this place, I had it in my mind that I would fix it up for Jade, or in memory of her. And I'd live out my days reminding

myself of what I could have had. It was morbid and horrible, but that was as far as I could see right now.

I hauled the bag over my shoulder and crept past the guys, who were passed out on the couch. I tossed the note onto the table and walked out. Thankfully, I hadn't lost my skills when I decided to wither away into nothing.

I walked around the house to the far end of the property where I kept a vehicle hidden, just in case. It turned out, it was coming in handy right now. I tossed my bag in the back, and was just about to get in when I turned around and nearly ran smack dab into Rafe.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I said after a tense minute.

“Checking up on you. I thought maybe you'd be ready to go again.”

I gritted my teeth, pissed that he could just shove all the hurt and anger aside as if it meant nothing. “And what made you think that?”

He shrugged. “I didn't take you for the sentimental type.”

“You mean, you didn't think I'd miss my wife.”

Even in the dark, I could see his irritated expression. Rafe wasn't one to let emotions and love stand in the way of the job. He certainly hadn't done that with his own wife. The stories I heard should have warned me off from working with him.

“She was your wife for five minutes. And you only married her because of the job.”

“That doesn't mean she was nothing to me,” I bit out.

“She was a casualty of war,” he said harshly. “The job is all that matters. Taking down the fuckers that went after you—that's what matters.”

“To who?” I asked, not even with a hint of anger. I was long past being angry at this man. I had to take responsibility for my own actions. I was the one that took the job. I married her when she didn't want to have anything to do with me. I

was the one that let her down when she needed me most. All the rest was just window dressing on the story.

Rafe strode toward me, his face mottled with anger. “Listen, you fucker, I hired you to do a job. Pull your shit together and get to work.”

“I don’t think so,” I answered as casually as possible. “What reason would I possibly have to go work with you again?”

“To get the men that did this to Jade!”

I cocked my head to the side, studying him closely. “You know, for someone who doesn’t give a shit about Jade, you sure are pushing hard for me to avenge her death.” He inclined his head ever-so-slightly. “The truth is, you don’t give a shit about Jade or me avenging her death. She was nothing to you, just another puzzle piece. You got what you wanted—her father out of the way—”

“But not the way I wanted,” Rafe snapped. “I needed intel! You blew the fucking job.”

“Then why would you want me to go back?”

“You’re already a player in the game.”

I scoffed at the ridiculousness of his statement. “I’ve been out of the game for months. No one in The Syndicate would believe I wanted back in the game if I showed up out of the blue. And even if I agreed to do it, I wouldn’t be able to hold my temper around them. There’s no fucking way I’d be able to achieve what you’re asking.”

He lunged for me, but I surprised him, grabbing him by the collar and shoving him up against the car. I might look weak, but I still had a temper. “You’re a fucking disgrace,” he spat.

“Better a disgrace than a man who only cares about himself.” I shoved off him, stepping back. “I told you, I’m out. There is no possible way you could convince me to come back. I walked away, and it was for good. Leave me the fuck alone.”

I turned my back on him, but he got in one final dig. “And you think you’re somehow doing something to remember her by carrying around that fucking pill bottle? She would be so fucking disgusted by what you’ve turned into.”

There was some truth in that. I couldn’t deny that I had let Jade down in every way. She probably wouldn’t want me moping around, destroying my own life. But she also would tell me not to listen to Rafe for one minute longer.

I yanked the door open and slid inside. When I looked in the rearview mirror, there was no one there. Hell, I wasn’t even sure right now that I hadn’t imagined Rafe to begin with. Maybe I was losing my fucking mind. Nothing would surprise me at this point. But one thing I knew for sure was that I had to leave my friends in the past. They would worry about me when they realized I was gone, but better to worry about me than constantly coming out to check on me. I didn’t want to be found. I just wanted to disappear and find some way to move on. And I couldn’t do that with them still in my life.

With one final glance at the house, I cranked the engine and drove off into the night. I was beginning a new chapter in my life, and whatever that was, it didn’t include OPS or any of the people from my past.

CHASE

I woke with a crick in my neck and the worst hangover of my life. Whoever said hard seltzer was not that bad really didn't know how to drink. Cans littered the floor around me, each of them empty after we chugged them last night. They were surprisingly refreshing, but I hadn't accounted for the headache that would accompany it.

"What the fuck," I groaned, pushing myself into a sitting position. Patrick was laying down in the fetal position, his feet curled up in my lap. I shoved him off, nearly sending him off the couch. He snorted as he sat up, looking around the room for a threat.

"What happened? What's going on?"

"You told me no liquor. That's what's going on."

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, shaking his head. "No, I said I wanted liquor and you said no. Party pooper." He stretched, wincing as he grabbed his back. "Fuck, I slept like shit."

"You took over the couch," I retorted. "I was sitting upright all night."

"Well, you could have slept on the floor."

"Fuck you," I grumbled. "I'm not sleeping on the floor."

I sighed and pushed to my feet. The mess around us was impossible to ignore. If we were still in the military, we'd have our asses handed to us, and then we'd have to run fifteen miles just for making such a mess.

“I’m getting a bag. We need to clean this shit up.”

Patrick stood, stumbling and falling against the table, shoving shit all over the place. Cans rattled on the ground all around him.

I smacked the back of his head. “Clean this shit up.”

“Geez, you’re so fucking abusive,” he grumbled. “Why don’t you make Asher clean it up? He’s the one we’re drinking lightly for.”

“Unlike you, Asher’s already outside working.”

He frowned. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Well, do you see him sleeping on the fucking couch?” I asked, pointing to the empty space.

“I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this, but you’re a real crabass first thing in the morning.”

I ignored him and walked over to the corner, grabbing a garbage bag out of the box. Shaking it out, I started picking up garbage while Patrick sat on his ass, probably contemplating the benefits of drinking beer as opposed to hard seltzer.

“Do you want to do some fucking work?” I snapped.

“Geez, you’re so cranky in the morning.” He bent over and started picking up cans, tossing them in my direction and missing the bag completely. It took everything in me not to tear into him right now. But there were more important things to deal with, like finding Asher. The longer I stood here, the more I worried that he went off into the night and did something fucking stupid.

I dropped the bag and headed for the door as a bad feeling sunk in my gut.

“Hey! I’m not cleaning this up on my own!” Patrick shouted.

I kept walking, jumping off the porch as I held my hand up to block the morning sun. I didn’t see any sign of him around the yard, but his truck was still here, so he was around. Still,

after what he pulled last night, I didn't trust that he didn't find a different way to get rid of the pain.

I started for the truck, terrified of what I would find. My boots squished in the mud as I started running to the driver's side. But as soon as I rounded the hood, relief rushed through me. He wasn't there.

I turned around and scanned the property. Where the fuck was he? Most of the house was in ruins. The upstairs was out since it was practically one large hole. And if he had been in the house, I would have heard him moving around. Unless, of course, he was passed out with the same fucking headache I had.

I stomped back to the house, hauling myself up onto what was left of the porch, then walked inside to find Patrick leaning against the couch snoring. I ignored him and walked around the first floor, but he wasn't in any of the rooms. I walked back into the living room and shoved Patrick over.

"No, I don't want to go," he mumbled, then swiped at his face and looked up at me sleepily. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Asher's not in the house."

"So?"

"He's not outside either."

His eyes widened as he stared up at me. "You mean, he just vanished?"

I rolled my eyes at his joking. If there was ever a time to be serious, it was when your best friend who had a death wish just disappeared without a trace. "Can you be serious for one fucking minute?"

"I would, but then both of us would be boring as hell."

"Asher's gone."

"His truck is outside," he said, jerking his head toward the window.

"I looked outside. He's not there."

“Maybe he went for a walk,” he muttered, picking at something in his teeth.

“Can you be serious for one fucking minute?”

He looked up at me out of the corner of his eye. “You already asked me that. And I told you the answer is no.”

“He’s fucking gone!” I shouted, the panic rising inside me. “He was just here with us. What if he went out there and...” I trailed off, not wanting to say the words on the tip of my tongue.

“Look,” he sighed. “I get that you’re worried about Asher. He had a hard time yesterday, but it’s because we showed up and pushed him. He doesn’t want us here.”

“He almost fucking killed himself,” I snapped.

“Let the man have some fucking space!” he shouted, getting to his feet. “Christ, you can’t fix everything for everyone!”

“Better than sitting on my ass and making a joke out of the whole fucking world,” I yelled.

“And it’s so much better to walk around with a stick up my ass like you?”

“This is fucking serious! How the hell do I get that through your head?”

“I know it’s serious,” he said, suddenly getting quiet. “Fuck, Chase, you can’t expect everyone to handle things like you would. His wife died, and he blames himself. The last thing he wants is for us to come in and try to fix him. Let him fix this in his own way.”

“Even if his way of fixing things is to end his life?”

Patrick sighed, slumping down on the couch. “If that’s what he wants, do you really think us watching him like a hawk is going to change anything?”

“And what does staying away do?” I asked. “Are you telling me that if he ended it all and we didn’t even try that you could live with yourself?”

“No, but we did come here. We did try. He made it perfectly clear that he doesn’t want us around. End of story.”

That wasn’t good enough for me. I couldn’t leave here until I knew he was okay. But what did he do? Put a backpack on and hitch a ride? I couldn’t imagine Asher just leaving us out here without telling us something.

“What do you want to do?” I sighed.

He shrugged. “Lock up the place and go home?”

I stared at him like an idiot. “The house is falling down and you want to lock up?”

“Hey, you wanted to clean up.”

“That’s because we made the mess, dumbass. And I’m not done looking for him. He could be out there somewhere.”

“Somewhere he doesn’t want us to find him,” he reiterated. “Look, Cash gave us a week to come out here. It’s only been a few days. I say we wait him out for the rest of the day. I’m sure he’ll come walking back up the...well, he would walk up the steps if he had any. He probably just went to let off some steam.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I muttered. “Fine, we’ll do things your way.”

“Good, then I can get some fucking sleep,” he said, flopping back onto the couch.

I walked over and kicked his feet. “Let’s clean this shit up first.”

I bent over and started picking up more cans, then moved onto the pizza boxes that fell to the floor when Patrick fell into the table earlier.

“Is there anything left in those?” he muttered, not bothering to open his eyes.

I picked up one box and tossed it at him, landing it with a solid oomph. I was just about to grab another box when I saw the paper on the floor. I stared at it for a moment, praying to God it wasn’t a suicide note.

“What?” Patrick said, watching me as I stared at the floor. He stood, shoving the box aside when he saw what I was looking at. “Fuck.”

“You don’t think it’s...”

“Only one way to find out,” he said, snatching it off the ground. He unfolded it and started reading. *“I know you guys came out here to make sure I’m okay. The truth is, I’ll never be okay. But having you here made me realize that I can’t stick around. I know you want to help me through this, but I have to do this on my own. She’s gone because of me, and nothing you say or do can fix this. I’m on my own from here on out. Don’t come looking for me.”*

“Well, fuck,” I muttered, letting the bag fall to the ground.

“He didn’t take his truck,” Patrick pointed out.

“Which means he either had another vehicle or he went on foot.”

“While we were passed out on the couch,” he grunted.

I slumped down on the couch, scrubbing a hand over my face. “He’s really fucking gone this time.”

“We could check his tracker,” Patrick suggested.

We could, but I doubted he left it in. He didn’t want to be found, and that meant erasing anything that could lead us to him. No, we wouldn’t find Asher again, not unless he wanted us to.

“It’s over. Time to go home.”

IRIS

I didn't waste time by moving Jane to the front seat. My mission was to get the fuck out of there before we were attacked and get Jane to safety. That was all that mattered at this point. I drove through the night, getting more worried by the minute when she didn't wake up. Once we were far enough away and I was sure we weren't being followed, I pulled over and got in the back with Jane.

I swiped the hair out of her face and stared at her, all mussed up from the fight. I felt around, finding a lump on the back of her head where she must have smacked it on the ground. This was all my fault. After everything that happened with the bomb in the clock tower, I realized that my attraction to the adrenaline was the same thing she felt, and one day it could get her killed.

So, I stopped her from having the adventure she craved, which drove her into IKE's arms. Not literally. He told her she couldn't go with him, but that didn't stop her. No, Jane was too much of a free spirit to ever let a man tell her what to do.

She shifted, finally opening her eyes and looking at me. She smiled for just a moment before she remembered what happened. She jerked upright in her seat and I grabbed her, worried about the bump on her head.

“Where's IKE?”

“How are you feeling?” I asked, rubbing her shoulder. “You hit your head pretty hard. You've been out for a while.”

She looked out into the darkness and frowned. “IRIS, where’s IKE?”

“Why don’t we worry about you for now?”

She pressed her hand to her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. “Oh my God. Is he dead?”

“No,” I said immediately. God, I didn’t want her thinking that. “He had some things to take care of.”

“But he’s meeting us again, right?”

I really didn’t want to lie to her. Everything in me screamed to tell her he was coming back, but I just couldn’t do it. She would hate me for keeping a secret like this from her.

“IRIS, tell me the truth,” she snapped, wincing at the sudden movement.

I sighed, knowing there was no getting out of this. “He’s not coming back, baby.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s done. He said he couldn’t do it.”

“Do what? What are you talking about.”

I stared at her for a moment. It was clear to me that IKE was in love with Jane in his own twisted way. I just wasn’t sure Jane understood that. She had a warped sense of what love was.

“I think you know.”

Her eyes dropped and she shuffled away from me. “No, I don’t know.”

“Don’t pretend.” Now it was just pissing me off. “You know he’s in love with you. He has been for some time.”

“So, you ran him off?” she said accusingly.

“No, he chose to leave. He knew he was putting you in danger.”

“And I’m sure you were happy to tell him to leave,” she scoffed. “You just couldn’t handle that another man was in my life.”

“Look around you,” I finally snapped. “There are men around you every day. People I put my trust in are constantly surrounding you. And even though you don’t believe me, I know IKE would never put you in danger. That’s why he had to leave. Not because I wanted him to, but because he knew staying around you would only get you in trouble. I asked him to stay, but he wouldn’t listen.”

She didn’t say anything, only stared at me as she fought the truth. She would lash out at me, be pissed at me and blame me for IKE leaving her, and I would accept that because I loved her. He’d been her friend for so long, it was hard to think he’d walk away without saying goodbye. It would have been easier if he had.

At least, for her.

“Take me home,” she said, refusing to look at me.

“We are going home, but we need to stop at a hospital and have you checked out.”

“I’m fine.” She continued to freeze me out, as if I meant nothing to her.

“I would feel better if—”

“We should really get home. I have a book to write.”

And just like that, she shut me out. I knew there would be no talking to her until she decided it was time. But I wouldn’t wait forever. I got out, shutting the door as I walked around to the driver’s side and got back in. We were a good five hours from home, long enough for me to really build up some steam on the way if I wasn’t careful.

For the first two hours, she completely ignored me, staring out the window at the darkness. Over the next hour, as the sun began to rise, I noticed her shielding her eyes from the morning sun. She had to be hurting, probably had a migraine from the whack to the head. And by the time we were pulling onto the property, I’d had enough of the pretending. I pulled into our spot at OPS, and before she could even get out, I flung the door open and dragged her out of the car.

“Hey—”

“Now you listen to me,” I said in a low voice. “I know he was your friend and I get that you think I’m somehow jealous of him. He’s a big part of your life. But I’m the man you’re in love with. I’m the man you’re going to marry,” I snapped. “I asked you to marry me, to be my wife. And that means something to me. It means we’re with each other through the good times and bad. It means you talk to me even when you’re fucking pissed at me. It means you don’t get the right to shut me out over some perceived notion that I tossed IKE aside so I could have you to myself. I’m not that fucking childish. I deserve better than what you’re doing to me. I deserve for you to give me the benefit of the doubt and for you to open your fucking eyes and see what’s right in front of you. Yeah, IKE walked out, but I’m still here. Me!” I shouted, slamming my fist against my chest. “And I will never walk away from you, no matter what either of us does or says. There is not a single fucking thing in this world that could ever keep me from you. So, you don’t get to do this to me. It’s you and me for the rest of our lives.”

I slid my hand into my pocket and pulled out the ring I had planned to put on her finger yesterday. I held it up for her to see and stared into her eyes.

“This is my fucking promise to you that I will never do to you what IKE did. And you either accept that right fucking now or you walk away. There is no room in our relationship for jealousy and—”

But I didn’t get to finish my sentence. She threw her arms around my neck and slammed her lips to mine. I could taste her salty tears as they slid down her cheeks and mingled with our lips. I kissed her hard, thankful that she wasn’t walking away, that IKE hadn’t ruined everything. I picked her up and carried her to the trunk of the car, setting her down on top. Then I got down on my fucking knees and asked her properly, like I always intended.

“Jane, pain in my ass and love of my life, will you marry me?”

She bit her lip and started to slide down the trunk, but I stood and swiftly held her in place.

“You’re not going anywhere until you answer my question.”

“And if I say I need time?”

“You don’t,” I said, challenging her. When she didn’t say anything, I started to put the ring back in my pocket.

“Alright, alright!” she giggled. “Fine, I’ll marry you if it means that much to you.”

“If it means that much to me? Jane, I had to fight off fucking Alexander Pierce to have you. This is no longer about me. This is about you letting go of your past and accepting your place beside me.”

“You know I already did.”

She had, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to hear her say it.

“Then get down on your fucking knees and prove it,” I commanded.

She slid off the trunk, giving me a sly smile as her eyes trailed up my legs, hovering over my cock, until finally meeting my eyes. “IRIS, do you know how I knew you were the one?”

I stared at her, my heart thundering in my chest as I waited for her to just fucking do it.

“I sweat a lot whenever I was around you. Like, way more than any normal person should.”

That was it. That was all she had to say? “And?”

“And do you know how bad it is when a woman sweats that much around a man? If that isn’t love, it’s fear. And I’ve never been afraid of you. But I sweat every damn day I’m around you.”

That was actually kind of sweet. Not that I would tell her.

“I want you to marry me. I want to have sweaty pits the rest of my life. I want to stink so bad that you’re the only one that can stand to be around me. I want—”

I grabbed her by the elbows and dragged her up against my body, laughing at how ridiculous she was. “Alright, geez. We’ll buy you some better fucking deodorant. But not until after our wedding day. I want to see you sweat for just one more day.”

“Sweat stains look terrible on white,” she whispered.

“Then you can go naked.” I kissed her hard, pulling her against me. And when I felt just how damp her armpits were, I grinned to myself.

RED

I groaned, rolling over and wrapping my arms around Zoe. Finally, after all the shit jobs I'd taken lately, I finally had the chance to sleep in with her. I just needed a few hours of peace. The kids would be asleep for at least another forty-five minutes, which was just enough time to get at least a little pleasure before we had to get up for the day.

I slipped my hand under the sheet and cupped her breast in my hand. After two kids, her breasts were much bigger than when I first met her, and I couldn't complain about that. I loved all the little changes in her body, but this was by far my favorite. I pinched her nipple between my fingers as I slid my other hand down her body, slipping just inside her underwear.

Her legs instantly opened for me. Things with Zoe were always easy. The attraction was so great that there was never a time I had to get her in the mood. Just one touch and she was ready to go. My lips latched onto her neck, sucking at the sweet taste of her skin. She moaned and rolled toward me, gasping when I slid a finger inside her.

"Mmm."

I pumped my finger inside her, loving the content smile on her face. That lasted all of two seconds before she sat upright in bed, smashing her forehead into my nose.

"Son of a bitch," I groaned, pinching my nose as my eyes started to water. She tossed off the covers and jumped up from the bed. "What time is it?"

"Not even seven," I muttered.

She shoved her long hair back from her face and panic took over. “Oh my God! I’m late!”

“How are you late? It’s your film.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t have to be on time,” she yelled, running around the room like a mad woman.

“I’m fine, by the way.” I pulled my hand away from my nose, sighing when I saw the palm of my hand covered in blood. I was going to be bruised up for days. The guys would give me shit over this for at least a month.

Zoe ran over to the bed and cupped my face in her hands. “I’m so sorry.” She pressed a kiss to my cheek. “There. All better.” Then she ran away.

“You know, I don’t think you really are sorry,” I yelled as she ran into the adjoining bathroom. “It’s just not right,” I muttered. “A guy has a right to have sex with his wife first thing in the morning.”

The shower kicked on and I saw the solution to my problem. She might need to get ready, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t join her and have a little fun. I tossed off the sheet and strode toward the bathroom, determined to get off if it was the last thing I did today.

“Baby,” I said, throwing back the curtain. She was scrubbing her hair furiously. “Slow down. You’re not going to be late.”

I pulled off my boxers and stepped inside behind her. But it was like she didn’t even notice. I slid my hands into her hair, only for her to scream and jerk around, nearly hitting me a second time. “Jesus! What are you doing? I thought you were an ax murderer!”

“Really? I was right in the other room and you think somehow an ax murderer not only snuck in but also managed to slip inside the house, make it past me, and step into the shower to murder you?”

“It could happen,” she snapped.

I sighed, knowing now wasn't the time to mess with her. She needed to relax. So, despite what I desperately wanted this morning, I focused on her. I slid my hands into her hair and gently massaged her scalp. It took a good minute, but she finally relaxed.

"You have to stop worrying so much about this project. It's going to be great."

"It's a disaster," she muttered. "Dash is ruining everything. This isn't like last time. This is supposed to be a comedy, and instead, it's more like a bad drama."

"Maybe the producers will love it." She snorted, groaning when I slid my hands down to her shoulders and dug my thumbs in. "Better?"

"Much. You always know what I need."

"That's because I know you better than anyone else." I slid my hand down her body until I was cupping her pussy. "And right now, you need to let go," I whispered in her ear. "Let me help," I said, sliding my fingers through her wet folds.

Her head flopped back against my chest as she allowed me to slowly work her body to climax. Just maybe, if I was lucky, she would be so turned on that she would shove me up against the wall and ride my cock. Her pussy clenched around my fingers as I pinched her nipple hard. She gasped, her whole body tightening as she came around my fingers.

My cock dug into her back and I spun her around, pressing her up against the wall. My cock was just inches from her pussy. I could feel the heat coming off her body, begging me to take her. I grabbed her ass, pulling her leg up around my waist as I lined up my cock.

"God, I need you so bad," I whispered. And then I was inside her, feeling her body squeeze my cock with need. It was so fucking perfect, so warm and magnificent.

And then the fucking phone rang, snapping her out of her lust-fueled haze.

"Shit!" She shoved me back, my cock slipping from that perfect heat as she tore open the curtain and practically ran out

of the bathroom.

“Dammit,” I hissed. “I was so fucking close.”

I wrapped my hand around my cock, thinking maybe I could still get some relief, but no such luck. With her running around in the other room, I couldn’t concentrate, and my hard on died a sad, lonely death in the shower.

Sighing, I shut off the water and grabbed the towel, wrapping it around my waist. I stepped out and watched as she yelled at someone on the phone, probably Dash. Then she was throwing on clothes in a flurry. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched her. She was passionate, and I loved that about her. I just wished her passion and my time didn’t clash so often.

She hurried over to me, leaning up on tip toes as she pressed a kiss to my cheek. “I have to go. Thanks for this morning,” she grinned before turning and rushing out the door.

“Yep, anytime,” I said to the empty room.

After getting dressed, I peeked into the kids’ rooms, finding both of them up and playing. I walked in and got down on my knees beside Caleb. “Whatcha doing?”

“Pwaying dinosaurs,” he said, not bothering to look up at me.

“Yeah? Can I play?”

He shoved one of them my way. “You can be ankwiosauraus.”

“Ankylosaurus, huh? And what does he do? Does he eat the other dinosaurs?”

My kid looked up at me like I was so stupid. “Daddy, he’s a herbivore.”

”A herbivore, huh? Those are big words. Where’d you learn that?”

“From Dino Dan.”

I really fucking hoped he didn't ask me to watch it with him. I hated that show. It was great for kids, but I could only watch so many episodes before I was done. He looked up at me with hope in his eyes, and then Olive started crying in the other room.

"I'll be right back, buddy."

I got out of there before he could say anything else. Diaper duty called, and while it wasn't my favorite thing to do, I'd take it any day over watching the same episode on repeat. "Hey, pumpkin! How's Daddy's little girl?"

Tears stained her cheeks as she continued to cry, holding up her hands for me to pick her up. I slid my hands under her arms and lifted her up, tucking her against my naked chest. Her cries instantly ceased as I shushed her, bouncing her in my arms. It was moments like this I never wanted to end. I loved the smell of her hair pressed against my nose and the way her little hands gripped me, begging me to never let go.

And then a loud explosion ripped through the peaceful silence and something oozed down my belly. I sighed, glancing up at the ceiling. "Of course, that's how today is going to go."

I pulled back and stared into her beautiful eyes. "You pooped on Daddy."

She smiled, her eyes watering still, but she was happy. "Dada!"

"Yeah, Daddy is covered in your poop. I can feel it leaking down my boxers."

She laughed again. I wasn't sure if she was even laughing about pooping on me or if she was just happy. Not that it mattered. I walked over to the changing table but wasn't sure what to do from here. If I laid her down on the table, I'd get shit all over it. And she needed a bath anyway. If I was covered in shit, so was she.

"Baby girl, we have a bit of a problem." Again, she smiled up at me. "I know you think this is funny, but there is no way

I'm changing you on the table. Your mom will kill me if I make more laundry for her."

"Dada!"

"Yeah, we're gonna have to do something here." With Caleb in the other room, I couldn't just leave him sitting around all by himself. That kid was bound to get into trouble. He was just like his mama. Then again, my daughter was just like me, so either way, we were in trouble.

"Alright, here's what we're going to do. Daddy is going to call Kavanaugh, and he's going to stay with Caleb while I get you cleaned up."

She smiled at me and clapped her hands. I carried her into the other room and grabbed my phone, calling my teammate.

"This better be good. I have a hot woman in bed with me."

"I need you at the house."

"Why?"

"Just get over here."

He groaned. "This isn't for kid duty, is it?"

"Let's just say I have a job for you."

"Nope, not gonna do it. I don't do kids."

"Well, you're going to today. I have a poop situation and I can't leave Caleb alone. He'll tear the place up."

"Have Zoe watch him."

I rolled my eyes, though he couldn't see me. "Don't you think I would do that if she was home? Just get your ass over here fast. I'm covered in shit."

"Shit!" Olive shouted, clapping her hands together as she laughed.

I winced, knowing Zoe would kick my ass later.

"Did your daughter just swear?"

"Just get over here," I said, hanging up before he could argue with me further. I walked back to Caleb's room and

watched as he played with his toys. Yeah, he looked innocent now, but the moment I wasn't there to stop him, he'd be causing destruction everywhere he went. I waited a whole ten minutes until Kavanaugh finally showed up. The poop was drying in all the wrong places, not that there was a good place for poop to dry on someone's body.

When he finally walked up the stairs, I glared at him. "Took you long enough."

"Hey, I had to get rid of my lady friend, and then I had to get dressed. I didn't think you'd want me to show up in just my birthday suit."

"I have shit drying to my balls."

"Baws!" Olive shouted.

Kavanaugh burst out laughing. Of course, it was funny to him. He didn't have to deal with this on a regular basis. "You know, one of these days, this is going to be you."

"Not likely. I made sure of it."

"Yeah? Did you get a vasectomy?"

"No, but that's not a bad idea."

"Yeah, it's a better idea to cut off all likelihood of ever having a kid just because of your old man."

"If you knew him, you'd do it too."

"You're not your old man," I said, trying to get that through his head. The thing is, given the chance, Kavanaugh could be really fucking happy. He just didn't allow it. He didn't want to be like his old man, and I couldn't blame him for thinking he would end up that way, but living alone was a fate I didn't wish on anyone.

"Do you want help with your kid or should I call Lo—Am—" He frowned. "Should I call the chick back?"

"The chick?"

"It's not like I plan to ever see her again."

There was no changing him right now. “Caleb is playing with dinosaurs. Can you handle him for ten minutes?”

He quirked an eyebrow at me. “Of course, I can.”

I hesitated for just a second, but then decided he was better than nothing. I took Olive into my bathroom and turned on the shower. This was going to be disgusting. I undressed her, grimacing at the poo smeared over her body, but then I remembered I had to get myself clean too. I was about to set her on the floor when I realized that she’d probably sit down. Then I’d have poo to clean up from the floor also.

“Shit, they should really make babies come with instruction manuals.” She giggled again, staring at me with those big eyes. “Yeah, I know. I already have one kid. You’d think I would have this figured out by now.”

She smacked me on the face with both hands. Something smelly swiped across my face and I grimaced, looking at her hands as she pulled them away.

“Olive, did you stick your hands in your poop?”

“Poop!” she squealed, giggling like it was the funniest thing in the world.

“Sure, you’re all full of words now.”

Sighing, I stepped into the shower with my boxers still on. If I had to, I’d just take another shower after I got her cleaned up. But what I didn’t consider was how slippery she’d be. I tucked her tight against my body, doing my best to hold her as I squirted some body wash into a loofah.

“See? We got this. We’ll just take this nice and slow.” I grinned as I washed her. I was awesome at this. It was strange because my kids were so different. I didn’t remember ever having to do anything like this with Caleb. Then again, I was out on jobs a lot. Most of the time, Zoe handled this end of the diaper situation. It made me wonder if she ever had to do anything as crazy as this.

“Dada!” she shouted, stretching for something behind her.

“Hold on, baby girl. Daddy has to rinse you off first.”

“Dada!” she screamed again, wiggling hard to get out of my hands. She was so damn slippery that I almost dropped her. I shoved her under the water, thinking if I could just get her rinsed off, everything would be fine. But she screamed as water cascaded over her face. She hit me with her little fist and twisted in my arms. My feet slid as I struggled to contain her little body, but the small movement was enough to let her twist again. My feet went out from under me and I twisted, trying not to crush her as my body went falling straight toward the faucet.

I hit hard, my eye swelling up instantly as I felt blood slide down my face from the cut I was now sporting on my cheekbone. I sighed, plopping my head down as Olive sat on my waist, giggling as the water rinsed her off.

“Sure, now you like it.”

I lifted her off me and stood, shutting off the water before any more accidents could happen. After wrapping her in a towel, I was about to head back to her room when I heard a crash. And it definitely was not from Caleb’s room. I rushed down the hall with Olive wrapped in my arms, stopping when I saw Kavanaugh in the living room. Dinosaurs littered the floor, along with everything else that used to be on the coffee table. Including the cup of coffee I just made for myself fifteen minutes ago. Zoe was going to kill me.

And I was going to kill Kavanaugh.

“Why is my brand new TV on the floor?”

“Why is your kid a little demon?” he asked, holding him up by only one leg.

“You can turn him upright at any time.”

He didn’t look like he wanted to, but finally grabbed him by the arm and spun him, then placed him on his hip. “You have shit dripping down your leg.”

CASH

“Boss!” Fox shouted as I walked down the hall. “Hey, boss! Wait up!”

Groaning, I stopped and waited for him. I really wasn’t in the mood for his shit today. “What do you want, Fox?”

“Hey, so I was thinking about how we can get FNG back and—”

“Fox!” I snapped. “FNG is gone. Not on vacation. Not on a job. Not lounging in the fucking Caribbean. He’s gone. Dead. In the ground.”

He shot me a grin, punching me in the shoulder. “Man, you don’t still believe he’s in that casket, do you?”

“No, he’s not, but that doesn’t mean he’s not dead.”

“And you believe Rafe?” His shoulders shook with laughter. “Come on. You know your brother. When has he not lied to you before?”

He was right, but he didn’t see the look in Rafe’s eyes when he told me FNG was gone. Things were escalating in Rafe’s world, and something dangerous was on the horizon. There was no doubt in my mind that FNG really was gone.

“Look, I know you want to believe that he’s alive somewhere, but he’s not. I know Rafe isn’t very trustworthy, but you know you can trust me. I’ve never lied to you.”

“I totally get it,” he said, giving me an exaggerated wink.

“There’s no wink. Stop winking at me,” I said irritably. “I’m not messing around. I’m not saying it because I don’t really know. He’s gone!”

Fox stared at me for a moment, his brows crinkled in confusion. Then his face cleared and he grinned. “So, check it out. The milk carton thing was kind of a dud. So, I got to thinking, what’s the best way to reach FNG?”

I sighed, unsure of what to say. If he didn’t believe me now, he never would. “I don’t know, Fox. What’s the best way?”

“We have to create a situation where he comes to the rescue! FNG is the guy that comes in and saves the day!”

“So, what? You want to blow the place up or something?”

“I wasn’t thinking that, but that’s a great idea!”

“No,” I said, turning and walking away.

“But you haven’t heard my plan!”

“Whatever it is, the answer is no,” I said over my shoulder.

“Come on, boss. At least let me go after him.”

“Sure, do whatever you want.”

“Great! Oh, and I’m taking Eva with me, so you’ve got the kid.”

I turned around instantly, but he was already running away. “You’re not taking Eva! Fox!” But he didn’t stop. In fact, I was pretty sure he was running away from me. “Goddamnit!”

I took off for the elevators, punching the button as soon as I was inside. As soon as I reached the top floor, I bolted for my truck. I knew Fox would pick up Eva as soon as he said he was taking her. I pulled out my phone and dialed her number, but she didn’t answer.

“Pick up the phone!” I shouted.

I dialed her again as I got in my truck and threw it into drive, but again, she didn’t answer. My tires kicked up dirt as I spun around and headed for the house. He shot out of one of

the escape hatches and took off across the grass. I had him now. There was no way he'd get to her before me.

I laughed, honking my horn at him as I hit the gas. My body jerked to the right as a vehicle came out of nowhere and crashed into the back end of the truck.

"Shit!" I shouted, trying to regain control of the vehicle. I smashed into a fence head-on, and smoke started pouring out from under the hood. Shaking off the accident, I shoved my door open and stepped out, pissed when I saw Fox waving at me in the distance. The fucker didn't even care that I'd just been in an accident.

I turned and faced the one person I really didn't think would be driving the other vehicle. Tate waved at me, then peeled out to catch up to Fox.

"So, the battle lines are drawn."

I looked back at my smoking truck and sighed. At least Duke would be able to fix it for me. Except Duke went with Rae, which left me Bowie. Kicking the tire, I started walking back to the office. I couldn't believe Tate would pull that shit. Then again, he was friends with Fox, so nothing was out of the question. Still, it pissed me off.

I headed over to the garage to clear my head. I needed the extra time to myself before this whole movie fiasco started up again. By the time I got to the bay, I was a little calmer, as in, I wasn't about to murder someone.

Bowie stood from behind the car he was working on and jerked his head at me. "Cash, what can I do for you?"

"My truck has been...in an accident."

A wolfish grin split his lips as he walked over. "Yeah, I'm not buying that. What really happened?"

I rolled my eyes, knowing it would be easier to just say what happened. "One of my guys crashed into me."

"On purpose?"

"Well, judging by the way he ran off with Fox, I'd say yes."

“Ah, Fox. Well, that explains it.”

“I hate that all I have to say is Fox and everyone knows why there’s chaos,” I muttered.

“So, who’s the new woman?” Bowie asked, pretending to not really care.

“Does it matter? Aren’t you married?”

“Officially annulled,” he grinned, walking over to his office. “As of yesterday. So, now I’m free to move on with my life.”

“And Carly? Is she still living with you?”

He scratched the back of his head, laughing slightly. “Yeah, that’s another problem. Not quite sure how to get rid of her.”

“You’re not married. Kick her out.”

“Yeah, but...what if a judge says no? Then I waste all that time and money in court.”

“I doubt that’ll happen.”

“Yeah, but what if it does?”

He wouldn’t look at me, and now I understood why. “You still want to sleep with her.”

He scoffed at that, finally meeting my eye. “No, that’s not it.”

“Well, I know she doesn’t cook for you, so it can’t be that. And from what I understand, she’s not working, so she’s not bringing any money in.”

“Right, and it would be heartless of me to kick her out.”

“Bowie, did you ever hear the phrase *you are your own worst enemy*?”

“Look, I get it, but...she’s hot and—”

“Crazy. The word you’re looking for is crazy. Cut her loose before you end up married a second time.”

His face paled at that. “Do you really think that could happen?”

“I don’t know. You got married in Vegas the first time. Do you really want to wait around and see what happens?”

I could already see the sweat forming on his brow as he considered the possibilities. “Maybe I could move onto the property. You know, Rae said she didn’t want to move out. Then I could be on call twenty-four, seven.”

I didn’t really like the idea of bringing more men onto the property at this point, but Bowie was a good guy. “Fine, but if she even steps foot on the property, I’ll kick your ass out.”

“I won’t even tell her I’m leaving. I’ll just be gone one day.”

“Yeah,” I grinned, turning my back on him. “That’ll work.”

“Cash,” I said as I picked up the phone.

“It’s Cap. I need a favor.”

I sat down in my chair and spun to face the window so I could see the movie set. “Why is it that every time I talk to you, you need a favor?”

“Hey, you stole Sinner from me.”

“Yeah, and he’s been back on your payroll for years. Let it go.”

“I will never mention it again.”

“Thank God.”

“If you do one favor for me.”

I wasn’t about to hand over favors left and right, but I was curious about what he needed. “Depends on the favor.”

“Do you remember Vira?”

“The vixen you sent my way before Sinner came out? Yeah, I remember her.”

“She’s in trouble. Someone put a hit out on her.”

“For what possible reason?”

“Well, if you’ll recall, her father is someone with a lot of connections.”

“Yeah, he wanted her to marry some asshole for a merger or something.”

“Exactly,” Cap answered. “Well, he died and he left everything to Vira. Except, she doesn’t want it. And if she dies, someone else inherits her fortune.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. It never ceased to amaze me just how far people would go for money. “So, someone wants her dead.”

“Right, and she’s refusing to come to Reed Security for protection. She has a little bit of history with a few people around here.”

I glanced out into the hallway thinking the same thing. “As I recall, she turned a few heads when she first showed up at our door.”

“Yeah, she showed up at your door last night, but guess what she didn’t find?”

Well, shit. That sort of blew our cover. “I’m guessing she didn’t find anyone at the building.”

“Did you move and forget to tell me?”

“It’s not like we’re exactly friends,” I said.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Nothing to concern you. We’ve moved our operations for safety.”

“Safety from what?”

“Every goddamn thing you can think of. So, I guess you want me to give you our new address.”

“That would be nice.”

“Fine, but it stays between us.”

“And my guys. They can’t exactly bring her to you if they don’t know where to go.”

“And I suppose you want me to take them in and give them a place to stay,” I added in a droll tone.

“Well, considering that they’ve been driving all fucking night, a bed wouldn’t be totally out of the question. Maybe some food.”

“You sure don’t ask for much,” I grumbled.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to get me back.”

He hung up, then my phone pinged with a reminder to send my address. After taking care of it, I tossed the phone aside and was just about to pull up the tracking on Eva. Even after all these years, I still wanted eyes on her at all times, even when she was with someone I trusted.

“Boss,” IRIS knocked at the door.

I waved him in distractedly as I pulled up the camera feed from the minivan. “What’s up?”

“I uh...got something to tell you.”

“You’re getting married,” I said, still watching the feed. Fox was in front, yapping away as he usually did. Eva looked like she was just going for the ride, but Tate looked downright pissed to be there.

“How did you know?”

Finally, I drew my attention away from the camera and looked at him. “You’re happy. That was my first sign.”

“I’m always happy.”

“Yes, but you never knock on my door. Plus, I saw you picking out the ring in town the other day. It wasn’t that much of a leap.”

Sighing, he walked over and slumped down in the chair across from me. “You know, you could have at least pretended you didn’t know.”

“Sorry,” I said, still distracted. “Next time I’ll do a better job.”

I zoomed in on Fox as he reached into the back seat. “Fucking Funyuns,” I muttered under my breath.

“What are you doing?” He leaned forward and looked at the screen. “Dude, you’re still stalking Eva?”

“You will too when Jane hangs out with Fox.”

He blew out a harsh breath. “That’s never gonna happen. I have that locked down.”

“Yeah, I did too, and then he won her over with musicals,” I said, glancing up at him. “Now, he broke my woman out of the house and took her on a joyride to find FNG. You bet your ass I’m spying on him.”

IRIS looked at me in concern. “Do you think I need to get cameras installed?”

“No need. I put them in all the vehicles.”

He paled drastically. “All of them?” he asked, swallowing hard.

I grinned at him. “Yes, all of them. I had to erase that particular scene from my memory. And let me tell you, if you ever role play with Jane again in one of my vehicles, you’d better get it sanitized before you bring it back.”

He laughed awkwardly and stood, scrambling for the door. “Right, boss.”

“Go propose to your woman.”

“Already done.”

“Then what are you doing in here?” I asked. “You better not have screwed her in the back seat again.”

He cocked his head at me. “You know, maybe don’t watch anything from the last forty-eight to sixty-eight hours.”

He ran out of the room and I shoved back from my desk. “Goddamnit, I’m gonna have to get all the vehicles professionally cleaned.”

TATE

Fox was running out of the house with Eva just as I pulled up. I had barely stopped when they got in the truck and shouted for me to go.

“Anyone want to tell me why I just caused a major accident with my new employer?” I said in a droll voice.

I hit the gas and took off down the road. This was not a good way to start working at a new company, and stealing Cash’s wife definitely wouldn’t endear me to him.

“We’re on the job,” Fox grinned. He wrapped his arm around Eva’s shoulders and pulled her in close. “And my girl is coming with us.”

“Your girl?”

“Not in the way you think. Eva’s been my girl ever since I first met her. I still remember our first time watching *Oklahoma* together. It was magical. Sparks flew, our hands linked, and in that moment, I knew I’d found my musical buddy.”

I grimaced at the way he described her. “That’s...I don’t even know what to say.”

“Why exactly did you kidnap me from my house?” Eva asked. “And why did you send Edu over to watch my son?”

Fox shifted in his seat to look at her. “Well, my fair lady, I would have thought it was obvious. While you sit at home day after day nurturing the wee lad you once carried in your belly, the Eva that used to challenge me to a knife-throwing

competition is slipping further and further away. And your all-knowing Foxy friend—that would be me—saw this terrible tragedy occurring and knew you needed a change. Ergo, me rescuing you. As for the unusual choice for watching your son, I knew in order for Cash not to catch on to my devious plan, I would need to send someone he would never suspect as an interloper. Enter Edu and his rugged, masculine good looks. I may have convinced him that this was an easy way to get out of playing the part of a fool. He gladly accepted the task, though I'm sure he'll question the sanity of my plan by the end of the day. Alas, we will be home by then, and you can relieve him of his babysitting duties.”

It was actually a pretty good plan, all things considered. Still, I wasn't sure what exactly he was hoping to accomplish today. “Are you going to tell me where we're going, or am I going to just drive us around all day?”

“We're going to get FNG,” Fox answered.

I slammed on the brakes and pulled the vehicle over. Turning around in my seat, I glared at my friend. “Fox, he's dead. We've been over this.”

“That's what you say.”

“That's what Rafe says, and he's the man you suspected all along of lying about FNG. Now he tells you the guy is dead and you don't believe him?”

“Ah, but you just said the one thing that gives Rafe away. He lies. So, when he finally decides to come clean, I know that he's still lying.”

“That doesn't make any sense! You can't come clean and still be lying!”

“Some would say,” Fox nodded. “But I know better. FNG is still out there. I can feel him.”

I couldn't get through to this guy. It was like talking to a crazy person. Hell, that was wrong. I was already talking to a crazy person. “Eva, help me out here.”

“I'm okay with going in search of FNG,” she shrugged.

“You can’t be serious,” I said incredulously. “Don’t feed into his...paranoia!”

“Oh, it’s not paranoia. Rafe really is a manipulative liar. I have no doubt that he told Cash FNG was dead as some sort of manipulation. After all the things he did to me, I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

That had me curious. “What has Rafe done to you?”

“Should I start with how he tried to detain me in his mountain bunker so he could use me to take down a high-ranking official at the appropriate moment? It was only because of Cash that I’m not still wasting away in that place. The man has no morals.”

“Especially after what he did when Cash was taken,” Fox grunted.

“Exactly, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go with Fox on this one.”

There was so much left out of this story, but it was clear Eva and Fox both thought Rafe was capable of lying about this. But that didn’t mean I could go through with this.

“Fox, you need to see things from my perspective,” I pleaded. “I already lost one job in search of this guy. If I lose another job, I’m coming after you.”

“You won’t lose another job,” he sighed. “Trust me, Cash would never fire you over something I convinced you to do. And definitely not when Eva is with us.”

I turned around in my seat. That was precisely the reason he would fire me. I got him in an accident and then I helped kidnap his wife. There was no way this was going to end well for me.

I heard Fox shift behind me, and then his hands were resting on my shoulders and he was whispering in my ear. “Just imagine...finding the man who’s been missing for over a year. The thrill of the hunt. The excitement of the chase. And when you finally find him, the satisfaction of knowing you never gave up.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “Seriously? You think that’s going to get me to go after FNG?”

He sat back and shrugged. “Alright, when you find FNG, you can drag him back to OPS and prove that you were the one that found him.”

“And when have I ever cared about taking the glory?”

A small smirk filled his face and I knew I was screwed. Then he leaned forward and whispered under his breath. My eyes flicked to Eva with every word he spoke, and I knew I wasn’t getting out of this no matter how many excuses I made.

“Fine,” I said, turning around in my seat. “Where are we headed?”

“That’s the spirit,” he said, slapping me on the shoulder.

“Wait,” Eva shook her head. “What just happened?”

I wasn’t about to tell her the words Fox whispered in my ear. “We’re going to find FNG.”

JONES

I strode through the doors of the prison, already itching to leave. I wouldn't have taken this job, but I knew Cash had no one else to help him out. Still, just being here put a target on my back. My movements would be tracked by someone. The question was, would anyone come at me?

The alarm sounded as I walked through the metal detector. The guard came over and I immediately lifted my pant leg, showing him my prosthetic.

“Over here.” He motioned me to follow him into a room.

Getting a pat down from a security guard wasn't on my agenda for today, but it wasn't like I hadn't been through this before. He closed the door behind me and immediately crouched in front of me, lifting the pant leg.

“Sir, how far does the prosthetic go?”

“All the way up,” I answered. “I hope you're not expecting anything in return.”

The guard turned bright red as I smiled at him. It wouldn't be worth the trip if I didn't fuck with him a little. He was quick after that. In just a few minutes, I was out of there and on my way to see Jack. After he showed me to the visiting room, I waited for a good twenty minutes before Jack arrived. Since he'd never met me, he was probably more than a little curious about who I was.

Jack walked over and sat down. Whatever he looked like before he came in, he looked like shit now. His hair was hanging down around his face, but it didn't distract from the

massive amount of muscle on his slender frame. I could see the military man underneath, but I couldn't for the life of me think of why the hell he looked like a drug addict.

He sat down and picked up the phone, staring at me with a bored expression. "Yeah?"

"Nice haircut."

He stared at me, not saying a word.

"Any chance you're gonna clean up your act?"

"When the time is right," he answered, lounging back in his chair.

"Yeah? And how much longer is that gonna be?"

"Who wants to know?"

There was no way I was telling him Cash sent me. That would be a surefire way to tip off anyone listening. "There's money in it for you if you can stop screwing around and get your shit together."

He smirked at me, his eyes calculating everything I said. I hoped to God he understood what I was saying, but he'd been in here for a while. And then he leaned forward, his eyes hardening as he lowered his voice. "For the love of money is a source of all kinds of evil."

And now we were getting down to the heart of the problem. He had lost his faith in Cash, probably because Rafe had abandoned him in here. At least, that's the way I saw it. If Rafe had some other plan up his sleeve, he sure as shit wasn't telling anyone else about it.

I didn't know my scripture by heart, but I knew enough to pass along a message to him, even if it was slightly off. "Those who claim to possess knowledge have failed. Obey your orders and keep the faith."

I stood and pushed away from the table, hanging up the phone. Whatever the fuck was going on here, Jack was swinging in the wind. Cash was going to be pissed when he found out. The problem was, there was no way for me to get any answers out of Jack without blowing the fact that I knew

him. I would have to dig deeper and find out why the fuck Rafe had any interest in putting Jack in here, and in order to do that, I was going to have to call in a favor.

I was on my way out of the prison when a guard stepped in front of me. “The warden wants to see you.”

“Me?” I pointed to myself. What the fuck did the warden want to see me for? Fuck, if I had let something slip somehow, I could be placing Jack in even more danger than I thought. But it wasn’t like I had a choice right now. Running wouldn’t do a damn thing to help anyone.

I nodded and followed the guard through the prison, ignoring the stares of the guards we passed on the way. Sirens sounded in the distance, signaling a lockdown for the prison. I could only imagine Jack being dragged off to his cell as some fight broke out. Probably another murder. This was one of the most dangerous prisons for him to be stuck in. I had no doubt this was some kind of job, but who the fuck was crazy enough to land themselves in here on purpose?

We stopped outside a room and the guard knocked on the door. A deep voice told us to enter, and I knew right away what I would find inside. Rafe sat behind the desk, looking just as smug as the day I first met him. I really hated this fucker.

“Why am I not surprised to find you here?” I asked, walking in as the door shut behind me. I took a seat across from him as he kicked his feet up on the desk and leaned back.

“About a year ago, the warden met an untimely death.”

“You don’t say.”

He shrugged. “Not that anyone around here cares. He was dirty.”

“And you slid right into the job.”

“Well, the government needed eyes inside.”

“And so did you,” I surmised. “I suppose you have no idea what actually happened to the warden.”

“Not a clue, but it was very fortunate that it happened when it did.”

“Because of the man you placed on the inside.”

He sat up, looking at me in confusion. “Placed on the inside? I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And you have no idea why an innocent man is behind bars.”

“Not innocent. The case file is one hundred percent correct on what happened that night. The very man you just visited killed a police officer. I bet my dear brother forgot to mention that.”

“On your orders,” I said forcefully.

He grinned at me. “You have a very creative imagination.”

“How much longer are you going to let him rot in there?” I spat.

“He’s doing his job.”

“Do you ever stop lying to people?” I asked. “When do your men come first?”

“When the job is done.”

“And when is that? How much longer is he going to rot in here on your orders?”

He shoved out of his seat and stood. “Tell my brother to stop sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong. And if he sends anyone else here to check up on things, I’ll be forced to take action.”

“You really are a piece of shit, Rafe.”

“Maybe. But do you know what separates me from everyone else?”

“What’s that?”

“I already know who I am.”

JACK

I had hoped when I was called in for a visit that Rafe was finally here to give me some good news. I knew it was highly unlikely, but I couldn't think of another person who would visit me in prison. Johnny and Jason couldn't, not without breaking my cover. It was even risky for Rafe, but I had no doubt he would find a way to send me a message when it was time.

I wasn't sure what the fuck was going on with Baz Gelbero. Rafe was positive he would get Rico out of prison, but the more days that went by, the less I believed that. It was very possible that Baz decided to leave his kid in prison to think about what he was going to do for the family. And if that was the case, taking this job would be for nothing.

As it was, this job was eating away at me. I didn't mind straddling the line of right and wrong. That had never been an issue for me. But murdering someone in broad daylight when they hadn't actually done anything to threaten me in any way was a hard pill to swallow.

But I did it. For Rafe and for Johnny and Jason. There was no doubt in my mind that Johnny would have done the job right. But I couldn't live with myself if I allowed him to go to prison. I was the team leader, the one that was supposed to take the hit when the team was in trouble.

"Back to your cell, McClain!" The corrections officer shoved me from behind. I clenched my fists to keep from turning around and slamming my fist into his face. I had a new respect for inmates after becoming one myself. As twisted as it

sounded, being treated like shit day in and day out made me actually feel sorry for these guys.

The sirens went off just as I was heading for the stairs leading up to my cell. The CO started yelling for us to get in line, and that's when I saw it. The very man I was sent in here to protect was surrounded by some of the deadliest men in this prison. They had been after him for a while now, all because they were connected to men working against his father, Baz Gelbero.

I'd already spent more time in the hole than I ever wanted because of Rico Gelbero. That fucker was the epitome of trouble, and it was my job to protect him. As much as I didn't want to run to his aid, and would probably end up in the morgue for trying to break up this fight, it was my only option.

As soon as the CO was distracted, I booked it across the room, swinging at the first asshole I crossed. I didn't stop there, taking out anyone that got in my way. If I could get to Rico and get him out of the center of the fight, he might actually stand a chance.

A foot landed in my back, kicking me to the ground. I rolled immediately, slamming my foot into the side of another inmate's knee. I jumped to my feet and continued throwing punches. And when I turned and saw one man choking Rico, I ran hard at him, tackling him from behind.

"Run!" I shouted at Rico as men descended on me. I barely had time to cover my head before feet slammed into my body from all angles. I caught a glimpse of Rico running from me, and for a brief moment, I was grateful I had done my job to protect him.

And then a swift kick to my kidneys had me wishing I had never taken this job. I grunted and tried to curl in on myself. There had to be at least ten men attacking, and with every kick I took, there was a possibility I might not get out of this alive. It wasn't until I heard the second alarm that I had hope someone would intervene.

Something sharp slammed into my stomach over and over again. I could feel the rush of blood as it left my body. The

pain was excruciating, but nothing was worse than knowing I had no way to defend myself. Interfering was the stupidest fucking move. But then, I always told Rafe I would do anything that was necessary to get the job done.

I was picked up and hauled over, just enough for someone to land a kick right to my jaw. I heard the crack and felt a blinding pain rip through my face. But it wasn't over yet.

It took several minutes too long for the COs to come to my aid. I briefly thought that they were purposely taking their time. After all, I shot a cop. I deserved everything I got.

The crowd dispersed around me as the COs closed in, staring down at me as I lay in a pool of blood. I knew it was bad. My breathing was shallow, and the pain wasn't as intense as it was just moments ago. I was losing too much blood, and if these fuckers didn't get their asses moving, I was going to bleed out on the floor of the fucking prison.

Finally, after what felt like hours, the E.M.T.s arrived. I barely saw the eyes of the angel watching over me as blood dripped into my eyes. She swiped at my eyes with something, leaning over me as she spoke. I couldn't hear a thing she said. I just kept staring into those ice blue eyes and praying that if I went, she was the last thing I saw.

Sweat poured from my face when I woke up again. Shivers wracked my whole body with every breath. No matter how many deep breaths I took, I couldn't stop shaking. There was a faint beeping that kept repeating in my head, but I had no idea what it was.

"Jack, don't go."

"I can't stay."

My sister wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me tight to her. "Please," she pleaded. "I won't survive without you."

I smiled and cupped her cheeks in my hands. "You're stronger than you think. Trust me, everything will be fine."

“You’re just saying that,” she cried.

I was one hundred percent positive that she could get through this on her own. It would be rough on her for a while, but eventually, the pain of losing me would get easier. She’d make friends and find a good job. She was a smart girl, one that I knew I could trust on her own.

She was nothing like me. She didn’t screw things up like I did. It was my fault she was attacked in the first place. I was supposed to be there to pick her up that night. But I stayed behind to work late and forgot about her. She walked home instead of calling me because she knew we needed the money. That decision nearly ended her life.

As I stared at her now, I didn’t regret a thing I did other than staying late that night. The assault charge the prosecutor laid against me was bad enough. But hearing that I might go to jail was even worse. But I got justice for her the only way I knew how. She was safe and he wouldn’t dare touch her again. I made sure of it.

“Why are you doing this? I need you!”

“I’m doing this because I have to,” I said, trying to hold back my anger at the situation. This wasn’t her fault, far from it. But that asshole that hurt her put me in a position with no way out. If I stayed, I would go to jail. And I wouldn’t regret it for a minute. But I couldn’t protect her from there. At least when I joined the military, it gave us both a chance to start over.

She would be surrounded by military families that would look after her. They’d keep an eye on her when I couldn’t. It wouldn’t be the same, but it was better than the alternative. I pressed a kiss to her cheek one last time and turned, grabbing my bag. The only thing I was sure about in any of this was that I was doing the right thing by her. She was my baby sister, and it was my job to protect her.

“I love you, Hannah,” I said quietly. I couldn’t look at her again, not even when I heard her crying. Her tears killed me. They tore at my heart, reminding me that I was all she had. I was all she would ever have.

“Hannah,” I murmured. I could swear I saw her sitting next to me and held out my hand. Her fingers wrapped around mine, giving me a tight squeeze. For just a moment, I felt peace settle in my chest. I had been waiting to see her again for so long, and now she was here.

I blinked and she was gone. I rubbed my fingers together, wondering if I had imagined it, and that’s when I felt the metal around my wrist. I jerked my hand, only for it to be stopped again.

Blinking the sweat from my eyes, I tried to figure out what was going on. Bright light shone in my eyes, making it impossible for me to think clearly. I started panicking, feeling my heart race out of control with every second that passed. I jerked at the cuffs, trying to free myself from this prison in my head. Everything was muddled. It didn’t make sense. The beeping got louder and louder, and then a flurry of people rushed into the room. I couldn’t hear myself think over the yelling.

“Hannah!” I shouted, hoping she would come back to me. My arms strained from trying to break free from the cuffs. I had to get back to her. I promised her. “Hannah!”

I was pressed down into the mattress until a warm calm washed over my body. Everything in front of me started to go fuzzy until fighting felt like too much work. I sank back into the bed, still looking around for my sister. I let her down. Going into the military was supposed to protect her. Instead, I wasn’t there when she needed me most.

I failed her again.

THUMPER

I rolled off the couch and fell to the ground. Everything hurt, and it was all due to the fact that I opened my mouth and stuck my foot in it last night. What was supposed to be a romantic dinner turned into a nightmare. And the worst part was that I had no clue how to fix any of it.

I grabbed the remote that fell off my body and onto the floor sometime during the night and tossed it onto the table. Rubbing my eyes, I knew I was in for a hell of a day. I shoved the blanket off my lap and hauled myself back up onto the couch. My leg was killing me today, but that always happened when I didn't take care of it properly. Usually, Bree gave me a rubdown every night. It was sort of our ritual. But last night, she slammed the door in my face as soon as we got home. It was clear I wasn't welcome in our bedroom.

I grabbed my robotic leg from where it leaned up against the wall, then went through the steps of getting it on. There were days I wished I didn't have to have this thing squeezing my stump. If I just left it off for a few days, I would feel so much better, but that wasn't a possibility when I had a job to do.

Or when I had to pee.

I couldn't really hop around the house all day long. I'd end up on my ass, and then I'd regret ever leaving it off. Besides, if I tried that now, Bree would just think I was trying to gain sympathy. Normally, I wouldn't be above using that to win her back, but I had a feeling the pregnancy card trumped my sore leg.

“Yo!”

I rolled my eyes as Slider came walking into my house uninvited. He grinned when he saw me standing in only my boxers, and the couch clearly my bed for the night.

“What did you do?”

“I fucked up,” I sighed, running my hand through my hair.

“And you got sent to the couch for being a naughty boy.” He tsked playfully as he shook his head. “So, what did you do to fuck up this bad?”

I didn’t even want to tell him about it. I hadn’t talked to Bree yet, so I wasn’t sure saying anything would be wise. But I needed help dealing with this. “Bree’s pregnant.”

His smile dropped instantly. “Oh.”

I nodded. “And I thought she was pregnant, but it turns out she thought I was cheating with Candy.”

“The woman Bowie’s married to?”

“The very one. Apparently, she called my phone and left me some dirty message.”

“Dude,” he scolded. “You have to delete those. Don’t you know women sneak through your phone?”

“I didn’t know they were there,” I practically yelled. “She heard it and erased it.”

“So, wait...if you thought she was pregnant and she is pregnant, what’s the problem?”

“Well, when she thought I was cheating, I realized all that crying and shit was due to the supposed affair and not the pregnancy.”

“Ah,” he said knowingly. “I thought you wanted a family.”

“I do, but then I realized that Bree isn’t like every other woman.”

“Yeah, she wants a family. I’m still not seeing the problem.”

I winced at the soreness in my leg and sat down. I was going to need something to get through this day, and I wasn't talking about coffee. "Bree isn't like the other women. She wants family, not bombs. She wants to know I'm safe, not wondering what cool job I'm out on. Which is what I love so much about her, but throw a kid in the mix—"

"And you have a terrified woman on your hands," he finished.

"Exactly. She's been eyeing my leg lately."

He winced at that. "You're a machine. Why is she even worried about that?"

"Because she's about to have a baby," I finished. I scrubbed my hands over my face and sighed. "I need to figure out how to deal with this, but first, I need to get her to talk to me again."

"So, the question of the day is how to make her think you're not a complete ass and you really do want this kid."

"Exactly, but I'm not sure saying I'm sorry is enough."

"You're right on that. You could try flowers."

"That's so cliché. *I'm sorry I was relieved I thought you weren't pregnant. Here are some flowers to make up for it.*"

"Okay," he nodded, rubbing his hands together in thought. "So, we need something outside the box. You could propose."

"Again, very cliché. I don't want her to think I'm asking her to marry me because I knocked her up."

"But you do want to marry her..."

"Of course. But I can't ask her now. It'll ruin the moment."

"I think you ruined it the moment you did a happy dance because she wasn't pregnant."

I glared at him. "That's not being helpful."

He held up his hands in defense. "Hey, don't take this out on me. I'm not the one that ended up on the couch last night."

“You’d have to actually have a woman for that to happen,” I muttered.

“Hey, you don’t see me taking cheap shots at you. If you don’t want my help, I’ll leave.”

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“And that is not the kind of apology that will win you over with Bree. It needs to be heartfelt. It needs to be something that shows just how dedicated you are to her. You need...you need...”

“I’m all ears. Please, tell me what I need,” I said, getting frustrated. The truth was, I had no fucking clue what I needed. I knew there was no quick fix to any of this. But I needed to show her that I was serious, that I really did want a family with her. I just wasn’t sure she’d believe me if I told her.

“I’ve got it!” Slider grinned. “Get dressed. We’re going out.”

“I don’t think now is the time for one of your harebrained ideas.”

“You said you wanted help. And unless you’ve thought of something other than sitting on your ass all day while she cries in the other room, you’re coming with me. But with pants and a shirt on because they won’t let you in the store otherwise.”

“Pants and a shirt—”

“You know, those things normal people wear when they’re around company.”

I shot him a dirty look. “Other people don’t just walk into someone else’s house.”

“Other people aren’t sleeping on the couch.”

I sighed. “You know, one of these days, I’m gonna be fucking her on that couch when you walk through the door.”

“Yeah, but it won’t be anytime soon. And once that kid comes, you can say goodbye to fun sex. Hello, boring daddy.”

I winced at that. “Please don’t ever call me daddy again.”

“Too much?”

“Not at all sexy.”

“You know, in some circles—”

I spun around and glared at him. “I can’t stress enough how much I don’t want to know.”

He held his hands up and relented. I turned to head upstairs to get dressed, but he just couldn’t resist.

“Guess you’re already boring in bed.”

I pushed ahead of Slider despite the ache in my leg. If I had to hear one more thing about kinky sex, I was gonna feed him to the dog in the window.

“And it might interest you to know that most people don’t call their lover *daddy* because they fantasize about sex with their father. That would be disgusting. In fact, most of the time, daddy is used to mean boss or protector. They want to live out that fantasy about a man coming to their rescue. Which in your case with Bree would actually fit quite well.”

I spun around and got in his face. “We’re in a fucking pet store. Do you think you could keep the sex talk down?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were so defensive about the subject.”

“In public? Seriously?”

He shrugged with a grin on his face. “It doesn’t matter to me. I’m always looking for a member of the opposite sex just dying to tell me her darkest fantasies.” A woman stopped beside us, blushing hard. “How you doin’?”

I rolled my eyes as the woman giggled, scurrying away from us. “Nice, she can’t be more than twenty-five.”

“Hey, I don’t discriminate. Women in their twenties need a man who’s experienced and can guide them on their sexual journey.”

“And you think you’re that man.”

“Who better? I am unattached and looking for a good time.”

“Except, women in their twenties still dream about a man who wants to settle down and make babies with them. And right now, you’re looking pretty good.”

His smile fell and I walked away, feeling pretty damn good about putting him in his place. “So, what exactly are we doing here?”

“You need something to woo her with.”

I turned and stared at him like an idiot. “And you think a pet will make up for everything?”

“The pet is to make her realize that you’re ready to take the next step,” he clarified. “See, it starts with taking care of an animal. They’re hard work, and that shows you can take care of a baby.”

“I’m not a teenager needing to prove that I’m old enough for more responsibility. I’m a grown man,” I argued.

“Yes, a grown man who was relieved when his girlfriend wasn’t pregnant. Trust me, you need this.”

I looked around at the cages of animals, wondering what I was supposed to go with. “Alright, genius, what do you have in mind?”

He walked over to the cage and grinned. “Nothing says I love you and I can take the responsibility more than a bird.”

I looked at the parakeet he was pointing to and then back to him. “A bird.”

“The way I see it, you need something low maintenance.”

“I thought the point was to prove to her that I could take care of an animal.”

“Right, but you don’t actually want to do that. The animal alone is enough to prove you’re ready.”

I looked back at the bird and grimaced. There were newspapers laid across the bottom of the cage and shit all over it. Then there was the food pellets and water dish...none of it looked like anything I wanted to deal with.

I looked back at him, shaking my head. "I don't know. Can't I just get her a dog?"

He barked out a laugh. "Seriously? Do you know how much work dogs are?"

"Yes, I had one growing up."

"And did you have to train it?"

"Well, no. It was an outdoor dog."

"And you really think Bree is going to think you're ready by getting a dog and then leaving it outside?"

He had a point. "Alright, but a dog is still better than a parrot."

"And what happens when it's winter and you have to take him on walks? Or what about when he needs to go out in the middle of the night? Who's going to do it? You might as well just have a baby."

I tensed in irritation. "I am having a baby."

"Exactly. Why would you get a second one?"

"Because I'm trying to prove I can take care of a baby. Are you listening to the conversation you started?"

"Of course, I am. The question is, do you really understand the point of all this? Because it's not to make life more difficult. You're supposed to give her something and walk away. It's a gesture."

"Not very meaningful if I walk away," I muttered.

"Then what's your plan?" he huffed.

"I don't know. Apologize and slowly work through shit day to day. Isn't that what normal people do?"

"But you're not normal people," he stressed. "The very thing that terrifies her is that you'll be gone one day."

“And an animal won’t change that,” I argued. But he had a point. Showing up with nothing would be worse.

It took forever to come up with something, but finally, a half hour later, I was walking back through the front door with a brand new pet that was scratching the hell out of me. Bree was already in the kitchen getting her breakfast when I slinked in with my tail between my legs. She momentarily stopped buttering her toast, then resumed as if I wasn’t even there.

“Can we talk?”

“Are you going to tell me how miserable you are that I’m pregnant?”

Man, she was not going to make this easy. I pulled the kitten from behind my back and held it out in a peace offering. My hands were full of scratches, some small and some already bleeding. Having a cat was no joke. And here I thought it would be the easy choice.

She looked up, but I didn’t see any sign of a smile on her face. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

I looked back at the kitten and shrugged. “Slider said I needed something to prove that I was ready to be a father.”

“And you think a kitten does that? Cats basically lay around all day.”

Right, she caught onto that right away. Sighing, I walked closer to her. “I do want to be a father. It just caught me off guard. We haven’t really talked about it that much, and when you started crying...”

“You assumed I wasn’t happy about it?”

“No, I saw the way you were eyeing my leg and crying all the time. And it reminded me that you’re not like the other women. You don’t like the danger and the explosives. I wasn’t ready for how our lives were about to change. I don’t ever want you to worry about me not coming home or getting hurt, and then having to worry about what happens with our child if that happens.”

“Does that mean you’re giving it up?” she asked hopefully.

I wasn't expecting her to ask that, and if she did want me to, I wasn't sure where to go from here. I couldn't give it up. It was what kept me going. Doing this job was all I wanted. Without it, I was just another guy who lost his leg during the war. I couldn't imagine ever having just a nine-to-five job, sitting behind a desk and staring at the wall all day. That wasn't me.

"Do you really want me to?"

"I want you to be safe," she said, dropping her gaze.

"Baby, nothing in life is ever safe."

"No, but you don't have to put yourself in danger so much."

"And where would that leave me?" I asked without any heat in my voice. "It's not who I am. I can't do nothing."

"You wouldn't be doing nothing. You could get a regular job and—"

"And what? Bree, I wouldn't be the man you fell in love with if I quit my job. Maybe for a while it would be okay, but I know myself. I can't just sit on the sidelines."

I could see the tears swimming in her eyes, the way her whole body sagged at my words. I hated to see her like this, but I couldn't change who I was. Having a baby on the way just amplified her fears.

I set the kitten down on the counter and wrapped my arms around her. "Baby, I love you so much, but please don't ask me to give up who I am."

"I won't," she whispered, sniffing slightly. "I just can't stand the thought of you getting injured. I see how much it affects you at the end of the day. You're sore and tired, and I hate that."

"It's a part of me now. I can't change it, and being angry about it won't make a damn bit of difference. I've accepted this is part of my life, and you need to see that I'm fine. I can handle anything."

"But—"

“No buts. Yeah, it’s sore sometimes. Yeah, it makes me tired, but it also reminds me I’m alive.” I tilted her chin up and forced her to look at me. “We’re gonna be parents,” I grinned at her.

Finally, a small smile split her lips. “Yeah.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The kitten meowed, then fell off the counter, just barely landing on his feet.

“Oh, and you have to change the litter box,” she grinned. “Pregnant women aren’t supposed to handle litter.”

Fuck, I knew I should have gone with the dog.

JACK

“Do you know where you are?” she asked.

I stared at the doctor as she tried her best not to fidget. I couldn't blame her. I looked like shit and I was handcuffed to a bed. Who wouldn't be nervous around me?

“At the hospital.”

“And do you know how you got here?”

Because of that fucker, Rico. “Fight at the prison.”

She nodded, still staring at her chart. “You had a major infection, probably from whatever the...prisoners cut you with. There were some pretty deep wounds. But it looks like you'll recover in no time. You should be able to return tomorrow.”

Fucking fantastic. I could almost pretend this was a vacation, that I wasn't in prison, but the handcuffs were a constant reminder that I was headed back. This wasn't the way I thought this job would go. I knew it was dangerous, that the chances of making it out alive were slim, but still, part of me hoped for a better outcome.

I continued to stare at the doctor, wondering if she would have the courage to look at me. Since she'd already given me the good news, there was no reason for her to stick around. Yet, she did.

Her eyes finally flicked to mine, and I saw the curiosity and fear swirling in their depths. Her lips parted and her tongue darted out for just a second. I knew what she was going

to ask before she spoke the words. Everyone wanted to know what drove a man to do the things I had done. And not many had the opportunity to ask without fear of being murdered.

“I...” She cleared her throat, glancing down at her chart again.

“You can ask.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “What?”

“You want to know why I did it.”

“Um...”

“So, ask.”

She still hesitated. There was something nice about not knowing. If you didn’t know the real reason why people killed, you could make up something more pleasant in your head. But once you knew the real reason, you could no longer pretend. You couldn’t erase it from your brain with a better reason.

She stood up straight, squaring her shoulders as she gathered the courage to ask. “Why did you do it?”

“Do you want the real reason or the one that helps you sleep at night?”

“I—” She shifted again, a sure sign that she really didn’t know what she wanted. Part of her needed the truth. She was a scientist, and they worked with facts. As long as she had facts, she could explain what happened. But the human condition didn’t always follow the laws of logic.

“Does it really matter why I did it?”

“I just want to understand.”

“Why? Does it make any difference to your job?”

She stiffened, staring hard at me now. “I just don’t understand why someone would throw away their life. What did you get out of this?”

Me, personally? “Not a damn thing.”

“Then why do it? It doesn’t make sense.”

“And it never will. Let me ask you a question. You seem like a good doctor, moral and upstanding.” She gave a nod. “But if you had to do something, knowing it could very well end your life, but it was for the greater good...would you do it?”

“Is that what you did?”

“I’m asking you a hypothetical question.”

Again, she was silent as she considered this. “I don’t know. I guess I would have to know what it was all for.”

Even I couldn’t answer that. It wasn’t like Rafe filled us in on his bigger plans. I was pretty sure we all knew something else was going on, but Rafe had never steered us wrong, and that’s why I followed him so blindly. I trusted what I knew about him, which was that his agenda always benefited him. He would sacrifice anything to get the job done, and that was something I could live with. At least with him, I always knew where I stood. Governments lied to your face to get their way. They didn’t tell it like it is. That made it really fucking hard to trust anyone.

“What is any of it for?”

She pursed her lips, clearly not happy with my answer. “You called out for a woman when you first got out of surgery. Hannah.”

I swallowed hard, refusing to show how much that name affected me. I couldn’t think about Hannah. It was a painful reminder that I failed even while trying to do the right thing.

“And?”

“Who is she? Your wife?”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“Okay, a girlfriend or something. I could get her a message.”

She fidgeted under my gaze. “Why would you do that?”

“Because...because everyone needs someone.”

“That’s a very generous attitude considering that I’m in prison. You could lose your job for passing a message for me.”

“Are you planning to do something that could get me in trouble?”

I would never do that. Rafe would do it in an instant, but I wasn’t him. “Let me give you some advice. Whatever you think you see in me, I’m in prison for a reason. Don’t ever risk your life to help someone like me. It’s not worth it.”

She flushed bright red and turned on her heel, but stalled at the door. With one last look at me, she pulled open the door and left the room. I sighed and rested back in bed. I did the right thing. She would have regretted helping me. Sure, it was nice to think about taking a walk on the wild side, but the moment you did it, there was no going back. I wouldn’t let her risk all the years of hard work she put in for someone like me.

I shifted in bed, trying to get comfortable. I wouldn’t have the privacy of a room like this for a long time. With Rafe in the wind, it looked like I had traded my life for nothing. Any hope I had that this job would be over soon was snuffed out the moment I walked into the visitor’s room and saw Jones. He didn’t think I knew him, but Rafe had us do our research on Cash a long time ago.

But Rafe didn’t send in Jones. It was Cash, and since he wasn’t privy to Rafe’s plans, he was no more help to me than I was on the inside. The job was over. I’d gotten close to Rico. I’d saved his ass more times than I could count, and it didn’t make a bit of difference. Rafe’s plan had failed, and I was paying the price for it.

ZOE

“No, we’re not having any explosions!” I shouted at Dash. “What part of romantic comedy do you not understand?”

He covered his mouth with his hand, blowing into it angrily. “Look, I know you fancy yourself a writer, but this isn’t going to work. The romance is dead.”

“Because we have shitty actors,” I argued. “And I don’t fancy myself a writer. I am one!”

“No, Jane is a writer. She has a career and actual books.”

“And I have actual movies,” I argued. “And you’re not a director.”

“Oh! Oh!” he shouted dramatically. “So, this is my fault?”

“For changing the script? Yes!”

“I can’t work like this! Amateurs surround me.”

I pressed my hands to my face. There was no way I was going to get through this. I needed Fox. He would probably knife Dash for me, and then I could take back my job as director. I wasn’t even sure how I was ousted in the first place.

“Listen—”

“Zoe?”

I spun around just as Cotton walked onto the set. I was so relieved to see him that I nearly cried. I rushed over to him and flung myself into his arms. Cotton didn’t like to be touched, so it didn’t surprise me when he kept his hands at his side. But he didn’t pull away from me as I cried into his chest.

“What’s going on?”

“Dash took over and everything’s going wrong. The screenplay is going to fail and I won’t get the job!”

“Dash,” he said, and that’s when I remembered that Cotton didn’t like Dash. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea for him to be here.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be crying on your shoulder.”

But he wasn’t paying attention to me anymore. His eyes were firmly locked on Dash, and he looked like he was going to murder the man.

“We should talk to Dash.”

“No, that’s okay, Cotton. I appreciate—”

He shoved past me and walked straight up to Dash, poking him in the shoulder. Dash spun around to yell at someone but stopped the moment he saw who it was.

“Cotton! Hey, man. Long time, no see.”

He held out his hand for Cotton to shake, but Cotton only stared at him. “You took over the film. You need to go away.”

“Listen, Cotton, I understand why you would think that, but someone has to direct this film.”

“Yes, it’s Zoe. You need to leave.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Cotton asked very matter-of-factly.

“Look, I could leave, but I won’t. We’re in the middle of filming.”

“She’s upset, and you’re the one who’s upsetting her. And she should be happy, so you need to go.”

Dash leaned in closer to Cotton conspiratorially. “This is a misunderstanding. She’s not mad at me and she doesn’t hate me. She’s just frustrated right now. You know me. I’m a good guy.”

“Good guys don’t upset women.”

Dash laughed slightly, glancing at me for help. “Buddy, it’s me! You like me.”

“No, I don’t,” Cotton said, crossing his arms over his chest.

And then in true Dash fashion, he punched Cotton on the shoulder playfully. “Buddy...you like me. We’re good.”

Even I could feel the awkwardness of the situation. Cotton wasn’t giving in on this. And as Dash stood there completely out on a ledge, Cotton refused to play along.

“We’re not good.”

“What is it going to take for you to give me a second chance?”

Cotton stared at him, not flinching. “Leave.”

“Like, go to another state?”

“Leave the set.”

Dash laughed nervously. “But...I’m directing.”

“Not anymore. If you want in with me, you need to leave the set.”

I could see the conflict in Dash’s eyes. He didn’t want to leave, but he made a bad impression with Cotton from the beginning, and there was no way he was going to miss the opportunity to fix things.

“Alright, I’m out. So, we’re good?”

Cotton narrowed his eyes at him. “This is phase one.”

“Phase...what?”

Cotton took my hand and shoved past him. I couldn’t help but giggle as Dash shouted to Cotton, “How many phases are there?”

“You really didn’t need to do that.”

“Yes, I did. You were upset.”

“I’m always upset during filming.”

“You shouldn’t be. It’s not good for the baby.”

“Shh,” I hissed at him. “You need to keep your voice down.”

“Everyone already knows you’re pregnant. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that I don’t need people being reminded of it. The last thing I need is someone offering me a chair or a glass of water.”

“Here’s your chair,” he pointed to the director’s chair. “It’s all yours.”

“Why, thank you,” I grinned, sitting down happily.

“Would the director like anything to drink?”

“A water would be lovely.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He rushed off to get me water. I looked around, then frowned, glancing down at the chair. Seconds later, a bottle of water was shoved into my hands.

“Better?”

“Um...”

“You have a chair and your water. We should get to work.” Then he turned around, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Filming begins in two minutes. Places!”

I cocked my head at Cotton, wondering what the hell just happened. I went from getting my chair back to having a new director. People rushed around the set, not wanting to upset Cotton. It was nothing like with Dash or me. Maybe this was a good thing.

“Alright, what’s all this stuff with kissing? People don’t want that,” Cotton said, studying the script. “Where’s IRIS? We need some explosives.”

I pressed my hand to my head. Maybe I was wrong.

SLIDER

“Slider!”

I turned around, my eyes widening when I saw it was Zoe. Then I took off running. There was no way in hell I was getting roped into this movie.

“Slider, you stop right now!”

Maybe it was wrong to run from a woman, but Red would make me participate in her film, and I really didn’t want to do that. The last one was fun, but this was romance. The thought made me shudder. I turned the corner and would have escaped her if I hadn’t slammed into Lock’s hulking frame. We both hit the ground hard and Lock tossed me off him, sending me straight into the wall.

“Ow, you douchebag!”

“Watch where the fuck you’re going,” he snapped, getting to his feet. He looked down at his shirt and sighed. “Emilio’s going to kill me.”

I stood, pressing my hand to my lower back. “Fuck, I think I tweaked something.”

“Slider Ernesto Jameson!” Zoe yelled, catching up to me, her little body struggling to keep up with me. It was never smart to run from a pregnant woman.

“My name isn’t Ernesto or Jameson,” I clarified.

She bent over, sucking in a deep breath. “Since I don’t know your name, it’ll have to do. Why were you running from me?”

“You know why,” I said, refusing to get drawn into the madness.

“I need you.”

“You have Lock.”

“Nobody has me,” he muttered, fixing his hair.

I rolled my eyes, turning back to Zoe. “I need you. Cotton is trying to take over. It was bad enough when Dash was in place, but now Cotton is throwing out my script!”

“And you think I can help in some way?”

She looked at me with sad eyes and a big frown. “Maybe you could come read lines for one of my guys. I’m sure you could do the part justice.”

“Nope,” I said, turning and walking away. “I don’t do romance.”

I could hear her little feet scurrying after me. I felt bad, but not bad enough to stop. “I’m desperate! Please!”

“Not gonna happen. I did it once and that was enough for me.”

“Slider—”

I turned around to tell her just how much I didn’t want to be part of this, but instead of Zoe standing behind me, it was a very pissed-off Red. He stood there with his arms crossed over his chest and a *don’t fuck with me* expression on his face.

“Oh, hey, Red.”

“Did you just tell my woman you wouldn’t help her?”

“Uh...”

“Because that’s what it sounded like.”

“I wouldn’t say that. No, I was...I was telling her that... that...”

He raised his eyebrow, waiting for my answer. Hell, I was stuck now. There was no way out of this. I cleared my throat, shifting from one foot to the other. If I took off now, I might be able to get away. Then again, I might get my ass beat.

“You know, I really don’t like it when my friends don’t help out my wife. It’s not very nice.”

The threat in his voice was clear. “Um...”

“You already said that.”

“Right, but...but what I didn’t say was that...I didn’t want to step on any toes. You know, with IRIS taking off last night.”

“What does IRIS have to do with anything?”

“Well...” Shit, I had no idea. I was just going with the flow. “Because he’s the EOD expert.”

“It’s a romance film,” Red retorted.

“There is that,” I nodded.

“So, you’ll go back and do as she asks.”

There was no question there, only a demand for me to get my ass over to the set before he dragged me there. “Sure.”

“And the next time you make my pregnant wife chase you down, I’m gonna let you know how it feels to push a baby out of your body.”

I laughed. “Yeah? How are you gonna do that?”

He cracked his knuckles, stepping toe to toe with me. “Care to find out?”

I swallowed hard. I most definitely did not want to find out. “I should really get to the set.”

“Why don’t you do that.”

I nodded and stepped past him, but he didn’t budge an inch, other than to slam his shoulder into mine with a final glare. I rubbed my shoulder, knowing I’d probably have a bruise tomorrow.

“You know, one of these days I’m going to have a woman, and then you’d better watch your back. You’re the first one I’m coming for.”

He tossed his head back and laughed.

“I’m serious.”

“Oh, I know you are. I can’t decide what’s more funny. You having a woman or coming after me.”

I flipped him off, then followed Zoe back to the set, but just as I suspected, Red followed me the whole way. “So, what is it you need me to do?”

She picked up a script and handed it over to me. “You’re on in about twenty minutes. Try not to screw it up.”

With a satisfied smile, she turned away from me. “Try not to screw it up,” I said mockingly, then turned right into Red. He narrowed his eyes at me and I held up the script. “I’m just gonna go...practice my lines.”

“You do that.”

I got out of there as quickly as I could. I briefly considered running away and not showing up for a week or so. By then, things would have died down. Red would have no excuse to kick my ass. But frankly, I didn’t want to mess with Red. He would beat my ass just on principle.

I sat down on the ground with a heavy sigh, staring at the script in front of me. “This sucks.”

Edu plopped down on the ground beside me. “You got roped into doing lines?”

“Want to take over?”

“Not a chance. I already did my part and it sucked.”

I hissed, glancing around for Red. I knew he was lurking. “Keep your voice down. Red’s on a mission today.”

“To do what?”

“To kill anyone that’s not cooperating with Zoe. I don’t want to end up dead.”

“He can’t actually kill you.”

“No, but he can make my life very miserable. I’ll pass.”

He laid back in the grass, crossing his arm over his eyes. “You know, it wouldn’t be so bad if there was something more exciting going on.”

“Right? Listen to this line. *I know we haven't known each other very long, but my heart can't deny the connection between us.*” I scoffed. “What a load of bullshit. Now, if there was...a bomb or something about to go off and he said something really awesome, I could see this as a great holiday movie.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“Do I look stupid? No, the last thing I'm going to do is talk to her again. She's pregnant.”

“Well, you could always make a few changes.”

“And how would I do that?”

He sat up and grinned at me. “Let's say something were to happen around here that wasn't supposed to be part of the film.”

“But it just happened to make its way into the picture,” I grinned. “I like where you're going with this.”

“And cameras just happened to be around to catch it all for the film.”

“And then I wouldn't have to say any of this dumb romantic shit.”

“Or you could improvise and say something just to keep in line with the romance part of the film.”

“And then neither she nor Red can be mad at me. I like it.”

He laid back down and stared up at the sky with a smile on his face. “Now we just have to figure out what we're going to blow up.”

“It's a shame IRIS isn't around. He'd be all over this.”

“He's here. I believe he's celebrating his engagement at the moment.”

“You want to interrupt?”

A smirk played across his lips. “And ruin this special moment? I don't think so.”

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Edu asked.

I stopped what I was doing to glare at him. “I’ve seen IRIS do this a thousand times.”

“Really? A thousand?”

“Okay, not a thousand, but a lot. I know what I’m doing.”

“But how can you be sure? Shouldn’t we have someone look it over first?”

“Do you not trust me?”

“Nope,” he said without even an ounce of hesitation.

“You know, that hurts. Do I question your skills?”

“No, but I’m also not the one building a bomb.”

“A very simple bomb,” I corrected. “This is something a ten-year-old could make.”

“That is *not* something a ten-year-old could make.” He shoved away from the table and started pacing the room. “Look, maybe we should just forget the whole thing.”

I set down my tools, already irritated with him. “Forget it? Did you really just say that to me?”

“I have my reservations about this whole thing.”

“And I have my reservations about giving you credit for any part in this,” I retorted. “This is not rocket science. In fact, this is the simplest bomb I could make.”

“Yes, but shouldn’t you have made it *outside*?”

“So Cash could see and stop me? Hell no.”

“Just a few more minutes and I’ll be done with this bad boy. Then we can get it over to the set and in position.”

“And how the hell do you propose that we get it over to the set?”

“Well, we could try walking, but if you want to fly, we can definitely do that.”

“Would you be serious about this? We’re not qualified to handle anything more than a sticky bomb.”

“And do you want to be the one to tell Red that you aren’t giving Zoe what she needs?”

“I’m pretty sure she didn’t say she wanted a bomb.”

“No, but the new director did,” I grinned. “And he’s not only Red’s brother but one of Zoe’s friends.”

“Fine,” he grunted. “But I still think this is a bad idea.”

I rubbed my hands together, ready to see this thing through. “Alright—”

But I didn’t get any further than that. An alarm sounded throughout the whole building, signaling someone was breaching the property. I looked at Edu, who immediately turned and ran from the room. Racing after him, we made it to the IT room in record time. Luckily, since Dash had been kicked off the screenplay, he was inside.

“What do we have?”

“Right there,” he said, pointing at the screen as he flicked through the feeds. “We have three tangos, from what I can see.” Then he was pulling up Cash’s number. “Boss, we’ve got three tangos on the property and alarms going off everywhere. Sending you footage now.”

“That’s the tower.” I walked closer to the screen, searching for the man who was supposed to be stationed there. “Anything on his vitals?”

His fingers flew across the keyboard as he pulled up the vitals of everyone with an implant. “Looks like he didn’t get his yet. Today’s his first day,” he said, turning to face me.”

“I’ll go check it out.” I grabbed an earpiece and shoved it in place. Edu did the same and followed me out of the room. Edu and I headed to the elevator, taking it down two levels where we could easily access the tower.

“Dash, has the door to the tower been breached?”

“Negative. It’s free and clear.”

“That means they’re moving around the property,” Edu said, running behind me.

“Thank God everyone stayed home this week.”

We hit the ladder going up to the trap door just a few minutes later. Pulling my gun, I nodded to Edu before turning the wheel and opening the hatch. When no one immediately fired, I shoved the hatch the rest of the way open and climbed through, checking the perimeter.

“All clear!” I shouted, heading for the stairs. We took them two at a time, climbing five stories until we finally reached the top. The coppery smell of blood immediately filled my nostrils as we entered the room up top.

The guard’s body lay on the ground with blood surrounding him. I ran closer, immediately on edge when I saw the mutilated boy on the floor. Blood still seeped from his eye socket where someone had dug in deep to carve out his eyeball. His hand was a gnarled mess with only four fingers remaining.

“Dash, they’re trying to get into the silo. They cut out his eye and took his thumb.”

“Not that it’ll do them any good,” Edu muttered. “They know they need retina and fingerprint scans, but they don’t know that this guy doesn’t have access to the silo yet.”

“We need to find out where they are before they go after anyone else,” I said, rushing toward the stairs. “Dash, do you copy?”

“Loud and clear.”

“They’re going for the silo.”

“Already in lockdown mode. Get your asses back here.”

“Working on that,” I said, running down the last flight of stairs.

I hit the last step when they appeared from the sides of the tower. Five men, all armed and ready for war. And here Edu and I were with only two guns. We were outnumbered and in no position to take them out.

“Well shit,” I muttered.

“I’ve seen worse,” Edu grumbled. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and saw the grin on his lips. “Not the best numbers.”

“Not the worst numbers either.”

“We could just comply. Live to see another day,” he said conversationally.

We could. We could lower our weapons and they would most likely walk us over to the silo to help them gain access to whatever they needed. Everyone else would be there, ready for battle. They’d take them out in just a few minutes and everything would be over.

But that just didn’t seem like any fun.

“You know, tomorrow’s not looking that good anyway.”

FOX

“And this game is called what?” Eva asked as we drove out of town.

“Fox versus Funyuns,” I answered, grinning at her. We were only about a half hour out of town. I knew Cash wouldn’t come after us, not after Tate drove his truck into Cash’s SUV. So, I had time to stop for a few healthy snacks. Funyuns were on the list, along with beef jerky and more Funyuns. Had I planned ahead, I would have made some shawarma for the road.

“How can it be Fox versus Funyuns?” Tate asked, leaning between the seats. “Don’t you need to go up against another person? Or at the very least, a hippo?”

“Now, that would be awesome. Where do you think I could get a hippo to fight?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Africa,” Tate sighed. “But I doubt they’ll just let you take one home.”

“Very true. Now, back to the game. It’s very simple to play. For example: Who makes a more delicious treat? Fox or Funyuns?”

“Like, you want us to try and eat you?” Eva asked.

Man, I loved Eva. She was so crazy sometimes. “No, Funyuns are a good treat on their own, but I make delicious foods. The question is, which one is better? Funyuns really are the best. However, you’ve tasted some of the foods I’ve created. I’m not sure there’s really a contest.”

“Especially when you combine the two,” Eva added.

“Exactly. I thought those frog’s feet were excellent with Funyuns flavoring.”

“This is a stupid game,” Tate muttered, sitting back in his seat.

I glared at him in the mirror. I was excellent at coming up with entertaining ways to pass the time. “It’s only stupid if you don’t play along.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Fine, which is better in a fight. Fox or Funyuns?”

“Ooh,” I grinned. “That is a good one. Well, obviously, I’m pretty awesome in a fight. So, clearly, I hold the advantage. However, Funyuns have their own assets in a fight. For instance, since they’re made with onion powder, if they’re ground up, they would be perfect for blowing in someone’s eyes to distract them. Also, because they are literally rings, they can fit on someone’s fingers, distracting your enemy with their deliciousness.”

Tate snickered. “Yeah, I’d like to see you distract someone during a gunfight with Funyuns.”

“I’ll take that bet,” I said, fully confident that my plan would work.

“Honestly, I can’t see how Funyuns would win this round,” Eva said. “While I can see your point about crushing them up and using the powder against your enemies, I’m not sure that’s much of a defense in the long run. Plus, since they can be crushed, they could just as easily be scattered in the wind, making it impossible to use them when you need them. And the whole thing about putting them on your fingers would get in the way when you want to use your throwing knives.” She looked at me and shrugged. “I’m sorry. I’m with Tate on this one.”

“Okay, let’s say I concede your point on the usefulness of Funyuns in battle. Did you consider the smell factor?”

“The what?” Tate asked.

“After eating Funyuns, your breath smells like onions.” I laughed to myself. I loved it when I rhymed. “Most of the guys I usually fight are up close and personal. One whiff of my breath and they’re passed out on the ground.”

“So, what you’re really saying is that Funyuns and Fox working together is more beneficial than Fox versus Funyuns,” Eva surmised.

“This is ridiculous,” Tate muttered.

“Hey, if you don’t like the game, don’t play.”

“I wasn’t. I don’t know how I get dragged along on your adventures.”

“You wouldn’t have come if you didn’t want to.”

“I only came because Anna was worried about you,” he snapped.

I jerked the SUV to the side of the road and turned around. “What?”

He sighed heavily, refusing to look at me.

“What’s going on?”

“Anna’s worried about you. She thinks you’re going to fall into some depression or get lost inside your head again.”

I had no idea she was worried about me. “Why does she think that?”

“Because you’re obsessed with FNG!” he shouted. “Jesus, Fox. You can’t act the way you used to anymore. Your wife is scared out of her mind that you’re gonna lose your shit. She loves you and doesn’t want to see you go down that road again. Can you blame her for asking me to tag along after this crazy obsession with tracking down FNG? The man’s dead! You need to accept that. Milk bottles aren’t going to bring him back, and neither is contacting this Rafe guy for help.”

I glanced at Eva, wondering if she felt the same way, but she was hiding her face from me. That told me all I needed to know. I hadn’t considered that my mission to find FNG would cause so many problems.

“And you feel the same way?” I asked Eva.

She turned to me, her eyes filled with sympathy. I fucking hated sympathy. That was just someone’s way of saying they felt really fucking bad that you couldn’t see what was really going on.

“Fox, I could maybe understand that you didn’t believe it the first time. But Cash talked to Rafe. He wasn’t lying. He said FNG is dead. You have to stop looking before you do something that you can’t come back from.”

“And just what exactly do you think I’m going to do?” I asked accusingly. “I don’t recall you having a problem with my methods when it was your ass on the line.”

“But this is different,” she argued. “FNG is dead—”

“Says you. What if everyone had given up on you? I know FNG is alive.”

“How?” she asked angrily. “What makes you so sure?”

“I just—”

“Facts, Fox. Not conjecture. Give me something concrete to go on and I’ll back you up. But you can’t go on gut instinct. It doesn’t work like that!”

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the noise. I hated when it got so fucking loud in my head. It drove me to drown it out, to kill whatever was pounding inside my head.

I saw the movie on TV. I heard the snapping of fingers.

I blew out a breath and let the rhythm take over. The tension in my body washed away, leaving me with a deadly calm that I knew all too well. When I opened my eyes, everything seemed to be floating around me in a dreamlike haze. I could taste the blood in the air, and I only wanted one thing.

To kill.

“Fox,” Eva whispered.

I turned to her and watched a tear slip down her cheek, trailing under her chin where it dripped in a soft splat on her

hand. Just like blood. My eyes met hers again, and I saw the fear for me, the terror that I was going to lose it. But the thing she didn't realize was that I was always on the edge of the cliff, just barely hanging on.

Everyone thought I was better because of Anna. And maybe I was, but that didn't calm the beast raging inside me, eager to tear free and finally feel the relief I craved.

To feel blood slide through my fingers as life dimmed in the eyes of the person I was removing from this earth. Nothing calmed me quite like death. There was a peace to it, a sense of everything returning to a sort of equilibrium in this world. Pure life could only be reborn when one of the demons of the world was removed from this earth.

"Fox, please," Eva pleaded.

The alarm on my phone sounded and I pulled it out, reading the text that came through. Grinning, I turned to her. "Someone's being a bad boy and trying to break into OPS. What do you say we have some fun?"

CASH

“Initiate lockdown procedure and make sure everyone’s accounted for!” Even from this distance, the ground shook from the explosion. The alarms on my phone showed a breach at the north gate, along with the one at the tower.

Right now, my focus had to be getting the women to safety, and ensuring this went no further than our borders. “Slider! Get all the women in the silo!”

He nodded and started motioning for the women to get to the silo.

“Red, Thumper! On me!”

I pulled my weapon and took off for the north gate. Without any intel, we had no idea how many people were breaching the property or why. Red was on my left side and Thumper took the right. We moved as a team, watching each other’s backs as we maneuvered around vehicles, the shed, and bushes. Any cover we could find was vital at this moment.

“Boss, the barn!” Thumper shouted, taking a knee just as gunfire sounded.

We all dropped, taking cover as we waited for them to reload.

I nodded to Red right before he popped up and started firing. I jumped to my feet and ran flat out toward the barn. I counted five men positioned on top of or around the barn. That’s when I saw the glint of light to the left. I turned and saw the flash of light just before my body jerked back and I fell to the ground, landing on my stomach. I couldn’t see jack shit

from my position. My body was torqued away from the shooter, not even allowing me to see if he was still in the radio tower.

Pain ricocheted through my body as I bit back the urge to roll over and fire my weapon. There was a sniper out there, and if he saw me move, I would get another bullet, this time to the head.

“Boss!” Red yelled through comms. “Don’t fucking move.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Where are you hit?”

“Left shoulder. Maybe two inches below my collarbone.”

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. Would you like me to take a look?” I said sarcastically.

I was itching to roll my head and stare this fucker in the eyes. Well, I wouldn’t be able to see him, but he would see me, and he would fucking know he was caught.

“He’s in the radio tower,” Thumper said. “About a hundred feet up. We rush him, there’s no way we get him before he escapes.”

We needed a fucking sniper, but that asshole was currently laying on the ground with blood seeping out of him. IKE was probably the next best bet, but he wasn’t here either. Red and Thumper wouldn’t be able to move from their positions without taking heavy fire, and I knew they wouldn’t leave me here unless I was dead. No one on the team would. We needed someone on to move in and take this fucker out from somewhere he wouldn’t be expecting.

“Dash, do you copy?”

“Loud and clear, boss.”

“Grab Sally 2 and get it over to Bowie.” Silence met me on the other end. “Dash, do you fucking copy?”

“Yeah, I copy, but are you sure?”

“Well, it’s either bleed out on the ground or someone gets Sally 2 and takes this fucker out.”

“He’s not a sniper, boss.”

“Neither is anyone else,” I argued. “But he’s got the advantage from the garage. It’s the closest point to the radio tower with enough height to get a good sight. Take the underground route.”

“I’m on it.”

I could feel the blood pulsing from my wound. I needed to put pressure on it and fast, but moving wouldn’t help at all. I had to hope that Dash moved fast and Bowie could make the shot.

“Red, are the women at the silo?”

“I can’t see from here, boss.”

I huffed out a laugh. “And I didn’t want Eva to go with Fox. I thought for sure that would be more dangerous.”

“Well, it is Fox,” he muttered.

“He’ll take care of her,” I said, my head starting to feel a little muddled. Crap, I was losing too much blood.

“Boss, you know she could make Fox do anything she wanted.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Boss, you doin’ okay?” Red asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

I licked my lips slightly, blinking my eyes rapidly as I tried to stay focused on living long enough to kill this fucker. Based on the amount of blood I could feel seeping from my wound, I’d already lost too much blood.

“Yeah, I’m good.” But it was rough even getting those words out.

“Thumper, I need you to cover my ass. I’m making a run for the barn.”

“Not a chance in hell,” Thumper retorted. “You’ve got like seven kids. If anyone’s going, it’s me.”

“I have two kids,” Red argued. “And from what I hear, you have one on the way too.”

My lips tilted up in a grin, but I was pretty sure it was only in my head that they moved. “You knocked her up?” I whispered.

“Yeah, I sort of fucked that up,” Thumper retorted.

“Nobody’s moving,” I forced out. “You stay in place until Bowie can take out the sniper.”

“Boss, it’ll be too late by the time Bowie gets there. We need to move now.”

“And get shot?” I asked Red. “Your wife won’t thank me for that.”

“She won’t thank you at all if you’re dead,” he retorted.

My eyes slipped closed, but I forced them open again. “Just...stay.”

“Boss,” Red snapped.

I fought to keep my eyes open, for the orders to come out, but there was just no energy left in my body.

“Boss! Keep talking!”

“No, if he keeps talking, he loses more blood,” Thumper argued.

“Can’t a man die...in peace?” I mumbled. Fucking idiots yelling in my ear as I was trying and failing to slip into unconsciousness without all the distractions.

“I swear to God, if I have to tell Fox that you’re dead, I’m gonna bury you with the fishes. You know how he reacts to bad news.”

I smiled at that. “Conspiracy theories,” I said, unable to get out more. He’d probably say it wasn’t my body, that Rafe was really dead and I was carted off somewhere by cartels or a gang of angry thieves.

“Where the fuck is Bowie?” Red snapped.
I heard a shot and then everything went dark.

FOX

I saw the sniper's nest in the radio tower as we were approaching the road to OPS. I jerked the SUV over to the side of the road and flung my door open, rushing to the back of the SUV.

"What is it?" Eva asked, running out beside me.

I pulled the scope out of the trunk and focused in on the sniper. About a hundred feet in the air, he was aiming right at OPS.

"What is it?" Tate asked, already pulling out weapons from the trunk.

"Sniper, one hundred feet up in the tower," I said, already getting out the rifle from the trunk. I was no sniper, but I trained with the best of the best. I could make that shot. I just needed a good angle.

"What do you need?" Tate asked.

"I need a spotter. Eva, get in the SUV and stay low."

"But I—"

I turned and whatever she saw in my eyes, she knew now wasn't the time to fuck with me. I was already down that dark road. There was no stopping me now, not when the men I worked with every day were under attack.

"Get your ass in the vehicle and stay low. If anything happens to you on my watch..."

I couldn't finish, but I didn't really need to. Eva was important to me, just like everyone else at OPS. But she was special. During some of my darkest times, she was there for me. There was no way I'd let her get mixed up in something like this.

She nodded to me and rushed back to the vehicle, getting on the floor. I nodded to Tate, who also had a rifle in hand. I scanned the area, looking for the best spot to take up position. There was only one place that worked, and I wasn't sure we would get up there in time before this fucker fired.

"The tree," I said, pointing to an old oak that was half dead, hopefully giving us enough room to set up without any obstruction.

I kept low as I ran, not sure if anyone else was watching. I flung the rifle over my shoulder and started climbing. I knew Tate was right on my ass, moving just as swiftly as I was. I climbed out on a branch, laying down on my belly as I wrapped my legs around the branch, hugging it between my thighs.

"Are you sure you have the shot?" Tate asked

I pulled my rifle from my back and got in position. Looking through the scope, I had a decent chance of hitting this fucker. I quickly scanned the property around him, not seeing any sign of anyone else around.

"Tate, look for casualties."

"On it," he answered.

I took my time, lining up my shot and doing my best to judge the wind speed, but it was nearly impossible with how little surrounded the tower. And with all the metal surrounding the sniper, there was every chance I could miss and just hit the tower. If he escaped, I would put more lives at risk.

"I can't see jack shit from this distance," Tate answered.

"Is Eva good?"

"Yeah, still good. No one knows we're here yet."

“Or they’re on their way,” I said quietly. I had to calm the fuck down. I felt wired beyond control, which was so unlike me. This was when I was in my element, but my earlier loss of control was still feeding my nervous system.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, thinking of my days at the cabin with Anna, lounging on the couch as we watched a movie. When I opened my eyes, all I saw was this fucker.

And he needed to be taken out.

I adjusted my rifle one last time, confident that I could make the shot.

The shot was loud, but echoed around me like someone tapping on a table. I watched with satisfaction as the man jerked in his sniper’s nest, then started falling down the radio tower, hitting the metal steps on the way down. I slung the rifle over my shoulder, whistling a jaunty tune as I made my way back down the tree.

“Stay with Eva,” I ordered Tate.

Then I took off across the field of grass, running hard so this fucker didn’t get away if he survived the fall. With my gun in hand, my eyes swept the area, but there was no one else around. They had to be at the silo already, which was made clear when I cleared the trees and glanced to my right, seeing the smoke at the front gate.

The man was lying in a heap at the bottom of the tower, but he was moving, trying to get to his rifle which had fallen several feet away. By the twist of his legs, he must have broken them during the fall. It was a shame. That would have been a fun job for me.

He looked up and saw me walking toward him, every step measured as I approached. I taunted him, let him know I was coming for him. I let him think he stood a chance of getting his weapon and saving his own life. But that would never happen. This fucker would never see the light of day again.

His hand reached for the rifle and I placed my boot over it, crushing his fingers beneath me. To his credit, he didn’t cry

out. He just stared up at me, his face scrunched in pain.

I grinned at him, feeling my fingers snap that familiar rhythm. “You’re mine now, fucker.”

LOCK

“To the silo, now!” I shouted at the ladies.

“There’s a breach at the north gate!” Brock shouted, talking into the phone. I presumed he was on with Dash.

I grabbed Miranda, the new girl, as she fell to the ground in the commotion. Hoisting her up by her arm, I started dragging her toward the silo. It was chaos all around us, with our only focus on getting the women to safety. I glanced over my shoulder, and that’s when I saw a masked man coming around the corner, grabbing Sarah, Eli’s woman, from behind.

I shoved Miranda behind me and aimed my weapon at the man, but I had no clear shot. “Let her go!”

The man laughed. “Let her go,” he said mockingly.

“This is such a cliché,” Sarah snapped. “How many times do I have to be taken hostage? Do you know how ridiculous this is?”

“Sarah, shut your mouth,” I warned her. But did she listen? Of course not. She didn’t have a filter when it came to dealing with situations like this. I glanced over at Brock, who was ushering the rest of the women behind the set. As long as they had cover, I could deal with this asshole.

“You know what? You’re not even a good hostage taker,” she yelled at the man holding her. “You’re leaving way too many clues behind.”

“Shut up!” he shouted, shaking her in his arms.

“You have smelly breath, like onions and garlic. Rule number one of taking a hostage is *try not to leave any identifying markers about yourself*. Maybe you should have read up on that first.”

She had him distracted, which was the only reason I didn't tell her to shut her mouth again. Brock signaled that everyone else was accounted for and safe. Now I just had to figure out how to get Sarah away from this guy.

“Put your weapons down or I'll put a bullet in her head!” the man shouted.

Sarah grunted angrily. “You can't even make a good threat! Here's a clue, if the hostage isn't scared, that usually means she's prepared to die!”

I winced at her choice of words, but when he didn't immediately pull the trigger, I assumed he didn't like the idea of killing women. Either that, or he had a target here, and it wasn't her.

“Who are you after?” I asked.

“What makes you think we're after a person?”

“If you were here for something and not someone, you wouldn't have come in the middle of the fucking day when we're all here,” I answered. “And since you haven't already put a bullet in her or us, I'm assuming you're trying to keep the casualties down. So, why don't we skip all this and you just tell us what you're after?”

But I never heard what he said. I could see Brock moving out of the corner of my eye, going around the set to take control of the situation from the other side.

“— put down your gun, I'm going to put a bullet in her head and call it a day!”

“You won't shoot her.”

“And why's that?”

“Because you have no leverage, mother fucker,” Brock said as he walked out from around the set, his gun trained on the man holding Sarah.

It was almost too perfect, too easy, and that's how I knew it was all about to go sideways. A low chuckle came from the man in front of me, and then one from the side of me. I hadn't even heard the asshole creep up on me, which meant he was a professional.

I calculated the risks of putting down my weapon, all of which ended with me in a body bag at the end of the day, along with everyone else out here. The only option was to fight back, which Brock clearly agreed with when he gave me a slight nod.

I didn't wait for Brock to make his move. I spun, grabbed the man's gun and yanked it toward me and to the side just as it fired. I slammed my foot into his chest, countering the momentum of him coming at me. Spinning, I saw my chance to take out the asshole holding Sarah. Without a second of hesitation, I fired, sending a spray of blood over her shoulder as the man's head exploded out the back and he fell to the ground.

Gunfire erupted to my right, with one bullet striking me in the leg. I dove for the set, taking cover behind the wood panels that made up the exterior of the fake house. Sarah scrambled over to me, finally gaining some common sense as she covered her head. Brock was beside us a moment later, checking his weapon.

"I don't have enough for a gunfight," he said, slamming his magazine into place. He winced as he sat back against the set, then leaned forward and pulled out a bag from behind him. As it fell to the ground, the top opened, revealing a bomb inside.

I grabbed it and finished opening the homemade device. "This looks like one of IRIS's."

"But what was it doing out here?" Brock asked.

I dug around inside until I found the trigger, just waiting there for us in a twisted turn of fate. I shoved the bag back at Brock. "Throw it hard and far."

He stood up and nodded at me, then tossed it over the set. I waited two seconds before hitting the trigger. The blast threw us forward, sending the walls of the set falling down on top of us. Dust and smoke wafted around us, making it impossible to breathe.

“You okay?” Brock asked.

“Yeah,” I grunted. “Nothing like being crushed by your own set.”

“Could have been worse. The bomb could have killed you.”

Sarah sighed beside me. “You know, I really thought all the kidnapping stuff was over when I came here.”

“You weren’t kidnapped,” I corrected her. “You were just...almost blown up. There’s a difference.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to tell my father that the next time I talk to him.”

I was about to tell her she didn’t need to bring her father into this when I remembered the girls were inside the fake house on set. They were probably trapped under all that debris.

“Fuck, the girls—” I said, shoving the panel up as much as I could.

“They’re fine. There’s a trap door in the set,” Brock said, pushing the panel up with me until we could shove it off all of us. Coughing, he stood and helped Sarah to her feet. “That’s why the set was put up over here. They thought it would be easier to get to the set from the silo than walking all over the property.”

“Thank fuck for that,” I said, waving away the dust.

Sarah sighed beside me. “You know, it’s a shame we didn’t get that all on film. I bet the producers would have loved that.”

I slowly turned and stared at the woman beside me. “You realize you were almost dead two seconds ago, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Totally,” she nodded. Then stopped and looked up at me. “Should I be panicking more? I feel like maybe this

is the wrong reaction to have.”

“Just a little.”

She sighed again. “Would it make it less weird if I told you I got his wallet?” She grinned and then held up two fingers, the wallet in between them.

I jumped to my feet, stumbling when the bullet in my leg twinged. Yanking her up, I kissed her hard on the cheek. “You know, if you weren’t so useful, I would tell Eli to send you back to Chicago.”

“I think I resent that!” she shouted as I dragged her along behind me.

This case just got cracked wide open.

THUMPER

“Boss!” I shouted, hoping he wasn’t dead. What a clusterfuck. We didn’t even know who was behind this.

I turned to Red and made a decision without asking his permission. He could shoot me later, if I didn’t end up dead. I took a deep breath and ran toward Cash, ignoring Red yelling at me. When I made it there without any bullets being fired, I figured I was good. I knelt down beside Cash, pressing my fingers to his neck. His pulse was steady, but a little weak.

Red was behind me two seconds later, keeping guard as I rolled Cash to his back and pulled gauze from my pocket, pressing down hard on Cash’s wound. His eyes flew open and he jolted upright, slamming his fist into my face.

“Jesus Christ!” he shouted. “Warn a man next time!”

“I thought you were on your deathbed,” I snapped, my jaw aching from the massive hit I took. “Lay the fuck down. I have to get you bandaged up.”

His face contorted in pain as I pressed even harder, then wrapped it as best I could. Reaching into my pocket, I grabbed the morphine, but he shook his head.

“Don’t even fucking think about it. I’m gonna be awake when we catch this fucker.”

I rolled my eyes, shoving my hand under his armpit as I hoisted him to his feet. I already knew it was going to be hell getting him back to the silo. He was so unsteady on his feet, we’d be better off getting the minivan, but he’d never go for that.

“You got this?” I asked.

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Just a walk in the park.”

“Sure it is, on a very slow Sunday when we have nothing better to do than watch the clouds roll past us,” Red muttered, his eyes scanning the area.

“Just hop on my back,” I said, bending forward slightly.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Cash snapped. “I don’t need a goddamn piggyback ride.”

“You also don’t need to pass out. And if you want to live to tell about it, you need some fucking help.”

“Fuck that,” Cash said, taking a single step before falling to his knees.

“Yeah, you’re right. You don’t need a goddamn thing,” I muttered, hauling him off his feet. “Get on my fucking back.”

“You know, I really fucking hate you right now,” he muttered.

But he didn’t argue anymore and got on my back. I nodded to Red and we double-timed it back to the silo with Cash bouncing on my back the whole way. By the time we were almost there, he passed out, nearly falling off my back. If it weren’t for Red grabbing his arm and holding him up, we would have both gone down.

On the other side of the building, smoke filled the air, but I didn’t have time to stop and find out what was going on. I had to pray that Zoe made it back inside in time. Red entered the code and scanned in, then flung the door open for me. I was only a few feet inside when I saw Lock down the hall.

“Yo!”

He turned, then swore and raced down the hall to me. Red helped me ease Cash off my back, and we lowered him to the floor where Lock immediately got to work. “Fuck, the bullet is still in there,” he muttered. “Let’s get him down to the medic room.”

Red strode through the office to a supply closet and came back out with a backboard, something I didn't know we stored in there. Together, Lock and I rolled Cash as Red shoved it underneath him.

“Get him down there. I'll get down there and prepare for surgery.”

I grabbed him by the shirt, huffing out a laugh. “You're gonna do what?”

“He has a bullet in him. We can't exactly take him to the hospital right now. What the fuck do you want me to do?”

“You'd better thank your lucky stars Fox isn't here.”

“Or Eva,” he huffed.

The front door swung open and Fox came strolling through with a man draped over his shoulder like a deer. “Hey, boys! Guess what I have for you!”

He stopped the moment he saw Cash laying on the floor. He dropped the man, letting him fall to the ground with a harsh thud. He strode over to Cash, staring down at him with a look of horror. “What the fuck is this?”

“He's alive,” Lock reassured him. “I'm gonna get the bullet out and—”

“Bullet? He's got a fucking bullet in him?” Fox ran his fingers through his hair, then turned, stalked back to the heap on the floor, and slammed his foot into the unconscious man's stomach. “You fucker! I'm gonna boil you in acid after I slice you open and let your guts spill all over the goddamn floor!”

“Fox!” I shouted, trying to rein him in, but there was no stopping him.

He stomped on the man's fingers, then kicked him in the face. The man was flung over, blood flying from his mouth. But Fox wasn't done yet. I raced over to him, grabbing him from behind. Fox roared, flinging me off him in a fit of rage. I hit the wall, falling to the floor.

My back ached, but it was nothing compared to what we would all face if we didn't get Fox under control. “Red!” I

shouted, rushing back over to Fox. By the look on his face, he was already gone. Thankfully, the door opened and Tate walked in. He immediately knew what was wrong and rushed over to help. It took the three of us to stop him from murdering the man in the main office.

We shoved him up against the wall and Tate got in his face. He gripped his chin, forcing Fox to look at him. “Calm the fuck down! You can deal with him downstairs. Not up here.”

Fox stared at Tate, his breathing harsh as he kept trying to look back at the man on the ground. Then Tate forced Fox to look at Cash.

“Do you see him? We need to focus on helping him right now.”

That seemed to do the trick, at least for the time being. Fox gave a slight nod and strode over to Cash. Lock grabbed one end of the backboard and Fox took the other. I could see the hesitation on his face, the urge to go back to the man on the ground.

“I’ll put him in your room,” I said, garnering his attention.

He gave a tight nod and walked away with Lock. I sighed, running my hand through my hair. “Fuck, that could have been bad.”

“Not as bad as I’ve seen,” Tate muttered.

I grabbed him as he started to walk away. “He’s doing better.”

“Yeah, until something comes along and fucks it up. Trust me, I’ve seen this before.”

“So have I. The love of his life was attacked. Trust me, that was worse.”

“We’ll see about that.”

He jerked out of my grasp and walked away, leaving me with the man that shot Cash. I was just about to pick him up when Eva walked through the door, her face pale as she stared at the man on my shoulder.

“Tell me he’s alive.”

EVA

I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk in there and find out that my world was over. I paced in the parking lot, refusing to go inside. Something in my gut said that something very bad had happened to Cash. I should have run inside immediately, but my feet wouldn't let me. I was terrified of what I might find out.

Cash saved my life. He made it possible for me to live again, to have a family. That was something I never thought would happen. For years, I had been terrified, but here, I found my family. And along with that, a man that I loved more than life itself.

I stopped pacing and turned to the door. It was time to gut up and get my ass inside. Staying out here wouldn't give me the answers I needed. I took one step, then forced myself to take another. Moving forward was the only option at this point. No matter what happened, I had a child to take care of, and that took priority over falling apart over something that hadn't happened yet.

That I knew of.

I strode forward, determined to get this over with and yanked the door to the lobby open only to find Thumper hauling a man over his shoulder.

"Tell me he's alive," I ordered.

Thumper must have seen the fear written all over my face. His eyes softened and that was the moment I thought it was all over.

“He’s downstairs with Lock. He was hit and he lost a lot of blood.”

“But he’s alive.”

He hesitated, but gave a nod. That wasn’t very reassuring. My eyes flicked to the man.

“I need to see him.”

“Maybe you want to wait until Lock’s finished. He has to get the bullet out.”

But that wasn’t good enough for me. I had to be down there. I had to see with my own eyes that he was okay. I marched right past Thumper and hit the button on the elevator. Once the doors opened, I got in.

“Mind if I go down with you? He’s getting a little heavy.”

I didn’t want to let him, but gave a curt nod. He got on silently and stood beside me, waiting for us to get to level four. He wouldn’t be getting off on the same floor. When the doors opened, I glanced at Thumper, then slammed my elbow into the man’s face, adding to his already bloody features.

I practically ran down the hall, needing to see Cash and know that he was okay, but terrified at the same time. I stepped up to the door, closed my eyes and prepared for the worst.

But I wasn’t prepared for what I saw the moment the door opened. I covered my mouth, tears filling my eyes as I stared at the table where my husband laid—pale and lifeless. Lock rushed over to me, blocking me from seeing my husband. There was so much blood on the floor. It looked like a murder scene.

“Lock,” I whispered.

“Eva—”

But I couldn’t deal with it. I lashed out, slamming my fist into his chest, beating him over and over again. “How could you let this happen?” I shouted. “Why didn’t you save him?”

Then Fox walked over, grinning at me like the idiot he was, holding out a bag of Funyuns. I snatched it from his hands, throwing it to the ground as I shoved past them and practically threw myself on top of Cash's chest. My tears mingled with the blood on his body, and that's when I felt it.

My head jerked up and I stared into the eyes of the man I thought was dead.

"Kitten..."

"You're...you're not dead."

"No, but you're kind of hurting my chest."

I pushed off him, not even feeling bad when he winced in pain. "You're not dead."

His eyes searched my face, and then he quirked an eyebrow at me. "Did you want me to be?"

I looked at Lock, who had his head ducked with a slight smirk on his face. Then I looked at Fox, who was staring at me angrily, probably because I threw out his Funyuns.

"I don't understand. There's so much blood. You look dead!" I shouted.

Lock shut the door and walked back over to Cash, hanging a blood bag on a hook. "You can thank Fox for that. Slippery fingers with a knife."

"Since when does Fox have slippery fingers?" I asked accusingly.

"Well, not so much slippery fingers, as he thought he could nail the blood bag to the wall with his throwing knife. I tried to stop him and the blood ended up all over your husband."

"So...that's not his blood?" I asked, staring down at his chest.

"Nope."

I looked at my front, covered in blood and lost it. "Gross! I'm not even covered in his blood! Do you know how disgusting that is?"

“Would it make you feel better if you were covered in my blood?” Cash asked.

“Don’t get smart with me, mister,” I snapped, pointing a finger at him. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“I’m sorry I failed.”

“You bet your ass you failed. Do you have any idea how terrified I was to come down here? You couldn’t even have someone call me and say *Hey, we’re about to bring Cash in with a massive bullet hole, but no worries. He’s not gonna bleed on the table!*”

“You know, we probably should have done that,” Fox nodded.

I glared at my husband. “You know, you really fucked up my week.”

“Yeah, because you’re the one with a hole in you,” he muttered.

“Hey! You ruined my coffee.”

With no better argument, I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room. When the door shut, I leaned against the door and broke down crying. Yes, I had just yelled at my husband for being alive. I might possibly be the worst wife ever.

The door swung open and I nearly fell backward. Fox caught me, setting me upright, then pointed his finger in my face. “You owe me a bag of Funyuns.”

CASH

“Are you sure you’re up for this, boss?” Lock asked, watching as I pulled my shirt on.

“Positive. I want to know why this fucker was coming after us.”

The door opened and Thumper walked in. “Um, if you were hoping for your shot at this guy, you might want to get down there fast.”

“Why?”

“Because Fox—”

He didn’t have to finish the thought. I stormed past him and down the hall to the elevator. Fox would kill him before I got the answers I needed. But it took me longer to get down there than I thought. I was still lightheaded even with multiple blood transfusions. I knew I should be in a fucking hospital right now or at the very least, laying down in bed. But I could rest later. Right now, I had to know who kicked in our door.

I stood in the room opposite from where the man was being stashed and took the file Red handed me. “Who is he?”

“Adam Smith. He runs Compass Security in Texas.”

I was reading through his company profile, trying to understand why a man like this would attack us. “He’s ex-military.”

“He was in for four years, then got out and set up this company.”

“Why would a man like him come after us?”

“Could be a job we did?” Red suggested. “His company takes a lot of...unsavory jobs. Think of them as anti-OPS. Closer to hitmen than protection agents.”

“And we pissed him off on a job?” I asked, still reading through his military record. “Wait, he’s not a U.S. citizen. He came over as a kid from Afghanistan, then joined the military. He’s not protecting people. He’s killing them off and enjoying every fucking minute of it.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why he came after us,” Red said. “Fox has been working him for hours. Maybe he got something out of him.”

“What about his men?”

“All dead,” Red answered. “We’ve got ‘em piled up outside.”

“Let’s make sure they disappear.”

“On it.”

He walked out of the room, giving me a few minutes to myself before I entered that room. I thought I left Afghanistan behind. I thought my war days were over, but now this guy showed up and brought up every fucking bad memory from my time there. I closed my eyes and pushed the memories away. I had a job to do.

I shoved the door open to Fox’s lair. Nobody else used this room, not for any kind of interrogation. Fox was very particular about his things, and no one dared touch any of his stuff.

I expected to see the man who attacked us boiling in acid or strung up by his toes. Instead, he was laid out on a stretcher, strapped down with his mouth pried with some kind of metal device. His eyelids were taped open and a bright light shone above him.

“What do you have?” I asked, walking into the room.

Fox didn’t even turn to me. His arms were crossed over his chest as he stared down at the man who shot me. “I’ve had

him like this since I left you.”

That was hours ago. Christ, the guy’s eyeballs had to be dried out by now. His fists were still clenched, but not nearly as tightly as I imagined they were from the start. Blood oozed slowly from a wound on his side. The man was probably already battered and bruised when he was brought in. It didn’t look like Fox had to do much.

Fox grabbed a container of salt off the table and poured a very small amount into his hand. There were no speeches or questions to be asked. Fox simply started humming as he sprinkled the salt in the man’s wound. At first, it was slow, just enough to make the man feel the burn. The man didn’t scream. Although, I wasn’t sure he could after his mouth had been pried open for so long. With every minute that passed, Fox increased the amount of salt he poured into the wound. The man’s heart was pounding, his chest heaving from the pain.

As he dug his thumb into the hole in the man’s side, he started singing “Think Of Me” from *Phantom Of The Opera*. Fox did the love the classics. He sang louder and louder as the man writhed under his restraints. As Fox sang louder, he yanked his hand out and held up the bullet lodged in the man’s side. He held his hands out wide as he ended the song, then took a sweeping bow.

I gave a slow clap, smiling at Fox’s performance. He was a little bit twisted and a hell of a lot insane, but he was effective. Fox reached under the table and released a lever, then grabbed the stretcher where the man’s head was and swung it up so the man was vertical. He wrenched the metal object out of the man’s mouth, but the man had been stuck like that for so long that his mouth didn’t immediately close. His muscles were locked in place.

“So, why did you attack us?” Fox asked conversationally.

The man couldn’t have answered if he wanted to, not with his face seizing.

Fox strolled closer. “Don’t want to talk, huh? I bet you need a drink of water. I can help with that.”

That's when I saw the low-standing metal tub where the head of the stretcher was, filled with just enough water to accomplish what he needed. Fox flicked the lock, letting the stretcher crash backward into the tub of water. The man's head was fully submerged for a full ten seconds before Fox yanked him upright again.

"Is that better? I bet you're a little parched."

The man coughed, spluttering as he struggled to close his mouth. "You...killed...my father," the man struggled to get out.

"I'm sorry, we didn't get that," Fox said, shoving the stretcher back again and dunking the man back into the water. This time, he left him for longer. He raised him up again, locking the stretcher upright. "Did you say I killed your father?"

"Not you," the man said, staring at me.

I walked forward until I was right in front of him. "What are you talking about?"

"Fifteen years ago," the man said quietly. "You shot him. I was there. I saw my father bleed out and die."

Fifteen years ago, I was in the military. I was a sniper. I killed a lot of men. He was staring at me but not making eye contact. And then I realized he was looking at what was hanging around my neck. I lifted the hog's tooth that hung around my neck and I understood.

"You were hiding," I said.

"He was protecting his country, and you killed him."

"He wasn't protecting his country. He was part of a terrorist organization," I corrected. "It was war."

"You took the bullet from his gun and you wear it around your neck like some fucking prize!"

It wasn't a prize. It was superstition, but he would never understand that. It wasn't worth explaining to him. But I was going to try when I heard Fox's low voice come from beside me.

“I am Adam. You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

I rolled my eyes, then turned and walked out of the room. I didn't need to know anything more about this guy. At least, not from him. As the door shut, I heard his screams, and then they abruptly cut off. He was gone, and I couldn't feel too bad about that. After all, he shot me.

ZOE

I stared around at the burned down set, still unable to believe what just happened. All the camera equipment, all the footage we already shot was gone. I didn't have the budget to buy more equipment, and I couldn't ask Cash for it. This was on me, even if it was because of him that it all went to hell.

Red walked up behind me and dug his fingers into my shoulders, massaging the tense muscles. But I couldn't relax, no matter how much he tried to make me feel better. Everything I worked for was gone with just one small bomb.

"It'll be okay. We'll figure something out."

A small tear slipped down my cheek. Maybe it was hormonal, or maybe it was just seeing all my dreams disappear. Either way, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"There's nothing to figure out. It's over. I have to call Lark and tell her the bad news."

"Maybe we can film it again with a...phone camera."

I huffed out a laugh. "And show them just how professional I am? Face it, the movie was going to be a bust anyway. You saw how Dash was directing it." I pressed my hands to my cheeks, shaking my head as I thought back to everything that went wrong. "Oh God, and then Cotton took over. I didn't think anyone could be worse than Dash."

"Don't let him hear you say that. He'll kick you out of his life."

“I know.” I turned into his arms, pressing my head against his chest. At least I had him. But I refused to just sit back and be Mom. I wanted so much more in my life. I had dreamed of this all my life, and with one major movie under my belt and smaller projects already in the works, I thought this was finally my time. Apparently, I was wrong.

I pulled out my phone and FaceTimed Lark. When she didn’t answer right away, I called her again. It was our way of letting each other know it was urgent. And when she answered the call, she didn’t even have to ask what was wrong.

“Why is there smoke behind you? Are those flames? Please tell me that’s not our set!”

“It’s not just our set.” I repositioned the camera so she could see better. The silence was enough to tell me she was seriously freaking out. And I couldn’t blame her. She was in just as deep as I was.

“Okay, this is not the end of the world. You still have footage, right?”

I turned the phone back to me and shook my head. “It all burned.”

“All of it?” she screeched. “Oh God, oh Lord. Oh, dear Jesus.”

“Stop saying that. You’re not even religious.”

“I know that!” she shouted, entering the phase of going batshit crazy. I could see her pacing wherever she was. “This is not the end. It’s not. I refuse for this to be over.”

“Lark, we don’t have any other equipment.”

“Like that’s ever stopped us before.”

“Actually, it’s always stopped us.”

“Well, who burned down the set?” she yelled.

“Um...it was sort of a collective effort.”

“Is this a conspiracy theory? Is someone out to get us?”

“You’re not far off,” I laughed humorlessly. “Let’s just say someone was out for revenge and we got caught in the middle.”

“Give me their names. I’ll kick their asses and get our money back.”

“Yeah, they’re sort of dead. I’m not sure that’s going to help you any.”

“Then I’ll go after their estate. I’ll sue them for everything they have, and when I’m done with that, I’ll go after their kids and their grandkids!”

“Geez, back up,” I said, trying to calm the woman down. “We’re not turning into hitmen. We’ll figure something out. We just need time.”

“And what are we supposed to tell the producers?” she argued. “Are we supposed to say *Oops, we screwed up. Please give us a second chance?*”

“I...I haven’t really thought about what to say to them.”

“Tell them Dash did it. They don’t like him anyway.”

I rolled my eyes. She didn’t even know who Dash was. “Look, I have to make this call, so I’ll let you go and call you to give you the rundown on how it goes.”

“Yeah, because I can’t guess for myself. You know, I liked it a lot better when we were plotting while you were having sex.”

“I didn’t,” Red muttered.

“Nobody asked you,” Lark snapped. She took a deep breath and blew it out. “Okay, I am calm. I am fine. Everything is normal. We aren’t about to lose everything.”

“That’s the spirit,” I said, feeling far more cheerful than I actually was.

She flipped me off, then disconnected the phone. I turned back to Red, trying not to shake as I dialed the number. “Here goes nothing.”

The line rang three times. As it turns out, that was three times too little. I needed more time. The producer picked up, his face way too eager for what I was about to show him.

“So? How’s filming going?”

“Um...we had a bit of an incident.”

“What kind of incident?”

“Um...everything got...”

“Blowed up,” Red cut in. “That’s the term you’re looking for.”

I turned the phone for him to see, waiting for the inevitable angry words that were sure to follow. Instead, all I heard was laughter. “You’ve got to be kidding me! That’s great!”

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked, turning the phone back around.

“I just love how into character your guys get.”

“But...this was a romantic comedy.”

He waved me off as if this was no big deal. “Like you could really write a romantic comedy when you have all that great action just waiting to be seen. Trust me, I knew exactly what you were going to give me the moment I talked with you about it. And you did not let me down, kiddo. Keep up the good work! I’ll be expecting that script on my desk next week.”

“Next week, but sir—”

“Oh, and send over some of that footage.”

“There is none,” I said in a panic. “It all got...blowed up,” I said, repeating Red’s phrase.

Again, the producer threw his head back and laughed. “I love it. I just love it. So original and funny. This is gonna be great.”

And then he hung up, leaving me even more baffled than when I walked out of the silo and saw everything torched to the ground. “I don’t understand.”

Red wrapped his hand around my neck and squeezed. “It sounds like you just got another movie. Take the win and run with it.”

“But—”

He pressed his finger to my lips, shaking his head. “You won. This is more than you could have ever dreamed of. Your time for romantic comedies and sappy movies will come. First, build up your reputation, and then you move on to the stuff you really want to do. In the meantime, the guys and I will continue to wreak havoc on your movie sets and make the most unthinkable movies you could ever wish for.”

It wasn’t what I was hoping for, but I got the job. I would have to be happy with that for now.

A car door slammed behind me. I turned around and waved awkwardly at Rae, who was staring at the wreckage in shock.

“What...”

“Uh...there was a bad guy and...”

Red made the sound of an explosion beside me. “It all got blowed up.”

“Anyone hurt?” she asked.

“Cash,” Red answered. “One shot, but he’s going to be fine. I’ll let him fill you in on the details. How was your trip?”

“We successfully retrieved our new pilot. Scottie saved the day and didn’t vomit for once. And Duke seems to have come around. So, all in all, a successful trip.”

“How much damage?” Red asked, a funny grin on his face.

“You know I never leave a trail,” she retorted.

I snorted in amusement. “Well, you’re just in time for yet another movie to be taken over by OPS.”

She groaned, turning away from us immediately. “I’m not getting involved. The last time you shot a film, IRIS blew something up.”

“We already took care of that part. Now I have to figure out a way to turn a romance film into an action movie. Any ideas?”

“I wouldn’t help if you begged me,” she shouted, getting back in her car.

I sighed and turned back to the set. I wasn’t sure how to turn things around. I was going to need some serious help to get a script done in the next week.

“Well, hubby, any ideas?”

“Yeah, we talk to the one man that lives to blow shit up.” He pulled out his phone and dialed IRIS on FaceTime. The line rang over and over, and just when I thought he wouldn’t answer, he picked up, showing us just a little too much of himself.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“Yeah, we are too,” Red answered. He flipped the camera so IRIS could see the destruction around us. “New plan. We need to turn this romance film into an action movie. Any thoughts?”

His face crinkled as he looked at all the smoke floating through the air. “Just one. How fucking long have we been in bed?”

“Long enough for everything to be blown to shit,” Red answered. “We have a week to fix the script for Zoe’s film.”

“That gives me twenty-four more hours to show my new fiancé just how many ways I can christen a room,” he said, pulling the covers over his head as Jane squealed with laughter in the background.

“Ew!” I shrieked, punching the red button to end the call before we had to hear anything more. I shuddered, shaking out the gross images as I walked away.

“Where are you going?” Red called after me.

“To see if Fox can wipe those images from my mind!”

JACK

Walking back into the prison felt like a chain around my neck, slowly tightening every day until eventually, I wouldn't be able to breathe anymore. I was already weakened from getting ass kicked, and watching my back would be harder than ever.

And my enemies in the prison knew it.

I saw their looks as I walked back with the CO to my cell. They were all biding their time, waiting for me to be in the yard where they could finish me off when no one was watching. If I survived the next few days, I'd be lucky as hell.

The door to my cell slid open and I strolled in, waiting for the CO to unlock my cuffs. Once he did, I walked over to my bed, ignoring the way Rico was watching me.

“Guess I owe you.”

I didn't say anything. I closed my eyes and pretended not to hear him. I really didn't give a fuck if he thought he owed me or not. But it worked to my advantage to ignore him either way. He could never suspect that I was here for him. And maybe it didn't matter anymore. It was looking less and less like I would get out of here, but I still hung onto that hope that if I stuck with him, the job would still turn out alright in the end. He was my only hope. I highly doubted Rafe would find a way to get me out of this hellhole.

“Heard you almost didn't make it. The guards said you were dead on arrival.”

“And here I am,” I muttered.

“I’m trying to—”

I sat up suddenly, pulling at the stitches from my surgery. “I don’t give a fuck what you’re trying to do.”

“If you don’t give a fuck, why did you do it? You could have kept on walking, but you took the hit for me. Why?”

I huffed out a breath. “Look, kid. I didn’t do it because I like you or because I want to be friends. We’re cellmates, and that’s it. But I already know who the fuck you are. If they kill you, I end up with someone else. I can deal with you. The last thing I need is someone like Gonzalez in the cell with me.”

I laid back down and rested my hands on my chest.

“So, that’s it? You saved my ass because you don’t want a new cellmate?”

I let out a heavy sigh. This kid just wasn’t going to let it go. “In here, it’s better to have someone to watch your back. And since we share the same fucking cell, and I don’t want to kill you, I’d say take the fucking win and shut up.”

With that, he kept quiet the rest of the night. There wasn’t much to do but sleep, which I desperately needed, but couldn’t bring myself to actually allow my eyes to fully close. Even in this cell, I couldn’t trust that I was safe. And Rico was proving to be more of a liability than someone that could effectively watch my back. The kid was too green despite growing up in the environment he did. It was no wonder he got caught and thrown in prison.

The cell doors opened for morning roll call, but I was surprised when a CO stepped over the threshold instead. I could feel Rico watching him just as intently as I was. He glanced at Rico, then back to me.

“You have a visitor.”

If it was that fucker Jones, I really didn’t want to see him. “No thanks.”

“This isn’t a request.”

I saw his fingers move to his taser, and stood. After just having surgery, I wasn’t about to have fifty thousand volts of

electricity run through me. “Fine.”

I glanced back at Rico, nodding once at him before following the CO out. Nothing about this felt right, but my head was still muddled from my days in the hospital. I was moving slower, still favoring the right side of my body as the bruises only grew darker with every day that passed. It would take weeks before I was moving without pain.

But I kept my no-bullshit face for the entire walk through the prison. I couldn't let anyone know just how bad it was. They had to think I was still strong enough to defend myself, even if I did look like absolute shit. The CO stopped outside a door, not the usual visitors room, and shook his head at me.

“I don't know what fucking strings you pulled, but inside, you don't have any protection.”

I had no fucking clue what he was talking about, and frankly, I wasn't interested in playing games today. “I have no strings,” I muttered as he shoved open the door. I strolled through without breaking my gait, even when I recognized the asshole waiting for me in the room.

Baz Gelbero.

Sitting behind a desk in his expensive suit with thousand dollar shoes, the guy looked like he belonged on Wall Street instead of brokering arms deals. Just being in the same room with him made me sick to my stomach. I was in here because of him, because of his kid. The time had finally come to meet the very man that potentially held my fate in his hands. I couldn't screw this up.

I sat across from him, staring at him with indifference, waiting for him to speak. He took his time, looking me up and down for several minutes, waiting for me to break, but he didn't know me. It would take so much more than this fucker to shake me.

“So, you're the man that saved my kid's life.”

Still, I didn't say anything.

“I would say I'll take care of the hospital bill, but the state is covering that,” he grinned.

Not the state. The taxpayers. Every single scumbag in prison was a burden on the taxpayers, and this guy didn't give a fuck. Every cent he had was made from illegal deals, and because of men like him, innocent people got hurt. He profited from the deaths of others. And he laughed that there was no bill to cover.

“Aren't you at all interested in who I am?”

“You already told me,” I grunted.

“And do you know who I am?”

I let my eyes slowly trail over his suit. “Does it really matter?”

His smirk slowly faded from his face. It probably wasn't often that men weren't terrified of him. “I would say that me owing you a favor would be something you'd be grateful for.”

I laughed at that. “A favor? I'm in prison for murdering a cop. What exactly do you think you can give me that I would be so fucking grateful for?”

“Listen, asshole. I came here to thank you for watching over my kid.”

“I don't need your thanks. I didn't do it for you.”

“Then why did you do it?”

I shrugged, glancing away. “He's my cellmate. It's better to keep him on my side. In case you didn't know, the murder rate in this prison is extremely high.”

“And that's it?”

“What more do you want?”

He eyed me carefully, assessing me, but I kept my cool. Assholes like this would never respect a man that fawned all over him. If I wanted this to end right for me, he needed to believe that I couldn't be fucked with.

“I have a proposition for you. A job.”

“Not interested.”

“You haven't even heard my offer.”

“I don’t need to. There’s not a damn thing you can give me that I want.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

I leaned forward, ignoring the way my body twinged at the movement. “Whoever the fuck you are, you can’t do anything for me on the inside. I’m not getting out for the rest of my fucking life. I killed a cop in broad daylight. If I don’t get shanked again in the next year, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

I pushed to my feet and turned for the door.

“You’re not at all curious what I can do for you?”

I glanced back at him. “Unless you can give me my life back, there’s not a single fucking thing you can do for me.”

I swung open the door and walked out, grinning the whole fucking time. The ball was in his court now.

CASH

Two fucking days of cleanup, but we were finally back to normal around here. The bodies were long gone, but Adam's face was burned in my memory. The hatred that man carried around with him was so intense. I was just doing my job, but I never thought it would come back to haunt me in the form of the son of the man I killed.

“Hey,” Eva said, shutting the bathroom door.

She walked over to me and eased the shirt off my body, knowing I was still struggling to move the way I needed. Her fingertips ran over the stitches just under my collarbone. I knew she was still freaked out over what happened. Hell, it had me looking over my shoulder every two minutes. You expected to get shot by a sniper in war, not when you were on your own turf.

“I still can't believe he hated you that much,” she whispered. “How did he even find you?”

That was something that took a little investigating. “He claimed asylum to get into the country. All his family was gone, so the government allowed him in. He got his green card by joining the military, and he was working toward becoming a citizen.”

“But how—”

“He tracked me once he got into Marine Scout Sniper School. It wasn't hard. A few discreet questions here and there about a guy he heard of. Guys in the military love to tell

stories they've heard over the years. And when he got out, he tracked me down through the company."

"But the company moved out of California. He never should have found you."

I brushed my thumb across her jaw, then cupped the back of her neck. "Kitten, he was watching us the whole time. He kept tabs on me even when he was serving."

"Serving," she scoffed. "He was a traitor."

That was still to be determined. I would send it to the higher-ups and have them look into his time in the military. Only they could examine every mission he'd ever been on and figure out if he was disloyal to our country. Just because he had a beef with me didn't mean he actually betrayed the United States.

"It's over now," I said, pulling her into my arms.

"You need to lay down before you pass out."

"I'm good," I lied.

She stepped back from me and poked me in the stomach, which shouldn't have hurt. "Really?"

I held back a wince and followed her over to the bed, refusing to admit that I was in pain. "Fine, if you insist."

Like she really had to. I knew I looked just as bad as I felt. I was surprised she hadn't forced me into bed sooner. She pushed me gently into the bed, hovering just over my body.

"I think I have a way to make you feel better."

"Really," I said, my throat immediately going dry.

She smiled at me as she shimmied down my body, pulling my boxers down my legs. My cock immediately sprung to attention, ready for what she was about to give me.

I swallowed hard when she bent over and licked a thin line up my cock. God, this was fucking torture. I didn't dare move for fear that I would explode before she even took me in her mouth.

She looked up at me, her face serious. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

And then she swallowed me whole. My whole body convulsed from the feel of her warm mouth on me. I sucked in a breath, trying to hold back as she moaned around my cock. I wasn’t going to last long. Not with—

“Maaaa—”

“No,” I moaned as her lips slipped from my body.

She stood and grabbed her robe, wrapping it around her body as our son continued to call out for her down the hall.

“Kitten, he’ll go back to sleep.”

“No, he won’t,” she laughed. “You can wait. He can’t.”

“Kitten,” I pleaded.

She walked back over and kissed me on the lips. “I promise to finish what I started when I get back.”

I sighed as she walked out of the room. I was so close. Ten minutes passed, then a half hour. I got out of bed and pulled up my boxers, then made my way down the hall. When I peeked inside my son’s room, she was asleep beside him. I pulled the covers over them and closed the door quietly behind me as I walked out.

I was so fucking close.

SINNER

Walking up to the OPS building, it wasn't exactly what I had in mind when Cap told me they moved their operations. I was beat, my clothes shredded, and my stomach grumbling for just a morsel of food. When I took this job, I knew it would be dangerous, that it might not end how I thought it would. I just never imagined I would have to go so far to get Vira out of the line of fire.

"Finally," Cazzo grumbled. "I need a shower and a burger."

"Steak," Burg corrected. "Do you think they'll have something waiting for us?"

"How?" I asked. "They don't even know we're on the way."

"Cap would have called them," Cazzo muttered.

"Yeah, but he wouldn't know exactly when we'd arrive," I snapped. "It's not like they laid out a spread and are waiting inside for us to arrive."

"Boys!" Vira shouted, interrupting the bickering. "Can we save it for another time? Like, maybe after you leave so I don't have to hear this?"

"Hey, we saved your life," Burg argued. "How about a little fucking gratitude?"

Vira sighed heavily. "I can't wait to be inside with normal people."

“We are normal,” I said, slightly offended by her words. We used to mean something to each other. How could she tear me down like that?

“Normal is going on a drive with someone and not ending up on the edge of a cliff. Normal is hitching a ride with someone, but not having to hold a gun on them to make sure they take you where you want to go.” She spun around to face me. “Normal is not having to hear about your wax jobs and how you all like to compare them!”

I kicked at the dirt on the ground, grumbling, “We don’t always compare them.”

“You know, I totally get why you ended up with Cara. You needed someone who could ground you. Well, good for her. I’m glad that she can put up with this nonsense. And I’m so glad you couldn’t get it up for me. It saved me the trouble of having my ears bleed from listening to the incessant rambling you and your friends constantly raped my ears with!”

“Hey!” Burg snapped. “It’s not incessant rambling.”

“Yeah, and I could get it up for you,” I argued. “I just... had trouble performing all the way.”

“Please!” she barked out in laughter. “You deflated inside my pussy!”

“That says more about you than me,” I said, hoping to revive my reputation.

“I’ve never had a single complaint,” she smirked. “You, on the other hand, lost the use of little Sinner not long after.”

“I was electrocuted!” I shouted. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“And Cara stuck by you through all of it. I’m proud of her. Way to work you back into shape and get that train moving. Thankfully, I don’t have to deal with it ever again.”

She turned and stomped toward the doors of the building, completely unhinged. I snorted as she walked away.

“Women.”

“Tell me about it,” Burg said, crossing his arms over his chest. “We don’t talk about our waxing jobs that much.”

“I know. It was one conversation.”

“That lasted half the day,” Cazzo grumbled. “You might have overdone it just a little.”

“Like you didn’t talk about your favorite waxing place?” I shot back.

“Not as in-depth as you two. And I didn’t drop my pants on the side of the road to compare with you.”

“We were alone,” Burg said. “It’s not like anyone could see us.”

“Yeah, and I was itching,” I added. “I needed to know if it was because of the chafing from not showering or if it was the new place I tried.”

Cazzo rolled his eyes and stomped away after Vira. The man just didn’t get it. “They can think whatever they want. It was perfectly normal.”

Burg pointed at me, nodding his head. “That’s right. This is really a testament to just how prudish they are. Plenty of guys talk about this shit.”

“And show each other their wax jobs,” I agreed.

We both stood there nodding as we thought over the last twenty-four hours. “Although...I guess I can see how she thinks we talk about it too much. You did go on and on for like...three hours.”

“Me?” I asked, my eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “Did we really need to hear that story about Emma waxing you? That was maybe a little too intimate.”

“Well, at least I didn’t talk about how much larger my cock looks when waxed versus a full bush,” he retorted.

“You said the same thing five years ago! Why is it wrong for me to say?”

“Because everyone already knows how big Little Sinner is. We don’t need to hear about it nonstop.”

“You’re just jealous because my cock is bigger than yours.”

He laughed in derision. “Right, I’m over here with a tape measure, wondering why I can’t be as long as you. Well, I got news for you, buddy. You may be longer, but I’m thicker. You think women don’t talk about girth? I’m right up there at the top. Everyone knows I’m the thickest on the team.”

“Oh, everyone knows, huh? Do you think we all sit around and discuss it?”

“Yeah, I bet you do,” he snapped. “I bet you sit at home with your Lollipop and cry because you know you’ll never be as thick and—”

He suddenly whipped his head around, staring at something by the building. I was about to egg him on when I finally followed his gaze. My face flushed red when I saw the multiple people standing outside the building watching us in amusement.

I laughed suddenly, smacking Burg on the shoulder. “Do you like it? It’s a skit we’re working on.”

My chuckle was pained at best, and no one else was laughing. Clearly, they didn’t buy it.

“Yeah,” Burg continued. “We thought it would be funny to...to show the ladies.” Everyone remained quiet. “To...hone our acting skills for jobs,” he continued, clearing his throat uncomfortably.

“Right, because of all the...people...”

“Are you done?” Cazzo asked.

I squinted up into the sky and turned to Burg. “Are you feeling a little...”

“Dehydrated? Yep. All that walking and...yeah. I think the sun definitely got to us.”

“We should take a shower.”

“Not together,” he answered quickly.

“Of course not. Why would you say that? It’s not like I was suggesting it.”

“Right, but...” He jerked his head toward the building where everyone was standing, then fucking winked at me.

“Don’t wink at me. They already heard us. This is just making it worse.”

“It’s only worse because of you!”

“You’re the one that announced that we’re not showering together.”

“And you’re the one that—”

“Guys!” Cazzo shouted. “I think they already got the gist of this team. Maybe you want to shut your mouths and get your asses inside.”

“Right,” I nodded, strolling forward as if I hadn’t just been arguing with Burg about my girth. “Good to see you, Cash,” I nodded, ignoring the smirk on his face.

“Good to have you back, Sinner. You always brought such...entertainment to the group.”

I stumbled for just a second, but then righted myself and walked through the doors with my head held high. After all, I had nothing to be ashamed of.

“If you need to wax while you’re here,” Cash called out, “you’ll have to talk to the women!”

“All cleaned up?” Cash asked, slapping a hand on my shoulder as he sat down beside me in the break room.

“Ha ha,” I laughed around a bite of food. “You’re fucking hilarious.”

“Hey, it’s not every day I get to tease another guy about waxing.”

“Maybe you should consider giving it a try,” I shot back.

“No thanks. Eva and I are just fine as we are.”

“Yeah, you think that, but she doesn’t know what she’s missing out on, and neither do you.”

I swiped the grease from my face with a napkin, then grabbed my beer from the counter, taking a long swig. “This is fantastic.”

“Don’t let Fox hear you say that. He won’t ever leave you alone.”

I picked up the wrap and studied it. “I’ve never had shawarma before.”

A grimace crossed his face as he stared at the food.

“What?”

“You don’t want to know.” A visible shudder worked its way down his spine.

That was enough to make me set down the food. I had to know what that look was about before I continued eating. “Alright, lay it on me. I can’t possibly eat another bite until I know what that was all about.”

“What what was about?”

“The full body shudder as you looked at my food. Is he a bad cook? Does he not wash his hands after taking a piss?”

“Nah, Fox is good. It’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

He winced, but finally gave in to me. “We were on this job, and...well, Fox is a different sort of guy. He takes great pleasure in torturing people.”

I snorted, thinking that sounded very familiar. “You’ve met Knight.”

“Yeah, well...I’m pretty sure Fox is worse. He was stripping the skin from this guy, and while he was doing it, he said how much he would love some shawarma. Something about the skin reminding him of how he strips the meat for this,” he said, nodding to my sandwich.

My head bobbed up and down as I stared at the wrap. Yep, I was done. I dropped it on my plate and wiped off my hands. I wasn't sure I'd be eating meat anytime soon. "Well, I think that's enough eating for the rest of the month."

"I told you you didn't want to know."

"You did."

"So, what's the deal with Vira? What do I need to know?"

"We're pretty sure the ex is behind the hit on Vira," I answered. "He's named in the will if Vira is dead."

"Cap said that the ex was taken out of play."

"Technically, but with this kind of money, I'm not sure it matters to him. She doesn't want to go back to Reed Security for obvious reasons."

"Yeah, the only time I met her, she seemed like a bit of a hellcat."

I snorted at his assessment. "She's definitely wild. Cara would not appreciate me bringing her home."

"How are things going between you two?"

"Good," I nodded, smiling like the lovesick fool I was. "Can't complain."

"So, it was a good thing I allowed you to return."

"Like you could have forced me to stay."

"You would have been a good addition to the team. Despite what I think about your wax jobs, you would have fit right in."

I often wondered what would have happened if I had stayed out in California instead of returning to Cara. No matter how I played it in my head, nothing could be better than what I have with her now.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I like it out there."

"Well, you're missing out on a lot. Like the chance to have shawarma whenever you want."

I shoved the plate away, trying not to imagine Fox ripping a guy to shreds as he planned his next meal. “Yeah, I’ll pass.”

He chuckled, getting up to walk around the counter. “So, we keep Vira here and you’re going to continue investigating?”

“You’ll have to hash out the details with Cap. I’m pretty sure he’s going to pull me from the investigation.”

“Because of your past,” he surmised.

“That and I sort of lost our rental.”

He frowned as he slid another beer across the counter to me. “How did you lose it?”

“It...sort of...fell off a mountainside road.”

“Sort of,” he nodded. “Yeah, I’ve had a few of those.”

“Listen,” I said, shifting in my seat. “Vira’s kind of wild and crazy, but she’s good. And she definitely won’t like being locked up here. It’s gonna drive her nuts.”

“So, you’re saying I need to lock her up.”

“Only if you want your balls cut off. Don’t you have anyone you can stick on her full-time?”

“Sure, I’ll just snatch one of my guys and have her followed around like a puppy.”

“You know what I mean. She’s very...sexual. If you could maybe pair her off with someone that doesn’t mind the added benefits, it’s a win-win.”

“So, now you want me to pimp out one of my guys for her,” he chuckled. “Man, you’ve got some brass balls.”

“Hey, I’m just saying it’s a solution to the problem.”

He nodded, his eyes narrowing in thought. “Actually, there may be somebody. He’s not part of the team, but he’s former military.”

“And you think he’ll do it?”

“He sort of already did it once.”

“Who is this guy?”

“His name is Bowie. He works with Duke, the guy who owns the garage at the front of the property.”

“Yeah, I saw him on the way in.”

“Anyway, I’ll talk to him and see what I can do about it. But this thing with Vira needs to be wrapped up. Aside from tying her down, I’m not sure what more I can do to keep her at the facility.”

I glanced around, shaking my head in amusement. “Yeah, you’ve got a nice place here. How the hell did you pull this off without anyone finding out?”

“My brother,” he grunted. “It’s a sore spot with me. And you can’t tell anyone what you found here or our location.”

“Cap already knows.”

“Yeah, but let’s keep it to a minimum. This building has kept my people safe and I intend for it to stay that way.”

“You don’t have to say another word.” I stood from my chair, slapping my hands on the counter. “That’s it for me. I need a shower and bed.”

“What time does your flight leave in the morning?”

“Five.”

“I’ll make sure someone’s here to take you guys to the airport.”

“Thanks, Cash. Oh, and maybe don’t tell anyone about that argument you heard between me and Burg.”

“Afraid it might embarrass you?” he grinned.

“Not at all.”

“Uh-huh. Sure, I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“Thanks.”

“Cazzo beat me to it anyway.”

Shaking my head, I turned for the door, giving him the middle finger as I walked out. I heard his deep laughter as I

headed for the tunnel to the mansion. As directed, I followed the signs on the wall until I was walking through the dimly lit hallway underground. This place was a fucking fortress, but not nearly as comfortable as our panic room at OPS. There was no contest when it came to the beds Chance got for all of us.

I nodded to Burg as I walked through the door. He was busy talking with some of the guys, but I wasn't in the mood to talk. I just wanted to end this job and get back to Cara. When I left her, I knew she was terrified for me. That was a fact of the job, but it was worse because of who the job was. The first thing I did when I walked into the building was call her and tell her I was alright. The shaky sound of her voice through the receiver was enough to make me want to cry. There was nothing I wouldn't do for that woman, including promise to never leave her for Vira again.

Now I just had to tell Vira that.

She stood in the kitchen, making herself a cup of tea. The moment I walked in, a smile appeared on her face. "Hey."

"Hey, stranger," she grinned. "Did you find someone to lend you a waxing kit?"

"Haha," I said, walking in further. "Are you all settled?"

"As much as I can be with none of my stuff."

"They'll take care of you and make sure you have everything you need."

Her eyes dropped to her teacup. She fiddled with the string of the teabag, doing her very best not to look up at me.

"Vira—"

"I know, Mark. You don't have to say it."

When her eyes met mine, there was the slightest hint of tears, but also understanding. "You know I love you."

"Don't let your wife hear you say that."

"You know how I meant it. I wish things could be different, but..."

“But she’s your wife. You should choose her over me.”

“It’s not really choosing,” I tried to explain.

“It is,” she insisted, “and that’s how it should be. I’m grateful that you came for me. I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me. But this is for the best.” Her hand closed over mine as she smiled at me. “Besides, it’s not like I’d ever sleep with you again after your last performance.”

“You’re never gonna let me live that down, are you?”

“Not a chance,” she laughed.

I slid my hand out from under hers and pulled her into me, wrapping my arms around her. I hated saying goodbye to people. Cutting Vira out of my life wasn’t easy. It wasn’t like we were losing touch. It was a purposeful choice to stay away from her. And that felt way too much like losing a friend.

After pulling away from her, I stood there for a moment, trying to think of something else to say. When it was clear neither of us could come up with the words, I grinned at her one last time and walked away. It was the end of one part of my life, but it felt like the beginning of something else.

JACK

I stared at the bunk above me, tossing the ball I nicked off another prisoner against it. Rico got out yesterday. I had no doubt it was due to his father's influence. Time would tell if my plan worked or backfired. For now, I was alone in my cell, and that eased my mind slightly.

It wouldn't be long before I got another cellmate, no doubt some asshole that would try to kill me. The good news was that I was finally starting to heal. A few more weeks and no one would even be able to tell I had nearly died. Since that incident, the COs had hung around, keeping a closer watch on everyone, which thankfully saved my ass a few times. Part of me wondered if Rafe had anything to do with that, but it was more likely that Baz paid someone off to keep his son safe. That would probably change now that he was gone.

"McClain!"

I swiveled my head to look through the bars at the CO standing outside.

"You've got court."

"Bullshit," I answered, still unsure if this was an attempt to get me out of my cell so I could be killed, or if Baz actually came through.

The CO looked on his list, then back to me. "Look, you're on the fucking list for today. I don't give a fuck if you do or don't, but I'm supposed to get you, so haul your ass up double time."

I sat up and slowly tied my shoes as my heart started to beat faster in my chest. On the outside, I was cool and calm, but on the inside, I was having a fucking heart attack. Watching my back in here had become my number one job, the only way to survive. But if this really happened, if Baz really got me out, adjusting would be like coming home from a deployment, and that always sucked.

The walk to the van was rife with tension. The COs stared at me like I was scum. They knew what was happening, and they were pissed. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them tried to have me killed during transport. I had killed one of their own. He was a piece of shit, but they didn't know that. To them, I was just another asshole that deserved to rot in prison.

By the time I got to the courthouse, I was finally starting to believe this was really happening. Now it was time to start planning the next phase of my life, the part where I had to prove myself to Baz and get in good with him. There would most likely be a fair amount of shitty jobs before I got anywhere with Baz. Hell, he wasn't even located in the United States. The likelihood of getting any good intel on him was slim to none.

"In here," the CO said as he opened the door. He jerked his head at the far wall. "A gift from a friend," he sneered. "You have five minutes."

I walked inside and over to the garment bag hanging on a hook. I unzipped it and let out a low whistle at the suit inside. It wasn't nearly as fancy as the one he was wearing when he came to visit me, but it definitely cost him a pretty penny. And all to make me look like the golden boy in front of the judge.

I quickly changed, finishing up just as the CO knocked on the door. "Time's up!" The door swung open and the CO shook his head in disgust, but didn't say anything else. "You're up," he said, taking me by the arm and leading me to the courtroom.

I stepped inside and was guided to the chairs where a man stood waiting for me. He held out his hand, a first for me in the last year or so. "I'm your lawyer, Ben Rothenstein."

“Jack McClain.”

“It’s nice to meet you. This shouldn’t take more than a half hour.”

“What shouldn’t take more than a half hour?” I asked, playing along.

But he didn’t have time to answer before the judge entered and the officer in the court asked everyone to rise. It was a lot of formality shit that I didn’t pay attention to, at least, not until the judge started arguing with the prosecutor.

He stood there on his side of the room, staring at the judge in confusion. “Judge Haller, I think we’d all like to know what we’re doing here. Jack McClain was an open and shut case.”

“It’s been brought to my attention that there are several cases that have been reopened due to impropriety within the crime lab, D.A.’s office. and the prosecutor’s office.”

“That’s ridiculous!” the prosecutor argued.

“Your Honor, in light of the new evidence in Mr. McClain’s case, the defense feels it is only right to overturn his conviction and release him immediately,” Rothenstein said, standing and buttoning his suit coat. He was slick.

“You can’t be serious,” the prosecutor scoffed. “He shot a cop in broad daylight in front of a dozen witnesses!”

“Unfortunately,” the judge sighed, “I have no choice but to overturn his conviction due to prosecutorial misconduct.”

The prosecutor, along with others in the courtroom, burst out in anger. I could only imagine the cop’s family was in the courtroom today. If I was in their shoes, I would be outraged, demanding justice for their family. They weren’t the ones who committed the terrible crimes. They didn’t realize just how dirty that cop was.

But I wasn’t here for them. I was here to do a job, and that meant sometimes the good guys lost.

The judge banged his gavel, yelling at everyone to quiet down. “If you don’t like the ruling in this courtroom, the one I’m being forced to make, you should look into your own

offices. You're the ones that screwed up. He's back on the street because of your misconduct. Officers!"

I turned just in time to see the police walking up the aisle straight for the prosecutor. His cry of outrage amused me as he was handcuffed right there in the courtroom. I had no idea if he was being set up or if he was actually dirty. And frankly, it didn't matter. I had succeeded in the first part of my job. Now, it was time to move on and finish what Rafe sent me here to do.

I turned and faced the back of the courtroom, watching as Baz and Rico stood, eyeing me carefully before turning and walking out. I knew they would be waiting for me after I was released. This phase of my life was over, and a new one was just beginning.

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