



*Let the shadows be your
salvation*

CRUEL SALVATION

SHADOW ELITE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MADDIE WADE

CRUEL SALVATION

SHADOW ELITE: BOOK 8

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Cruel Salvation

Shadow Elite: Book Eight

By Maddie Wade

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Cover: Clem Parsons @Metatec

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PROLOGUE

WATCHING THE MEN WALK AROUND LIKE ZOMBIES HAD BEEN the hardest part of the assignment that had almost taken her life. The dead look in their eyes, as they'd carried out every command they were given, had destroyed what was left of her soul. A sharp pain had her eyes springing open from her lost thoughts and she looked around the unfamiliar room, her breaths coming in short gasps.

It took a minute to get her bearings and she remembered where she was and why. For almost a week she had been in and out of this strange, not awake not asleep, state and every time she felt confusion for those first few seconds.

“Are you in pain?”

Her eyes moved to the corner of the room and she saw him, her dark protector, the man who terrified almost every person he met and yet he had shown her nothing but kindness. He motioned to her hand, which was resting over the bandage on her side.

“A little.”

Rykov stood and moved toward the bed, his cool assessment something she had come to expect of him. “I will have drugs brought up for you.”

“Do we know what the poison was that they used on me yet?”

Rykov shook his head. “No, my people are looking into it, but the fluids are slowly flushing it from your system, so this is good.”

“I guess so.”

His head cocked and he sat down beside her, his three-piece suit looking perfect as always. “What troubles you?”

“How do you know something is troubling me?”

It wasn't in her nature to let people in, not since she'd lost her mother and found out that people, even those meant to love and protect you, couldn't be trusted. Yet something about this man made her want to. It wasn't a physical attraction she had to him, though God knew he was handsome and suave in a way only some men could pull off. No, it was something deeper than that. It was what she imagined an older brother would feel like.

“Ah, my little Lotus flower is closing up on me again.”

“I'm not a damn flower. I'm...” Nazareli stopped, not knowing how to describe herself anymore. She'd lost her identity in this operation for John Smith, and now it was over. He was dead, Rhea Winslow was dead, and she was a ghost. Only the devastation she'd caused was left to prove she lived.

“You're what?”

His hand gripped hers and it was the first tender human contact she'd had since her mother died. Tears sprang in her eyes and she blinked rapidly to rid herself of the weak emotion.

“I had a sister once.”

Rykov's statement cleared her mind somewhat as he gave her a little of himself. “You did? Where is she now?”

He sighed, his eyes holding so much sorrow and pain it was hard to look at. “She died. She was killed by my enemy in a war she had nothing to do with.”

Rykov Anatolievich was the new head of the Russian bratva but, to her, he was becoming a friend who looked out for her.

“I'm sorry.”

He nodded, acknowledging her sympathy. “You remind me of Masha. Her strength and resilience; she wore it like a crown, and so must you. I know you struggle with some of the decisions you’ve made, but none of us leave this earth without regrets, some more than others.”

“I’ve caused so much pain in my quest for vengeance.”

“Perhaps, but you also risked your life to rid the world of the greatest threat it has seen in hundreds of years.”

“Those soldiers, they were good men. They had families and friends and now I don’t know how they’ll carry on knowing what was done to them, what they were forced to become because of the drugs they were given on my watch.”

“There are always casualties in a war, Lotus, it is a fact. It’s how you move forward, and the next part of your life is what matters now. We cannot go back so we must go forward in a way that makes us feel good.”

“I have no idea what my life looks like moving forward.”

He was silent for a few minutes and she thought perhaps the conversation was over when he spoke. “A man in my position does not trust easily, there are many who would wish to dance on my grave.”

“I understand that.”

“I know you do, which is why I hope you understand that, when I tell you something, I’m doing it because I choose to trust you.”

“You can trust me.” She didn’t know why she made such a promise but she knew she’d keep it.

“I wish to leave this life.”

Nazareli felt her eyes widen. “You want to kill yourself?”

His low chuckle made her blink.

“No, Lotus, I wish to leave the bratva.”

“I didn’t think you left the bratva, unless it was in a box.”

“You don’t, but I’m working with someone to help me transition my way to a different life.”

“Wow, that’s brave.”

“Or, some would say, foolish.”

“That too, but why are you telling me this?”

“Because you know this man too and I think he can help you.”

Before she could respond, the door opened and Jack Granger stepped through. She scooted back on her bed, hating that she was lying in a vulnerable position.

“Settle, Lotus, he’s not here to hurt you.”

Nazareli felt her lip curl in anger at this ambush.

“Nazareli, I’m glad to see you looking better.”

“What do you want?” She was furious at Rykov for setting her up this way, but what could she do?

“Jack will explain, and I’ll be back shortly with your medication.”

Nazareli kept her gaze on Rykov, ignoring the man who stood beside her bed like a sentinel.

“May I sit?”

Nazareli shrugged, and watched as he pulled the chair Rykov had been using closer to the bed.

Jack sat and leaned back, his hands resting on his muscled abdomen. “How are you feeling?”

Nazareli speared him with a cool look, locking her emotions down, with the practice of a seasoned warrior. “Cut the crap. Why are you here?”

“I believe we may be able to help each other.”

“And why the hell would I help you? You hate my guts.”

Jack shook his head. “You’re wrong. We thought we were on opposite sides of a war, but I don’t hate you. I admire you.”

Nazareli snorted. “Yeah, ’course you do.”

Jack sat forward. “It’s true. You’re still young and yet you’re one of the smartest, coolest, and most confident operators I’ve ever seen.”

“John was a good teacher.”

“That he was, which is why I think you’ll like working for one of his original trainees.”

Nazareli hated the drug that was making her brain so slow and muggy. “Smithy?”

“No, Bás.”

Nazareli sucked in a breath. Bás had been one of John’s first recruits beside Smithy and, when his role ended, he’d dealt with a family tragedy and disappeared, and that was all she knew. His myth was legendary though, and John had always spoken of him with pride.

“What exactly would we be doing?”

“What you did for John. Cleaning up the messes of evil men and women. Taking down targets, chosen by Bás, that pose a threat. The ones governments are too afraid or weak to deal with.”

“Who else is on the team? Or is it just the two of us?”

“There would be others. All people like you, who need a second chance to make the choices they wished they had in the past or who need a fresh start.”

“So we’re like the A Team rejects?”

“Far from it. This team will be made up of some of the most elite people on the planet.”

“So why do you want me?”

“Because you need people to have your back and help right the wrongs you believe you’ve done, and I need the best. That includes you.”

“And how will joining you help me right those wrongs?”

“Because I’m going to help you ensure that each of those soldiers that were harmed will be helped. We can make sure

they get the therapy, physical and emotional support, and a way forward from this sick game Rhea played with them.”

Her heart was beating fast now and she felt a tiny kernel of hope spring into her chest. “And Rykov is part of this?”

“Hopefully, but his involvement won’t be as direct to start as he has things he needs to handle here, but he’ll be part of the team in a different way than you.”

“How so?”

“I want this new team to be invisible on paper and in life. We have a base with housing, offices, training areas, everything you’d need to start a war, and, if you want, a family of choice. You’ll effectively be dead on paper after today, and only those I deem trustworthy will be aware that you aren’t. You’ll eat, sleep, and breathe this job. These people will be all you have.”

She didn’t say it but it was more than she’d ever had before. Nobody would miss her if she were dead, and it would be her chance to fix her mistakes. “I need to think about it.”

Jack was shaking his head. “No, you don’t. When I leave, so does this offer.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

Jack chuckled. “You know more than most that life isn’t fair.”

“True story.”

“Listen, Nazareli, I know this life was chosen out of a thirst for vengeance, but I see the heart behind the fire in your belly, and I think you care more than you’d like to admit. This is a way for you to do good and use the skills you have. I won’t force you, but I do believe you’d make a great addition to the team.”

“Will I be the only woman? Am I the diversity hire?”

Jack’s lips twitched, and she noted that he was handsome in a Henry Cavill kind of way. “The second in command after Bás is a woman known as Duchess, and she’s one of the best spies in the business. We have a former jewel thief who makes

you look tall, but she's as deadly as they come, and we hope to take on more. I don't know why you'd think I'd hire anyone out of pity but let me make it clear. I hire people for their skills, not their sex."

He sat back, looking slightly aggrieved.

"I guess that was a shitty assumption. I'd blame the meds but Rykov is taking his sweet time getting them, so it's just me being a mouthy bitch."

"You're a straight shooter. I respect that."

"You promise you'll help me make sure those men are healed from what was done to them?"

"I promise."

"Then I guess we have a deal."

Nazareli moved to swing her legs out of the bed, and Jack sprang to his feet. "What the hell are you doing?"

Nazareli stilled, blinking as pain lanced through her like a rusty blade. "Getting to work."

"No, not yet. You need to stay here until you're fully healed and then I'll send for you both. Things aren't quite ready for you yet."

"Oh."

"Lotus, what are you doing?"

Her eyes moved to the man who looked ready to spit nails as he strode toward her angrily.

"Get back in bed at once. You'll tear your stitches."

"You know I already have one shitty dad. I don't need a second."

"Debatable, but you do need a keeper, so consider me your personal doctor until then."

"I'm going to leave." Jack looked between them and then focused on her. "I'll be in touch, but as of this day, you're officially dead."

"Great. Let's hope I end up in heaven, not hell."

Jack shook hands with Rykov and he left as silently as he'd arrived.

“Did you set this up?”

“I did.”

“You're very presumptuous and bossy.”

“Most people would be black and blue for speaking to me in such a manner.”

“Yeah, well, I'm not most people.”

“No, you are not. You're unique and refreshing.”

“I'm not sleeping with you.”

Rykov laughed, throwing his head back, and she'd have to be blind to miss how handsome he was, but he didn't make her feel that way. He made her feel safe in a different way.

“I wouldn't sleep with a woman so mouthy as you, my sweet Lotus.”

“So friends?”

“Yes, we are friends.”

“With no benefits.”

“As you wish.”

“Can I call you bro? I never had a sibling.”

“You may not, but I'd be honoured for you to consider me that way.”

“Fine, Rykov it is.”

He nodded and gave her a wink.

“Rykov?”

“Yes, Lotus?”

“Can I have my damn drugs now?”

He sighed and hid his smile behind a frown. “I forgot how trying little sisters could be.”

“Don't worry, I'm happy to remind you.”

CHAPTER I

FOUR YEARS LATER

“BROTHER, WHY ARE YOU IN MY HOUSE AT SEVEN-THIRTY IN the morning, eating my bacon and drinking my coffee?”

Damon looked up as Gideon walked into the large kitchen diner of his home in the village of Longtown, only wearing a pair of athletic shorts. His hair was messed and he had a two-day beard on his face.

He frowned at Gideon, his already shitty mood worsening. “Can you put some clothes on?”

Gideon shot him a look, only a brother could give, and lifted his middle finger. “One, this is my house and you’re lucky Nadia didn’t shoot you, and two, fuck you.”

Damon rolled his eyes. “Eloquent as always.”

Gideon poured himself a mug of coffee and walked around to sit opposite him at the table. Damon knew his brother didn’t really mind him being here. They’d given him a key, after all, but he was also aware they were newlyweds and needed space.

“What’s going on?”

He and Gideon were very different men. Although, since meeting Nadia and falling in love, Gideon had mellowed a lot. The mess with their half-brother, Carter, and the fallout for Cavendish Enterprises had left him feeling slightly adrift of late.

Damon had always been the face of the company, at least since his father had stepped back. But law was his first love and he’d managed to navigate a route where he could have his career as a barrister, which he loved, and be the face of Cavendish Enterprises while Gideon ran it. Now, though, it was a mess. At least, it felt that way for him.

Gideon was living his best life, but Damon wasn’t entirely sure where he fit into it. He loved it here, away from the hustle and bustle, and, helping Shadow, which until recently had felt like a different world, felt right. “I don’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

“How did you make this move so easily and walk away from Cavendish?”

Gideon got a soft look in his eye, and Damon knew he was thinking about Duchess.

“Because Cavendish wasn’t what I loved. I found I could give that up and not lose a second of sleep, but life without Nadia was unthinkable.”

Damon knew all this, but it wasn’t the same for him. He loved being a barrister; he’d just lost his reason for being in London. The glamorous parties, the string of women, it got old. He missed his grumpy brother and the woman who’d become a sister to him, and if he was honest with himself, it also had a lot to do with the irritating brunette who was avoiding him like the plague since their explosive night together a few weeks back. Not that he’d talk about that with Gideon.

“I still love being a barrister, I’m just tired of the parties and the mindless sex. I want what you have. I want something real. I want to make a difference and I don’t think I’m doing that at the moment.”

“Hey, Damon.”

He looked up as Duchess strolled into the room in a red silk robe and moved to kiss his cheek before Gideon snagged her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap with a growl.

“No kissing other men.”

Damon chuckled when Duchess rolled her eyes.

“He’s your brother.”

“Which is why it would be awful if I had to kill him.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously in love with you.”

“Okay, enough. I came here for advice, not to vomit in my mouth.”

Duchess glanced at him before stealing Gideon's coffee, the intimacy between them so natural it was like they shared a brain and a heart.

"Damon is jealous."

He threw his hands up. "I'm not jealous, asshole. I just want what you two have, and I want to take on a case or project that makes me feel good about myself. I swear, if I have to deal with another celebrity case of phone hacking, I'm gonna jump out the window."

Duchess watched him over the rim of her mug. "What kind of case?"

"I don't know." Damon shook his head. "Maybe I just need a break to think."

"Well, we could always use someone with your experience and you're cleared by Bás. Why don't you take a sabbatical and see what sticks? It's not like you can't afford it."

She was right. When Cavendish was sold, he and Gideon both became multi-billionaires. He needed to work, though, or he'd go crazy with boredom. It wasn't in his make-up to play golf all day.

"That might be a good idea." It would also give him a reason to be around Lotus and maybe force the stubborn woman to speak to him and acknowledge the connection they had.

"You can stay with us for as long as you need."

Damon smirked when Gideon shook his head behind his wife's back. "No, I might rent some place close though, so I can annoy him."

"We'd love that. Wouldn't we, Gideon?"

"Love it, Cookie."

She slapped his shoulder playfully at the sarcastic tone and he laughed but then sobered. "Seriously bro, it would be good to have you around. I miss your ugly face."

"And I miss your winning personality."

“Then that’s settled.”

“I need to speak to the partner at my firm first but yeah, it’s the way to go, I think.”

Duchess waggled her brows. “And I know Lotus will be happy to see you.”

Damon frowned at the mention of the woman who was as prickly as she was sexy. They’d had one night of mind-blowing sex, and then she’d ghosted him hard and she was good at it. The problem for him was that it wasn’t just the sex, he enjoyed her company. She was funny and smart and didn’t fawn over him for his money or status. If anything, she made him work for her attention and he liked that. But after her friend had died, she’d pulled back on him, until the night it had come to a head at Hurricane and Peyton’s engagement, when he’d cornered her and she’d slapped him for suggesting she was a coward and then launched herself into his arms. His groin ached, just thinking about how wild and untamed she’d been, how passionate and responsive to his touch. Now, though, she acted like he didn’t exist, closing the door on him and, from what he understood, everyone else too.

It was her fault his dick wasn’t seeing any action lately. Every time he looked at a beautiful woman, he ended up comparing them and his enthusiasm waned to nothing. It was unusual for him to go without sex for more than a few weeks. Now he didn’t see an end in sight, so his only option was to pursue her. He was nothing if not determined when he wanted something, and he wanted Nazareli Holt underneath him again and again, until they’d satiated this hunger.

Who knew snarky was so attractive? Certainly not him. Being here might give him the chance to get that out of his system. Perhaps being around her more would show him that, far from sexy, it was exhausting being with a woman who could cut you down so fast.

“Has Lotus ever been happy to see anyone in her life?”

Duchess got a sad look on her face. “She’s had a rough life, and this most recent loss of Rykov is weighing heavy.

Honestly, I'm worried she won't be able to carry it on her own for much longer."

"Was she in love with him?" An unfamiliar pang of jealousy swept over him and he fought to push it away. He'd seen them together once and seen how close they were. The man died shortly after, devastating everyone but especially Nazareli.

"She loved him very much, but not like that. At least I don't think so." Nadia looked pensive for a moment and then lifted her head and grinned. "You know, I have an idea that might be a good fit for you. Give me a few days as I need to speak with Bás about it first."

"Cool, now what's the plan for today?"

"Me and Nadia are going for Sunday lunch at Bishop and Charlie's with the gang. You're welcome to come with us."

"Are you sure that would be okay?"

Duchess nodded. "Absolutely. You're practically an honorary member now."

Damon chuckled. "And to think it all started with a bag over my head."

"Hey, it was a soft cotton bag. We aren't animals."

Gideon rolled his eyes. "Cookie, only you would justify kidnapping someone with a bag over their head by saying it was a cotton bag."

Duchess stood and dropped a kiss to his lips. "You married me so who is the real weirdo here?"

She darted off with a giggle as Gideon chased her up the stairs.

Damon walked outside and took in the beauty of the fields surrounding them, enjoying the silence and the clean air of the countryside. He'd never considered moving away from London, but there was something so peaceful about this place. Everything moved slower and he'd seen the effect it had on Gideon, although a lot of his brother's happiness was down to the woman he loved.

Perhaps he could find that too, except the only woman he wanted seemed to either hate him or want to ignore him. Yet he couldn't get that night out of his head. The way she'd arched her back as he tasted her, bringing her to orgasm on his tongue, her sighs and moans of pleasure as he fucked her. He couldn't figure out why she'd run after that, but he was going to find out.

CHAPTER 2

“OW, THAT HURT.” LOTUS YANKED HER FINGERS BACK FROM the huge pile of carved roast beef on the platter, after Charlie whacked her knuckles with a wooden spoon.

“Leave the meat alone or there won’t be enough to go around.”

Lotus looked at the two huge platters and cocked her head at her friend. “Are you kidding? There’s practically an entire cow on that counter.”

“Don’t start with me. You’ve seen how these men eat.”

Lotus shrugged. “True, they are like ravenous beasts most of the time.”

“Who’s ravenous?”

The two women turned as Duchess strolled into the large open-plan kitchen from the front of the house. Duchess looked stunning as always, her winged eyeliner and bright lips effortlessly stylish, with not a dark circle in sight. Lotus envied her friend’s ability to shine so brightly, no matter what the occasion.

“All of them, and this one keeps sneaking food behind my back.” Lotus had barely admitted to herself the reason for her hunger but the two pink lines on the seven pregnancy tests had confirmed it. She was pregnant and in complete denial until she could figure out how or when she would tell Damon, so she’d avoid him for now. How her life had ended up like this was a mystery to her, but then maybe not. She’d always attracted chaos.

Duchess slung her arm around Lotus and leaned in, letting her friend take the load for just a second. Her familiar perfume was a comfort to the lost ache in her heart that she couldn't seem to get rid of, no matter what.

“Well, you have one more now, too. We brought Damon with us.”

Lotus snapped upright, moving away from Duchess and groaning. “Really, you had to bring him?”

Hands on her hips, Duchess gave Lotus a sharp look of reprimand that only she could manage. “Don't start. Damon is a good man and whatever is happening with you two needs to be fixed.”

That was exactly the problem. He was a good man, the best, and the night they'd spent together had been spectacular, which was why she had to stay far away from him. She was toxic, and she couldn't risk getting close to him and losing him too. Everyone she got close to seemed to end up hurt or dead, and she wouldn't survive another loss.

Damon was one hundred percent not her type but, from the first meeting, she'd been attracted to the charismatic, handsome billionaire. Once she'd got to know him, it was worse than she'd thought. He was funny, loyal, sexy, and attentive, and she'd felt herself relax her guard around him, and then Rykov.

God, Rykov. Even now she could barely think about that day without a scream of pain building in her gut. Grief was something she understood, it had been a constant in her life from a young age, but, coupled with the knowledge and guilt that she was the reason he'd died, it was almost impossible to breathe.

“Lotus, are you listening?”

She blinked her attention, coming back from her dark thoughts and focusing on Duchess. “What?”

“Can you carry that platter of Yorkshire puddings through?”

She shook her head like she'd seen Monty do, and nodded, a smile stretching wide. "Yeah, of course."

The second she stepped through the door to the dining room, she felt his eyes on her and fought the draw to look his way. Damon Cavendish wasn't a man anyone could ignore. With his tall, dark, and handsome vibe and broad muscular shoulders, he was a snack she wanted to gorge on.

As she set the plate down, her stupid gaze moved to him as if she had no control whatsoever. He greeted her with a wide grin and wink that she felt all over her body. God, why did he have to be so nice and sexy? Turning away quickly, she busied herself by taking a seat far away from him, beside Titan and Snow, careful to make sure there wasn't a seat on either side he could snag. Her walls were up, but she'd learned with him that they were made of cotton wool.

Thankfully, with the entire team in attendance, it was a loud, lively affair, and avoiding conversation with him was easier than she'd hoped. Her appetite was a little off, but she ate enough not to be rude and laughed with Titan as he told stories about his mum, who she knew he missed.

Her phone buzzing had her excusing herself to answer the call, surprised to see Jack Granger's name on the screen.

Making her way into the garden, she answered. "Hey, Jack, what's up?" Jack never called and her stomach twisted in dread.

"Hi, Lotus, sorry to disturb you."

Her heart stuttered every time Jack called her that name because it reminded her of the day Rykov had given it to her. The same day Jack offered her this job.

"That's okay, what can I do for you?"

"There's no easy way to say this but Simon Dorsey and his girlfriend Kelly Jones have gone off the rails."

Her heart was almost beating out of her chest now. "What? How? He was doing so well."

Simon had been one of the soldiers from her time working undercover for John Smith with his wife Rhea Winslow as the target. Rhea had been hell-bent on annihilating anyone she deemed unworthy and had kidnapped hundreds of soldiers and drugged them so they became human robots with no ability to think for themselves. She'd been Rhea's right-hand woman and had to ensure the men were always compliant.

It had been the worst job she'd ever done and she lived with the guilt of it every day, and no amount of platitudes about her saving thousands of people could make up for what she had helped do to those men.

"Yeah, we thought so too. We're looking into it from our end, but he's robbed a bank and killed two guards in Gloucester and left a dead body in a service station in Stroud."

"Do we know where he is now?"

"No. That's the problem. He has the skills to stay off the radar but they're definitely on a spree of some kind, and he won't stop until someone stops him."

"I'll go. I might be able to reason with him."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? If you can't talk him down, you'll have to kill him and I know that won't be easy."

Jack was all too aware of the guilt she carried, and the pain of losing Rykov she was dealing with, but this was her mess and she needed to clean it up before anyone else got hurt. "I can do it. Send me the details and I'll leave now."

"He isn't your friend, Lotus. He's a trained killer and Kelly is off her head on drugs with a record for violence."

"I know. My head is straight and I can handle this, Jack."

"I know that. You're one of the best operatives I have ever met but I need to know you won't be reckless with your own life."

That was the problem working for someone like Jack. He was far too aware of things, and her lack of care about her own safety was more obvious than she thought. "Look, Jack, you called me for a reason. You could have called Bás or Duchess

first but you called me because you know I have the best shot of ending this without more bloodshed.”

“Believe me, Bás is my next call, but you’re right. I do believe you’re the best person for this job.”

“Then let me do it.”

“If Bás is okay with it, then so am I.”

“Send me the details.”

Lotus hung up and spun around, a shriek erupting from her lips when she saw Damon leaning against the wall, waiting for her. “Were you eavesdropping?”

He pushed off with his shoulder and walked slowly toward her, only stopping when he was close enough to reach out and touch her cheek with his palm.

“Talk to me. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It doesn’t matter, you can’t help me.”

“Naz, if it upsets you, it matters to me. Let me help you.”

Her gaze moved over his handsome face like a drowning man searching for a life raft. She wanted so badly to lean on him, to let him take the weight and make her forget anything but pleasure, but she knew she shouldn’t. “You can’t save me, Damon.”

“Then let me drown with you.”

“No, I won’t drag you down with me.”

“You’re not. I’m choosing to dive.”

God, this man was too much. She pulled from his hold, not trusting her body around him.

“One of the soldiers I drugged and ruined has gone on a killing spree. He and his girlfriend have robbed a bank and killed two guards. Do you know what that man did before he met me and I ruined his life?”

Damon shook his head. “Tell me.”

“He was a happily married father of two, with commendations for bravery and valour. He was a good man, a

great man, and I reduced him to a shell, taking away his free thought, his right to choose, and his family. That's what I do, Damon. I hurt people and I won't let you become another victim."

She saw him take a step back, his hand falling to his side, and her heart broke in two. She wasn't in love with him, but she cared about him, and he represented something that, in another life, she would have wanted for herself.

"Walk away, Damon, I'm not worth it."

Pushing past him, she headed inside to face Bás and Duchess. She had to get her head out of the clouds and back in the game or the next funeral her team attended would be hers.

Bás was waiting when she got inside, his careful look assessing her mood and gauging if she was ready.

"I'm going."

The plates had been cleared and Gideon, Lucía, Sebastian, and Peyton had taken the kids into the games room so they could discuss this as a team. She felt a presence behind her and waited for Bás to tell Damon to leave but he didn't.

Her boss, and the man she considered family, looked angry, and she knew it was because Jack had gone to her first.

He rested his hands on his hips and she could feel the tension radiate off him. "That's a bad idea."

"Lotus can do this and we have her back."

She looked at Hurricane with a small smile for his support but shook her head. "I need to go alone. If I turn up with a big team, Simon will handle it badly."

"No way are you going alone, Lotus." Duchess was seated, her legs crossed casually, but Lotus knew she was evaluating everything.

"I'll go with her."

Lotus spun at Damon's outrageous offer and glared at him. "No offense, but you can't help me. You will just get in my way."

“I disagree.”

Lotus felt her eyes almost bug at her friend’s comment. “What the hell, Duchess?”

“Damon is capable and smart and he can watch your back. More importantly, him being with you will stop you from doing anything reckless.”

“Fuck you, Duchess.”

The woman who was selling her out looked sad for a second before she lifted her shoulders up and back. “Tell me honestly. Would you take the same risks with Damon there that you would take alone?”

Lotus ground her teeth, fury burning through her blood and she knew lying would be pointless. “I can’t.”

Snow stepped up beside her and looped her hand through hers. “We love you, Lotus.”

Her hand shook as she faced the people around her, before her eyes landed on Damon. “If you die, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I trust you, Naz.”

That was the problem, though. She didn’t trust herself.

“Then it’s settled. Damon and Lotus will go after Simon and Kelly, aka Bonnie and Clyde, and Snow, Titan, Reaper, and Bishop will follow, staying about five miles behind. That gives you the space you need but ensures they’re close enough if you need them. Santa will also be available as air support and Watchdog will be by your side on comms. I want regular updates and, if I see any sign that this is going south, I’ll pull you and the authorities can deal with it. I don’t care what your objections might be. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

Lotus glanced at Watchdog who nodded but kept quiet. She never thought it would happen but she missed his frequent, detailed random facts and the playful banter from him. It was easy to forget sometimes that she wasn’t the only one suffering and, in fact, some suffered more than she’d ever imagined.

She saw Duchess talking to Damon and wondered what the hell he was thinking, insinuating himself into this op. The man was a great barrister, and she'd seen him in action, defending Peyton, but he wasn't a killer like she was and a part of her didn't want him seeing that side of her.

She wanted to push him away for his own safety and for the safety of her heart, but even more, so that she could decide what the hell she'd do about the secret she carried inside her that threatened to change and link both their lives forever, and how the hell she'd tell him when she did.

CHAPTER 3

“DAMON, A WORD?”

He knew it was coming but turning around and seeing his brother’s furious face, he winced slightly. “What?” He was about to leave with Lotus to go to Shadow HQ and grab what she needed before they hit the road, and he didn’t trust her to not leave without him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He considered blowing his brother off with platitudes, but the last year had taught him that life was short and anything could happen, so not to leave things unsaid. “I don’t know. Naz is vulnerable and strong, and she has this wild side to her that makes her impulsive. I knew I had to go, something inside me demanded it.”

“You care about her?”

Gideon looked shocked, even though he’d seen him carry Naz out of Hurricane’s party.

“She’s so much more than what she lets people see.”

“Brother, I don’t know if Lotus can be what you need. You want what Nadia and I have, I get that, but I think Lotus might just be too broken for you to repair.”

Damon knew his brother meant well, that he cared. If he hadn’t known Nadia so well and gotten to know her as a friend, he would have given Gideon the same warning when he started to fall for her.

“I don’t want to repair her or fix her, I just need her to know I’m there for her. I’m not some blind fool in love, that’s not what this is. I just need to be useful. Being there for someone important to me seems like a good place to start.”

Gideon ran his hand through his hair, leaving the ends sticking up before he sighed. “Just be careful and call me.”

“I will, and don’t be mad at Nadia over this.”

Gideon’s jaw tensed and he nodded curtly. Damon knew they’d have words, but he hoped Gideon listened before he ran his mouth. He hauled his brother in for a quick hug and jogged in the direction of Lotus’s voice.

Her back stiffened slightly when he walked into the now-empty dining room where she was talking to Watchdog. He knew every signal she was sending him was to keep away, but he’d never been afraid of her or the attitude she put out. In fact, it turned him on. He grinned as he stepped up beside her and she gave him a withering glare.

“What we got?”

Watchdog looked at them both, his emotions so locked down that Damon couldn’t have read what the man was thinking if he’d had a gun to his head.

“Pictures from the scene.”

He followed Nazareli’s finger and winced when he saw the carnage. The small branch of a well-known bank had not only been robbed, it had been destroyed. This wasn’t merely theft or murder, it spoke of a deep-seated desire to annihilate. Spray paint covered the walls in nonsensical symbols, a sharp weapon had been taken to the counter, perhaps an axe or machete, and everything around it was smashed or knocked to the floor, leaflets scattered, chairs torn, and in the middle were the two guards. Not only shot but shot so many times it would be almost impossible to identify them.

Naz turned her full attention to him now, and he could feel her anger like a wall of vibrating emotion. “Now do you see what you signed up for? This isn’t some jolly where you get to ride in and fix it all and play at being my protector or whatever

the hell it is you think you're doing. This is real and brutal, not just a game.”

“I know that, and I don't have any intention of riding in and saving you. I know I don't have even a fraction of the skills I need to have your back, but I know I need to do this. Have you never felt that? This urge that you needed to do something and you have no idea why, just that if you don't, something monumental and life-changing will happen and you won't ever forgive yourself?”

Naz stepped back as if he'd slapped her. Her skin was so pale, he went to grasp her arm but she shook him off and walked away.

He moved to go after her, but Watchdog stopped him. “Give her a minute. You hit a pretty raw nerve with that.”

Damon sighed and hung his head, wondering if this was a bad idea now. She clearly didn't want him anywhere near her, so why was he pushing this? “Maybe this is a mistake.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Damon lifted his head. “Sure.”

“Why did you offer?”

He laughed humourlessly. “I have no idea. I just knew that I had to go.”

“Then don't question it. Doubts get more people killed than following your heart.”

“You think?”

“I know so and so does she.”

Damon wasn't sure what that meant but he knew he wouldn't get answers out of Watchdog if he wasn't volunteering them. “Thanks, man.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgement and Damon wandered off to find Nazareli. She was throwing stuff into the boot of her car when he approached.

“Are you heading to base?”

“Yep.”

“Can I get a lift with you?”

“Yep.”

His lips twitched. He much preferred to see her riled up and angry than pale and upset. “On a scale of one to ten, how pissed off are you right now?”

“A hundred.”

“Good to know.”

He took the passenger seat as she buckled her seatbelt and started the ignition. He couldn't help but admire her as she drove, taking in the long, slender curve of her neck as she kept her eyes forward, studiously ignoring him. Nazareli was toned and slender, but her ass and tits were spectacular. At five feet five, she was short to his six foot plus, but her presence was huge. She was a spitfire, and her sexy, sassy mouth drove him nuts.

“Stop staring, it's creepy.”

“I can't help it, you're beautiful.”

She cast him a quick glare before her eyes were back on the road, navigating the narrow winding roads. “I *will* shoot you.”

He felt a smile twitch but fought it back, not wanting her to see it. Sparring with him verbally was almost foreplay to this woman, and he'd take it over her silence. “No, you won't.”

An unladylike snort left her. “And why is that? You think you're special because we fucked?”

His body tightened, his cock hardening at the word fuck on her sweet full lips. “I don't think, I know. I *am* special and not because we fucked, but because nobody can make you come like I did.” It was a bold statement but what they'd shared had been intense and he'd been around the block enough times to know that it wasn't a normal sexual encounter.

“Oh, please. My vibrator does a better job.”

“Well, then, I hope you brought it with you so we can put that little statement to the test.”

Nazareli pulled her Mini Copper to a stop at the entrance to the mountain rescue building that was a front for the Shadow Elite headquarters, which was situated hundreds of feet below them under the wild mountain range so integral to this part of the world.

“If you think this is an excuse for us to get naked again, then think again, Damon. It should never have happened in the first place, and we’re not repeating that mistake.”

As she faced him, it took every ounce of control he had not to seal his lips over hers and kiss her until she couldn’t deny their attraction a second longer, but forcing Nazareli into a corner would lead to her coming out swinging and he needed her to come to him on her own.

“Okay.”

He watched her blink, once, twice. “Okay?”

Damon turned back to the front so he wasn’t looking at her when he lied his ass off. “Maybe you’re right. You clearly regret it and I don’t want a woman in my bed who doesn’t want to be there. Let’s forget it happened and move on.”

He knew he’d stunned her with his statement but she recovered quickly.

“Yes, that’s what we should do.”

He couldn’t leave her thinking he regretted it though or that he wasn’t attracted to her. “Just to clarify, though. This is your decision. I’d happily peel those jeans down your perfect legs and bury my head in that sweet pussy of yours until you came screaming all over my face and then fuck you until we couldn’t stand. But like I said, if it’s not what you want, I can live with that.”

“It is.”

“Okay, so what’s the plan now for catching this guy?”

He knew his statement had affected her and then his abrupt change of subject had thrown her but she was a consummate

professional, and it didn't take long for her to switch gears.

“We need to gather weapons and comms, and Santa will be waiting to fly us to the last known sighting, which is constantly changing.”

“And this man, he's unstable?”

“Let's get our gear and get to the helo and then I'll tell you what I know of Simon Dorsey.”

“Sure.”

Damon followed her into the building, waving at Bein who had the job of manning the desk that day. He'd learned that, to ensure their cover stuck, they had to run this mountain rescue as a real venture. Which meant someone had to be there in case a call came for help.

As the lift descended, it was hard to reconcile the white, bright open hallways and apartments that opened up so far underground.

“Do you have a go-bag?”

Damon shook his head at her question. “No, never needed one.”

“You can borrow one of Reaper's. You're about the same size.”

“Okay, why?”

“This could take hours or days, even weeks if he goes underground before we catch him.”

“Okay.”

“Want to back out, because nobody would blame you?”

“No way.” He'd be lying to himself if he said he didn't have doubts but a bigger part of him knew he needed to be here with her.

“You can wait in the main common room while I grab my stuff. I won't be a minute.”

He walked into the room where he'd been before when the shit with Carter was going down and noticed how much this

place felt like a home. Yes, it was built to last, with steel and concrete, but pops of colour and personality made it almost homey.

He wandered closer to a wall where pictures were haphazardly pinned up. Bás and Val with Scout and Monty. Reaper, Snow, and Bein in the boxing ring, sparring. Naz and Rykov, his arm around her neck as if he'd her in a headlock like Gideon would so often do to him, growing up. It was difficult to look at the love in her eyes as she looked up at him or see the adoration on his face without feeling the loss she must feel.

What he didn't see was any kind of sexual attraction between them, although it was hard to tell from a picture. What he saw was the love between friends or siblings, and he wondered if he'd ever get over the loss if anything happened to Gideon. Losing Carter was different. Their relationship had been broken from the second he'd been born because of Marsha, the evil stepmother, yet he'd grieved for Carter and wondered 'what if' on more occasions than he could count.

“Ready?”

He turned to see her standing in the doorway watching him, and he thought perhaps taking sex off the table for now would be best. She needed a friend, someone to have her back and he wanted more than anything to be the person she could lean on. “Yes, I'm ready.”

“Last chance to back out.”

“I'm not going anywhere, Naz.”

He meant it too. Somehow seeing that picture had sharpened her loss into focus, making it real and he wanted to be the man she could lean on.

CHAPTER 4

HAIR BLOWING ABOUT HER FACE, LOTUS DUCKED HER HEAD AS she rushed away from the helo, Damon jogging just behind her. When she got a safe distance away, she lifted a hand and waved at Santa. It still gave her a pang in her heart not to see Hurricane flying them, but she was just glad he was safe and healthy.

“So what now?”

Lotus had been prepared to put Damon in his place since they'd left the Shadow compound, but something in Damon had shifted and he seemed content to follow her lead and take his cues from her.

His flirting had stopped after their conversation in the car, and she wished she could say she was relieved, but a part of her was disappointed and a little put out that he hadn't fought her harder on it.

Was it any wonder men got confused when she behaved like such a headcase? The truth was, she wanted him and she liked him more than she wanted to, but if they were going to be together, they'd need more than good sex. No, that was unfair. The sex had been mind-blowing and it was all she could do not to drag him to the nearest flat surface and maul him. She was blaming the hormones for her topsy-turvy behaviour.

“Now we head to the bank and look at the scene in person.”

“Why? Talk me through it. I want to learn.”

Lotus eyed him as they got in the rental car Bás had waiting for them. He looked genuine and perhaps he really did want to help. “Images are helpful, of course, but they only give you half the picture. You only get what the photographer chose to capture. Seeing the scene gives you the emotion and feeling of what the perpetrator was feeling too.”

“That makes sense.”

They were silent as she drove to the scene. It wasn't an awkward silence, it was comfortable, but then she'd always felt that way around Damon. It was similar to how she'd felt with Rykov, but she'd never wanted to rip Rykov's clothes off the way she did Damon.

Shaking away her thoughts and the dark melancholy that descended when she thought of him, she parked the car. “It's across the street.”

Side by side they crossed the high street, which was unusually quiet for the time of day. Incidents like this were rare in the UK, and it was felt by the entire community.

“Follow my lead.” Lotus didn't wait for a response but marched right up to the officer guarding the scene and introduced herself. “Good afternoon, Officer Scott.”

She flashed the fake identification indicating she was with Counterintelligence and was let through without incident.

She turned and handed a pair of gloves and booties to Damon, who dutifully put them on. He might not be as practised as she was but, as a barrister, he was certainly aware of the threat of cross-contamination and evidence.

“Don't touch anything.”

“Yes, boss.”

She shot him an annoyed look but fought the smile underneath.

It died on her face when she walked in and saw the true extent of the devastation. This wasn't merely a robbery that had gone horribly wrong, this was wilful destruction. All the chairs were smashed or the seating torn and the desks had

great gauges taken out of their surfaces with some kind of sharp object, which she suspected was a knife or blade of some kind.

Her stomach churned at the dark pools of congealed blood on the floor where the two security guards had lain. The metallic smell hit her, and she had to breathe through her mouth to try and get hold of the sudden nausea. This kind of thing didn't usually bother her so it must be the pregnancy. All too aware of Damon behind her, she moved away from the scene and caught sight of the green paint daubed across the glass partition.

“What's that?”

“His number.”

She could feel Damon looking at her, his warmth at her back, and it took everything she had not to lean back and let him take just a little of her weight. As if sensing it, he shifted forward slightly on his feet and his chest touched her back. It was only a tiny contact but it was enough to imbue her with the strength she needed to continue.

“Explain.”

“I will later when we haven't got eyes on us.”

Damon looked up and around, seeming to catch on to what she was saying, then giving her a chin lift. “You done in here? My stomach isn't used to this kind of gore.”

Lotus looked him over and he looked perfectly fine, but she was fully aware of how green she probably looked. He was saving her dignity by suggesting it was him rather than her who couldn't handle it.

“Yes, let's go back to the car and look through the CCTV. I need to see this play out and see if it gives me any clues as to why Simon went off the rails.”

Back at the car, she put in the code to access the internal system Watchdog had set up and found what she needed. She could feel Damon's breath on her neck and goosebumps popped out over her skin.

Seemingly without thinking, he reached out and rubbed her arm, the touch innocent and natural. “Cold?”

“Not really, just a little tired and that always makes me feel cooler.”

That was a part lie. She hadn't slept well, too much on her mind for her brain to rest, but the goosebumps were a result of the close proximity of the man beside her.

“Why aren't you sleeping?”

His voice was soft but firm, and she wanted to curl up in a ball and let it surround her. She couldn't give in to that weakness, so she did what she always did, used her snark to deflect. “Well, obviously I was fucking one of the many men in my harem.”

Damon's cheek twitched and it made her want to feather her fingers over his skin and smooth away the pain and anger she'd just caused. God, what a mess she was.

“Don't do that. If you don't want to tell me, just say so. Don't be a bitch about it and lie.”

“What, you don't think I could have more than one man panting after me?”

“Naz, you could have as many men as you want kneeling at your feet, but you're not that person.”

“Don't pretend to know me, Damon.”

“I don't have to pretend, Nazareli. I do know you.”

“Of course, you do.” She couldn't hide the sarcasm in her voice this time. Everyone thought they knew her, but few actually did.

“You wear your hair down because putting it up gives you a headache, you like white chocolate the most and think dark chocolate is the work of the devil. You walk on tiptoes unless you make a concerted effort not to, you cry at Disney movies and can't keep house plants alive, no matter how hard you try, and you love hard and deep. And when you let someone close, you give them everything.”

His speech stunned her into silence, her mouth hanging slightly open. Words choked her and she had to look away to get her equilibrium under control or she'd be snot and tears in seconds. How did he know all those things, and why did he care to find out?

“That doesn't mean anything.” She hated how throaty her voice was.

“No, perhaps not, but don't say I don't know you, Naz. I know you and I like you, far more than I should.”

“I said no sex.”

His warm chuckle made the pulse between her legs throb.

“Not everything is about sex, sweetheart, but any time you want a ride on my cock, say the word, but I have to tell you I might make you work for it.”

“No, you won't.” He grinned and she tried so hard not to smile back, biting her lip and looking away. “Back to work, slacker.”

She pressed play on the video and watched as the man she thought was on the mend went on a violent rampage. She'd initially thought it might be Kelly, the girlfriend, encouraging or instigating things but it was clear it was Simon.

“Wow, that's a lot of rage.”

“Yeah, it is, and it was pretty common when the men first came off the drugs.”

“Tell me about that.”

She didn't want to but it was only right to give him the background he needed to make informed decisions. “So, I told you I worked undercover for a man named John Smith. He was married to a woman called Rhea Winslow who, to put it lightly, was unhinged. When he saw just how mad she'd become, he faked his death and set about stopping her. I had personal reasons for wanting to help him and I went undercover as her right hand and earned her trust. Part of that involved me doing things I'm far from proud of.”

Lotus swallowed and kept her gaze on the fine drizzle that had started to fall. “Rhea had kidnapped highly skilled soldiers and was drugging them so they were basically robots who would follow commands without question. I oversaw that the drug was administered. So, a lot of this is my fault. I promised myself I’d help rehabilitate these men and give them a tiny part of what I stole from them back. It’s why I have to help find Simon before he gets himself killed.”

“That’s why Bás let me come. He knows I’ll stop you because you won’t endanger another civilian.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re not just a pretty face, are you?”

“Of course not. I’m a total stud, too.”

A laugh bubbled in her throat and she shook her head at his ridiculousness.

“I like seeing you laugh, you should do it more.”

His words fell heavy sobering her. “Not much reason to, mostly.”

“Then we need to change that.”

“Let’s just fix this mess first.”

“Okay, but Naz?”

“Yes, Damon?”

“None of this is your fault and I know you don’t believe that or want to hear it, but if you step back and look objectively, you know I’m right.”

She didn’t answer because what could she say? She did know, at least a part of her did, and yet the bigger part carried this guilt around like a shroud and it got heavier with every day.

Her phone buzzing gave her the perfect out and she took it, answering Watchdog’s call. “Whatcha got for me?”

“Simon and Kelly have just been spotted crossing the Severn Bridge, heading to Bristol.”

“Why the hell would they use a toll bridge? That makes no sense.”

“He was looking directly at the camera.”

“Like he wanted to be seen?”

“Yeah, that’s certainly how it looked to us.”

“Okay, keep me posted. We’ll head that way now.”

“Be safe.”

“I will.” She hadn’t been the only one affected by the losses of late. Watchdog had become hyper-focused on keeping the team secure and as safe as he could make them.

“Bristol?”

She glanced at Damon, who had that just fucked messy hair that made her want to wrap her fingers in it and tug his mouth to hers and tried to ignore the urge. “Yep, let’s go.”

As they crossed the bridge, the screen on the car lit up and she saw a name she hadn’t heard from in a while. “Smithy, this is a surprise.”

Smithy had been in charge of the soldiers. He’d fought beside them, with them, and had been subjected to a lot of what they had before getting out, but not before he’d almost killed the woman he loved. They’d been colleagues, then adversaries, and then colleagues again before their relationship had slowly settled into a friendship born of pain and guilt. He was probably the only person who understood how she felt right now.

“Don’t bullshit me, Holt. You knew I’d call.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“What do you need? I can be with you in an hour.”

“You don’t even know where I am.”

“You have Watchdog, we have Will Granger.”

“Fair point.”

“So talk to me.”

Lotus briefly explained what she knew so far, and Smithy listened without interruption. He was so like his father, John Smith, who'd been her mentor and recruited her in the first place, not that Smithy would welcome the comparison. The two had been estranged and never really reconciled before his death.

“So, is it a cry for help or a taunt?”

“No clue, but if you want to help, you can look into everyone at the facility and find out if we missed any signs or if he talked to anyone about his plans.”

“On it. I'll be in touch.”

“Thanks, Smithy.”

“Stay safe.”

He hung up and she turned to see Damon staring out of the window looking pensive. “You okay?”

He swung his gaze to her and nodded. “Of course.”

He was lying but she wasn't going to push for answers, not when she hated it when people did it to her. He'd tell her in his own time, which reminded her of the ticking time bomb she had to decide on.

CHAPTER 5

“THIS IS NICE FOR A SAFE HOUSE. I THOUGHT THEY WERE ALL grungy and dilapidated.”

“You’ve been watching too many TV shows. A safe house just needs to blend into its surroundings and not have a bunch of people on neighbourhood watch documenting the comings and goings.”

Looking around at the two-bedroom detached house in a quiet street with empty driveways, he shrugged. It looked exactly like what it was, a first-time buy for a new couple. Which meant empty houses around them as people were at work during the day. Except it was Sunday so, when they’d arrived, Naz had grabbed his hand and smiled up at him.

“Pretend we’re newlyweds.”

“Um, how?”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” She had leaned into his arm and giggled up at him and he couldn’t help but smile down at her indulgently. “See, you got it.”

Once inside, she dropped his hand like it had rabies and moved to secure the exits. It might look like an average home but inside the security was high-tech, and he suspected it might even be bulletproof glass.

“So what now?”

“We wait. You can go relax. I want to go over the footage again.”

As she moved away from where he stood in the tiny living room, he saw her sway and caught her under her elbow. “Hey, you need to sit.”

Concern filled him as he made her sit on the grey, faux leather couch. He couldn’t help but remember how pale and sick she’d looked at the scene earlier too. Maybe she was getting sick. He couldn’t imagine Nazareli was very good at looking after herself.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You might be getting sick.”

She shook his hand off and he sat beside her, determined not to let her fob him off with her prickly attitude.

“I’m not sick.”

“Then what the hell? When did you eat last?”

“Same time as you, at lunch.”

“I ate, you pushed your food around your plate.”

Her gaze flashed to his. “You were watching me? That’s creepy as fuck.”

“I wasn’t watching you like that, I just noticed.”

“I wasn’t very hungry, that’s all, and I told you I didn’t sleep very well.”

“Fine. You sit, I’ll dig us up some food.”

“I’m not a child who needs babying, Damon.”

“No, you’re a human being who needs rest and food and I’m a friend who’s going to get it so you can stay sharp and keep us safe.”

He knew she wouldn’t argue with that.

“Fine, there should be food in the fridge. Nothing greasy.”

“Yes, boss.”

Damon went into the kitchen, that was no bigger than two meters squared, and rummaged through the fridge, pulling out tomatoes, onions, some chicken fillets, and basil. In the

cupboard, he found dried pasta, and set about cooking up a quick sauce. It was in no way gourmet but it had carbs, veg, and protein. Leaving it to cook, he headed back into the living room and found Nazareli spread out on the couch.

He watched her for a moment, taking in her delicate features relaxed in sleep. Her warm olive skin tone looked pale, and her thick dark hair, which hung long and straight, looked a little limp. Again he was struck with worry for her. She was always so busy taking care of other people's problems and making herself responsible for them but who looked after her?

Bending, he lifted her legs up and rolled her slightly so her neck wouldn't stiffen and placed a throw from the basket in the corner over her body. Her phone was in the kitchen where she had set it next to the weapon she always carried on her.

Sliding the ringer to silent, he put it where he could see it in case an important call came through and turned the burner on the hob down. She needed rest more than food right now.

Sitting at the bottom of the couch, he gently lifted her feet onto his lap and pulled out his own phone to text Gideon.

DAMON: AT THE HOUSE, NO NEWS. ALL SAFE.

GIDEON: HOW WAS THE SCENE? DID YOU BLOW CHUNKS?

Damon smiled at his brother's teasing.

DAMON: NO, BUT IT WAS PRETTY INTENSE. A LOT OF ANGER THERE.

GIDEON: WHAT DOES LOTUS SAY?

DAMON: SHE AGREES, BUT I HAVE A FEELING SHE'LL LOOK FOR A RESOLUTION THAT DOESN'T END IN HIS DEATH AND I'M NOT SURE THAT'S POSSIBLE.

GIDEON: SHE HAS A BIG HEART. DON'T TELL HER I SAID THAT. SHE STILL SCARES ME.

DAMON: ;) I WON'T TELL HER BUT YOU'RE RIGHT, SHE DOES.

GIDEON: SO DO YOU. BE CAREFUL. I KNOW YOU LIKE HER, BUT I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU GET HURT.

DAMON: I'M FINE.

GIDEON: NADIA SAYS TO MAKE SURE LOTUS EATS.

DAMON: YES, MUM.

GIDEON: ;)

Damon set his phone aside and stroked his hand over Nazareli's ankle as she shifted. His brain began to replay the day. He'd started feeling lost and unsettled, then had somewhat of a plan and now he was in a safe house with the woman who was coming to mean so much to him.

In the last year, his life had turned on its head and nothing felt right except when he was with this brash, funny, brave, caring woman. She was everything he never would have seen himself falling for and yet here he was, trekking across the country on a mission to keep her safe when she was a deadly killer.

"That's a very serious face."

He turned his head, his gaze landing on her sleepy face, her features soft. "Just thinking."

Nazareli was hugging the soft green throw to her chin, her eyes mellow with sleep as she watched him, and he wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss her. Not to seduce, rather because he wanted that connection with her, but he knew if he broke the spell he might not get this time back.

"What about?"

"Life. How much mine has changed in the last year and how I wished I could go back and change certain things."

"Like what?"

"I wish I'd been a better brother."

Naz frowned. "Gideon loves you."

Damon blew out a breath and leaned his head back against the couch, closing his eyes. "Not to him, to Carter. I wish I'd

made more of an effort to bridge the gap between us. To be the brother he needed despite Marsha. Then maybe he wouldn't have become what he did."

"You were a child, one grieving the loss of a parent at that. You can't blame yourself."

"I know, but when I was a teenager I should've pushed back. Should've made more effort to be in his life instead of allowing her to drive the wedge deeper."

"Regrets don't change things and we can all look back with hindsight and play the what-if game. All it does is steal hope and instil misery."

"I know, but I just know deep down he wasn't born evil. No baby is born evil. I just wish I could've saved him. That I could've been the brother he needed."

"And what about what you needed? You needed a father, and you didn't end up an evil baby-stealing megalomaniac."

"No, true, but I had Gideon."

"You two are close."

"Yeah, we always have been. We're very different but I'd die for him and I know he would for me too."

"You're lucky to have that."

"Yeah, I am. What about you, you ever want siblings?"

Nazareli speared her fingers through her hair, shoving the length back over her shoulder and settling against the side of the small couch facing him.

"Sure. When I was a kid, I wanted a brother or a sister, but I wanted a brother more. But after my mum was killed, I was so angry and confused it was all I could see."

"I didn't know she was killed. I'm sorry."

He expected her to shut down at the slightest sign of vulnerability, and yet he couldn't not offer her some kind of comfort, even if it was a risk. He lifted his arm, and she shocked him when she ducked under it and cuddled into his side.

“She was murdered by a man she thought she loved. He’s dead now, but it led me to this path. Honestly, looking back, it’s amazing I’m alive. I was so rash and angry, and I had no thought in my head except vengeance.”

“Well, I’m very glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

He was about to ask more when her belly grumbled loudly in the silence and her cheeks went pink, as he chuckled.

“I should probably feed you.”

“Whatever is cooking smells good.”

“Don’t get too excited, it’s only chicken and tomato pasta.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Damon stood, his arms feeling instantly empty and bent to place a kiss on her head, her scent familiar and sending a bolt of lust to his dick. But it was more than that, today, if not this conversation, had shown him that he wanted more with Nazareli Holt. He wanted to take care of her, to protect her even if sometimes that was from herself.

“Stay here, I’ll be back with food. Do you want a beer or wine? I saw some in the fridge.”

He saw her cheeks pink and her shoulders stiffen slightly but then she smiled. “Just water, please.”

“Be right back.”

He pulled her phone off the side table where he’d placed it. “I put your phone on silent but kept an eye on it and nothing came through.”

“Thanks.”

The rest of the evening was pleasant. They didn’t go deep again, preferring to keep the conversation on Simon and his plans and that was okay. He felt like he’d made progress in knocking down some of those walls she had sky-high around her and that was a start.

That lasted until eleven pm when a call came through that there was an active shooter, believed to be Simon Dorsey and Kelly Jones, targeting a power plant not far from them.

CHAPTER 6

“I DON’T LIKE THIS, NAZ.”

The urge to take his hand and reassure him that all would be okay was almost overwhelming, but after letting down her guard and falling asleep on him earlier, she’d shoved that wall back up and was focused on her task.

Lotus couldn’t say that hearing him talk about his regrets over Carter hadn’t affected her, it had affected her too much. Showing her a side of Damon Cavendish that she suspected he didn’t allow many people to witness. Which was exactly why she needed to keep him at arm’s length. He could break down her walls like a jackhammer through marshmallow if he tried, and she couldn’t let him.

“You don’t have to stay.” She winced at her sharp delivery but lifted her chin, determined to double down on her bitch routine.

“I know that, but enough people have left you, Nazareli, and I won’t be one more. I’m not going anywhere so get that through your beautiful, thick skull and stop trying to push me away.”

Thankfully she didn’t have to respond to that as they got to the outer perimeter of the scene. This wasn’t a huge plant, but it could cause a lot of problems if it went up. Fire crews were on the scene but in a holding position until police had cleared it as safe.

Approaching a man who looked to be in charge, she flashed her fake ID at him. “You in charge?”

“Yes. I’m Detective Radnor.”

Lotus nodded. “Update me.”

“We arrived shortly after eleven pm when reports of shots being fired at the plant were reported.”

“Reported by who?”

Detective Radnor frowned. “Anonymous. Why?”

Lotus shrugged. “Just wondered. Go on.”

“As of right now, we can’t find any signs of a shooter. I have my men searching the buildings to the west, which have the best line of sight.”

“Any sightings of Dorsey or Jones?”

“No, but their vehicle was found three miles from here.”

“Thanks.”

Damon had stayed quiet this entire time and she wondered if he was pissed off with her. Sneaking a glance at him, she saw his jaw flex and had the urge to take a bite out of him and shook herself. What the fuck was wrong with her thinking about sex when she was working a scene? She was definitely going soft.

“We need to poke around, see if we can find anything,” she told him.

“What are we looking for?”

“Footprints, shell casings, anything that might help us figure out an end game or what made him flip.”

“You think more is at play here than him just snapping?”

She watched the fire crew work to extinguish the fire and considered his question. “Yes, I do. Simon was doing well, and this makes no sense.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Is it possible someone else is controlling his behaviour again?”

Lotus flinched like she'd been slapped, not even wanting to consider that. If that were the case, it meant more of the drug she thought they'd eradicated was out there. "We destroyed every last drop."

"Is a drug ever truly destroyed once a recipe or formula or whatever you call it is out there?"

God, what he was saying made sense but that would mean someone inside the network was doing this and more people were at risk. A shudder ran through her, and nausea worked its way up her throat. A firm hand landed on her back, a gentle stroking movement meant to soothe.

"Just breathe, Naz."

Following the deep sound of his voice, she let Damon help her, even as she hated appearing weak in front of him. It didn't take long, as she drew in deep breaths,, for her heart to steady and the panic to subside.

"I'm okay." She stepped away from him when all she really wanted to do was sink into his arms and stay there. Let him take control for just a little bit and carry the weight with her.

"Where do we start looking for these clues you were talking about?"

Grateful he was moving past her mini breakdown, she pointed to an area where she would have taken the shot if she'd been trying to cause damage to the plant.

"Over there."

While Detective Radnor had his men checking the buildings to the west, she knew the one slightly more south would be the ideal location for this attack. It was a disused office, by the looks of it, with a flat roof.

"Stay behind me."

"No fucking way am I hiding behind, you, Nazareli. I will walk beside you and do as you ask but don't ever try and put yourself in danger to protect me."

“Stubborn alpha males.” She shook her head, but a part of her was touched by his statement, even if it was dumb.

The building itself was clear, which didn't surprise her, it was the roof she was interested in the most. Taking the fire escape up, she scanned the area, her weapon drawn in case they were still there and the abandoned car was just a ruse.

She didn't expect to find anyone, and she was right. “It's clear.”

She walked to the edge of the roof, her flashlight sweeping across the floor, noting the disturbed dust on the ledge and then she saw it. A single shell casing. Not on the floor like it had fallen, but placed on the ledge as if someone wanted her to find it.

Picking it up using a latex glove she kept in her pocket, she turned the shell over and frowned.

“Is that weird that it was right there?” Damon asked.

“Yes, it was placed there on purpose for us to find.”

“Why the hell would they do that?”

“I'm not sure but we need to find out. Let's head back to the house and call the team.”

Damon was quiet on the way back, although he'd insisted on driving and she hadn't fought him on it, too damn tired to fight.

As he flicked the kettle on to make tea, she opened the laptop and logged in before hitting dial to connect them face-to-face.

“You look like crap.”

“Gee, thanks, Bás, just what every woman wants to hear.”

“You sick?”

“No, just tired and hungry so get off my case.”

“Damon, make sure she rests and eats.”

She looked up and back to see Damon standing behind her, like he was the only snack she needed to survive right now, a

smirk on his overly handsome face as he nodded at Bás.

“Excuse me, neanderthal, but I don’t need some man to look out for me. I’m a grown-ass woman.”

“More like pain in the ass woman.”

“Do you want to hear this or not, because I want to go to bed?”

“Fine, speak, the rest of the team are listening.”

“At the bank, Dorsey left his number daubed in green paint.”

“Number?”

“The number Rhea Winslow had assigned to the soldiers to make them more robotic and seem less human. Then at the power plant, we found this shell casing.” Lotus held it up for them to see.

“It was left on the ledge very deliberately for someone to find, and it isn’t standard issue. If I had to guess, this is military grade and not easy to get a hold of either.”

“This is seeming less and less like a psychotic break and more deliberate.”

Lotus glanced back at Damon. “Damon suggested that maybe he’s under the influence of the drug again in some way.”

Bás, as she suspected, didn’t flinch. “Possible, and worth looking into. Jack has Will working on this with Watchdog so they can delve into that. I’ll also take Bein and go speak to the people at the rehab centre and see if we can dig anything up.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

Lotus turned slightly to Damon. “Go ahead.”

“It might be possible that Nazareli, and anyone who was seen as in power that they might hold responsible, is a target.”

“Shit. Smithy and his family.”

Her body went cold at the thought of Smithy’s wife, Lizzie, or one of the kids getting hurt.

“We’ll warn them. Smithy isn’t an idiot, and he won’t let anything happen to his family. In the meantime, we should consider pulling you from this and having someone else head this up.”

Ice trickled down her neck at the suggestion. “No way. I know this man better than all of you.”

“Lotus, you know damn well we don’t work that way. We’re a team.”

“Oh, and were we a team when it came to Rykov? Where were we when he needed us?” She stood abruptly, tears threatening to overflow. “I can’t do this.”

Pushing past Damon, she rushed up the stairs, fully aware that her out-of-character actions were in fact strengthening Bás’ case for him, not the opposite. Falling on the cool sheets of the double bed, she gave into the tears that had been stalking her these last few months. Everything seemed to spill out, the grief over Rykov, the guilt, the loss. The feeling of being so out of control and terrified of losing another person in her life.

She felt the bed dip and a strong, familiar pair of arms came around her. She grasped onto him like he was the only life raft in a sea of sharks. She cried for her mother, for John, who’d been her friend and mentor, for Rykov, and for the person she could’ve been if only things had been different. For the life she could’ve had if only death and evil hadn’t come into her life.

“It’s okay, sweetheart, let it out. I’ve got you.”

Damon and his sweet comfort only made her cry more because she knew he was different. From the very start, he’d been different, as if her heart was linked to him, and she’d never been more terrified in her life. Which was why she fought him, but now she had a part of him growing inside her as if fate was done letting her choose the path with him.

With his arm around her, he held her close, stroking her back, her hair, his lips pressing against her head as if she was fragile but not weak.

“I don’t know why I’m crying.”

His lips caressed her ear as he spoke close to her neck. “Yes, you do. You’re human, Naz, and you’ve been through so much, more than anyone should in a dozen lifetimes, and it takes a toll.”

“I’m normally so good at holding this in and getting on with things.” Her voice was a wet hiccupy mess as she tried to get her words out.

“I know, sweetheart, and holding it in isn’t good for you. Everyone needs an outlet for the emotions, and beating up Hurricane in the boxing ring isn’t enough.”

Her lips tipped up at his attempt at humour. “But it’s fun.”

“No doubt, but you need to acknowledge the pain or it will eat you up until there’s nothing left, and that would be a shame because I happen to think you’re pretty awesome.”

Lotus cuddled closer and he tightened his hold as if sensing it was what she needed. “You just want in my pants again.”

His warm chuckle slid over her like melted caramel, vibrating against her chest and causing her body to tingle. “You got me, but that’s not all.”

Lotus pulled back a little so she could look up at him and see his eyes. Warmth radiated back at her, but there was also a hint of vulnerability in his blue eyes. This man who could have any woman he wanted or be any place in the world right now, chose to be in this safe house, chasing after a maniac with her because he wanted to.

“Then what?”

His thumb caught her bottom lip as he cupped the back of her neck, and a shot of pure desire ran down her spine before settling heavily between her legs.

“I like you, Naz. I like your spirit, your dark humour, the way you care for those around you, and yes, your ass does look spectacular in a pair of tight jeans. But mostly I like how you make me feel when I’m around you.”

Her voice shook and this time she didn't try and hide it from him, she let him see her, warts and all. "How do I make you feel, Damon?"

"Like I can do anything. Like I can be a man worthy of a woman like you."

It was shocking to her that he'd ever consider he wasn't worthy of her. If anything, it was the other way around. She was so broken, so damaged, why would anyone ever sign up for that? The moment was charged, and she knew he wanted to kiss her and, God, she wanted that more than anything, but she couldn't kid herself any longer.

She was falling for this man, and she thought he felt the same way, but she couldn't allow things to get more complicated, not until she told him about the baby. Sitting up, she caught the flash of disappointment on his face before he hid it. She needed to lighten the moment because even that tiny flash of disappointment made her hate herself.

"Is Bás mad?"

"Worried. You should probably call him before he turns up here like a protective papa bear."

Lotus smiled at the thought. "Well, I do call him and Val, Mum and Dad."

Damon grinned and she felt her belly turn over as a swarm of butterflies took flight. Damon was incredibly handsome, but when he smiled it was like all the dark shadows of her world got lit up.

"Weirdo. They aren't that much older than you."

She bumped him with her shoulder, feeling lighter and less like she was drowning than before her meltdown. His teasing was something she enjoyed. The men on her team teased her, Bein, Hurricane, and Bishop, all of them would banter with her but that was like a sister. With Damon, it was different, less sisterly and all flirty.

"Hey, I'm not weird."

"You really are but it turns out I like weird."

“Good to know.” It was hard to pinpoint what the strange feeling in her chest was, but it felt a lot like happiness. Not that she hadn’t been happy in her life the last few years since Shadow and Rykov had taken her under their wing. But this felt almost dizzying, like a bubble of excitement, and it was the thought of what might happen to her when it burst that made her feel so cautious. Good things didn’t happen to people like her because she wasn’t a good person. Even Rykov had been taken away from her, the one man who felt invincible, her absolute best friend in the world, and he was gone too.

As if sensing her mood shifting, Damon stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. “You want me to bring you up some tea and biscuits?”

“You don’t have to wait on me, Damon.”

“I know, but I like doing it and it makes me feel useful.”

“You are useful. You’re the one that suggested the drug might be in play again.”

“I know but you would have got there.”

“Maybe, but you saved me time and I have your fine ass to look at.”

He choked out a laugh and poked his tongue to the side of his cheek. “So, I’m here as your man candy?”

“Got a problem with that?” She knew her tone was flirty and hiding the dark turn her thoughts had taken, and that she should stop teasing him, but it always felt natural to flirt with him, and fighting him was exhausting. She just needed to find a way to tell him about the baby before she fell back into his bed. Lotus had no illusion she wanted him, whether he would want her after her little revelation, she didn’t know.

“No problem at all.”

He skimmed her jawline with his finger and walked down the stairs, leaving her feeling slightly better. Still confused about her future, but lighter knowing that whatever happened she would be okay. She always was because what other choice was there?

CHAPTER 7

“OH MY GOD, I’M SO BORED.”

His instinct was to sneak up behind her and tell her exactly how they could fill their time, but they’d reached a tentative peace that felt, not good, because good would be her in his bed, but fragile, balanced, and easy. Their relationship had changed since the tears two nights ago. They’d struck up a friendship without the underlying angst that had always seemed to be between them.

“Want to play cards?”

“No, I want to do something useful.”

“We could head back to the compound if you like. You’ll have more than just me for company then.”

“No, we are where we need to be, and your company isn’t so bad.”

He put a hand over his heart. “Stop with the compliments, I can’t handle it.”

He ducked the cushion she threw at him and laughed. “Idiot.”

Placing the cushion back on the couch, he stood. “Come on, let’s go take a walk or go into town.”

There’d been no more sign of Dorsey or Jones. It was as if they’d fallen off the face of the earth. Lotus wasn’t surprised by that as, apparently, he was a very good soldier, but it made Damon uneasy. The thought of a threat to her hiding somewhere was so much worse than knowing what was

coming and being able to face it head-on. The shell casing they'd found that had been left for them was exactly what Lotus had said it was, a high-grade military round, not easily available.

"We can't, but you can take me to the drive-through. I want a burger and fries and a chocolate shake."

He wrinkled his nose. "Everyone knows banana shakes are the best."

She patted his face, her fingers soft and delicate as she sashayed past him. "Wrong as usual."

As much as he loved her opening up to him, like she had the other night, this confident playful side of her was his favourite. Lotus wasn't meant for the dark emotions that haunted her, she was meant for smiles and fun and love. She only ever showed him a glimpse at a time but when she did, it was like a lightning bolt to the heart.

As he drove towards the nearest burger restaurant, they argued playfully over the merits of milkshake flavours, both firmly entrenched in their respective camps. It was easy and mundane and gave him a tiny insight into what life could be like for them without the constant threat of death and destruction hanging over them like an axe about to fall.

He found himself watching the road more closely than normal and he could sense Lotus was watching more carefully than usual too, but even that didn't dim the pleasure he got from being around her. The fact that she was a potential target too made him feel sick if he let himself think about it, but after talking to Gideon last night he felt a little better.

This was all new to him but as Gideon had explained, it was second nature to these women, and it was the life they lived. If he wanted to be with Nazareli, which more and more he thought he did, then that was a part of her life and always would be. Now he just needed to figure out if he could live with that.

"Light's green."

“Shit.” He put the car in gear and pulled into the drive-thru.

He ordered for them both and he grinned to himself as Naz scarfed down one of her burgers on the drive back. It was good to see her enjoying food again. She’d had a couple of rough days, feeling unwell and looking pale, and he suspected it was the stress of it all, but now she looked a little better. Still stunningly beautiful, no matter what, but her sadness and the defeat he’d sensed from her had woken a primal protective side he’d never felt for a woman before. Yes, he was protective of Nadia but that was because she was family. This was different, he’d stand against anyone who came for Nazareli. Even if she didn’t need it or want it, he had this desire to shield her.

As they sank down, side by side on the couch in what was their temporary home, he heard her sigh and looked down.

“Feel a little better now you’ve eaten some junk food and had your chocolate shake?”

He gave an over-exaggerated shudder, and she punched his arm, before he snatched her hand and drew her under the curve of his arm. He thought she might fight him but she settled into his chest and her body went lax as if all the tension was draining from her body.

The scent of her body wash wafted over him, and he inhaled it like a dying man sucking on oxygen.

“This is nice.”

Her hand stroked his chest, not in an overtly sexual way, although his dick wasn’t getting the memo, but in a connected way.

“It is. You feel right in my arms.” He didn’t get a response and wasn’t really expecting one. “Tell me about Rykov.”

She tensed and tried to sit up, but he held her close. “Don’t run. It’s only a question, Naz, and you don’t have to answer it. I just know he was important to you, and I want to know more about him.”

He felt her still and then seem to make a decision as she relaxed back into his arms. “What do you want to know?”

“What was he like?”

“Funny. He had this wicked sense of humour. When we first met, I was weak and a bit like an injured kitten. I’d snarl and spit at anyone who approached me. I thought everyone had an ulterior motive. I’d spent so long undercover that I didn’t know which way was up anymore or who I could or should trust.”

“How did you get into this line of work? I don’t suppose it was on the careers list in secondary school.”

A huff of her laugh against his neck had him fighting the urge to bend his head and kiss her sweet mouth, but he knew he couldn’t risk losing this chance to know her more.

“Not exactly. My father cheated on my mum repeatedly. He was a venture capitalist, and I grew up surrounded by wealth and all the power that wealth could buy, but at home, nothing was what it seemed. My mother was desperately unhappy, and she sought solace with a man called Marcus Preedy. My dad was a terrible husband but, looking back, he wasn’t an awful father, just a very absent one.”

Damon knew who her father was just from that small revelation. “Richard Holt is your dad.”

Nazareli looked up. “Yes, do you know of him?”

“Never personally met him, but he was a titan in his industry.”

Naz nodded against his chest. “He was. My mother loved him, but he was always away and then she met Marcus Preedy and had an affair. But he didn’t really want her, she was just a pawn in another game he was playing, and he was an evil bastard. I never met him then, but he slaughtered her, and I was made to think it was an accident. I blamed my dad for a long time, but as I got a little older, I began to remember snippets of conversation she’d have on the phone when she thought I wasn’t listening. I began to snoop and found out she’d been cheating. Long story short, I found out Marcus

Preedy was dead, but he had a son, Drew, and I went after him. I was angry and bitter and in pain and I was reckless. It's amazing I wasn't killed by the Fortis team. Not long after that, John found me and offered to train me if I went undercover and helped him take down his ex-wife, who was Marcus Preedy's sister. I agreed and that's how I ended up in this world."

"Wow, that's an awful lot for a young girl riddled with grief for her mother."

She shrugged but didn't respond, and he wondered if she had any idea how much she'd been used and manipulated by her mentor, John Smith. She might hero-worship him but he was as much to blame as anyone for the pain she'd suffered.

"Want to hear the rest of my sad and sordid story?"

"Yeah, baby, I do."

Something about the way she said it, made him think she needed to say it out loud. Part of him didn't want to hear anymore, because it made him want to find every fucker that had ever used this beautiful, amazing woman and tear them apart.

"So, I went undercover, and I was totally unprepared for how manipulative Rhea was. It screwed with my head to the point I didn't know who to trust in the end. I felt drawn to her. She was so kind and caring towards me and she made me feel like I mattered. I knew she was my enemy, but it was all twisted up. I lost myself by the end and only just managed to do the right thing before I was almost killed when she figured out I wasn't the person she thought I was. Rykov put me back together. He didn't tell me who to trust or what to think, he just listened and helped me see how badly I'd been used by all of them. He let me find a new me, a woman who was broken and damaged but still deserved a life. He was my best friend, and I let him die."

Damon couldn't stand another minute not looking at her face and seeing her eyes. He twisted, lifting her so she was seated astride his thighs. He settled his hands on her hips, his thumbs stroking her hip bones and held her gaze.

“You’re not damaged and you’re not broken. You went through something horrendous at a very young age and then the people who were meant to protect you used you. You did good, Nazareli. You saved hundreds of thousands of people from that evil, and I know there are things you might not be proud of but we all have those. Yours are just a little harder for you to swallow because you’re a good person and you care.”

She looked at him with a wild, untamed denial in her eyes. “I killed people in cold blood and I’m good at it. I enjoy it sometimes. How does that make me a good person, Damon?”

“These people, were they kind, caring nurses or teachers or fathers with small kids waiting for a bedtime story or were they evil, killers, who would have murdered thousands of innocents?”

“Does it matter? I’m a killer.”

“Of course, it matters. I’m not saying life should be measured by the deeds we do but maybe they should be. Good people lived because bad people were extinguished by you and people like you. Where would this world be if she had won?”

Nazareli looked away and he gripped her chin and turned her to face him, her bottom lip wobbling slightly. “Tell me.”

“Hell. It would be a living hell.”

“You see? Yes, you killed but not because you enjoyed it, because I know that’s not it, but because you were protecting the good and the freedoms of us all. A killer without remorse doesn’t beat herself up like you do over the losses.”

“Rykov died because of me.”

“Did he, or did he die doing his job and protecting those he loved too?”

“I’m toxic, Damon. People die around me, and I don’t think I could cope if something happened to you too.”

He drew her into his arms and gripped her cheeks as he leaned his forehead onto hers. “Baby, you’re not toxic. You’ve been dealt the shittiest of hands and it’s about time that changed.”

“I don’t think we can change the hand we’re dealt.”

“Maybe not, but I need you to know you’re not alone. I don’t know what the future holds, but I do know I want you in mine. You’re strong and beautiful and smart, and yet I find myself wanting to bundle you up and take you to a private island so I can keep you safe.”

“I don’t need you to keep me safe, Damon.”

“Thank God, because I’m shit with a gun and my hand-to-hand combat is subpar. I can, however, promise that if you trust me with your heart, I can protect it.”

And he would. If she gave him the chance, he’d protect her heart with his life.

CHAPTER 8

RAIN POUNDED AGAINST THE WINDOWS OF THE DIMLY LIT living room, casting shadows on the pale walls that surrounded them as the afternoon bled into evening. Lotus was determined to fight the feelings this man aroused in her. She knew the promises he made were heartfelt, but without the full picture, which she was too scared to share with him, how could he make that vow? Frantically flipping through the pages on the screen in front of her, she tried to put the moment they'd shared earlier out of her mind but it was almost impossible. Damon was everything she wanted but the weight of her guilt and her fear were too heavy.

Instead, she was searching for a crucial piece of information to save the life of a soldier she'd wronged and tried to fix, and she didn't even know if he wanted saving or if she was doing this purely for selfish reasons of redemption.

Damon was polished and enigmatic, and she could feel him watching her with his piercing blue eyes as she resisted the urge to look up and face him. After his promise to keep her heart safe, she had run, withdrawing from him into research she knew Watchdog and Will were already doing, but she couldn't sit there idly while the world fell apart and do nothing. She really knew she was avoiding a conversation that was overdue.

His voice was steady and deep but filled with determination as he broke the silence. "Nazareli, let me help you. If we don't find them soon, it'll be too late, and two pairs of eyes are better than one."

She glanced up from the laptop resting on her legs, meeting his gaze with a mixture of determination and vulnerability. “Damon, I appreciate your willingness to help but this is my burden to bear, my mess to clean up. I hate that you’re risking your life being here as it is.”

Damon stepped closer, his voice softening. “Naz, I’ve watched you fight relentlessly for those you love. I’ve seen your strength and unwavering determination. But sometimes, it’s okay to lean on someone else. We’re in this together. I need you to understand that and believe it.”

She felt a flicker of doubt before she sighed, reluctantly accepting his offer of assistance. “Alright, Damon. But we need to figure out their next move quickly. Time is running out.”

They worked side by side, their focus deepening as they raced against an invisible clock. Their shoulders brushed occasionally, creating a spark of electricity that lingered in the air. With each passing minute, she could feel their connection grow stronger, forged by the shared desperation and a mutual understanding of the stakes. Yet it was more than that. From day one, she’d felt this pull towards Damon. And the more she fought it, the stronger it grew until they’d exploded, leading to the night of passion that had left her in the predicament she now found herself.

Finally, as she was about to lose hope, Lotus’s gaze froze on a page, her eyes widening with a mix of hope and disbelief. “Damon, I think I found it! This could be it.”

Damon moved closer, peering over her shoulder at the text. A smile of relief and triumph tugged at the corners of his lips. “Naz, that’s it! I think you’ve found the reason why Dorsey went off the rails. No way is that a coincidence.”

In that moment of triumph and relief, their gazes locked, their faces mere inches apart. Time seemed to stand still as their racing hearts echoed the intensity of the moment. The world around them faded into oblivion, leaving only the two of them caught in the magnetic pull of shared emotion.

Seemingly unable to resist any longer, Damon slowly closed the distance between them, his lips softly brushing against hers. Lotus was unable to fight the attraction a second longer. The kiss held a mixture of passion, hunger, and an unspoken promise of support and tenderness that blew apart her finely built walls of resistance. He made her feel like it was them against the world, that whatever happened in their fight against the forces that threatened their loved ones, he would be in her corner.

His tongue licked at the seam of her lips and she opened on a sigh of pleasure. Desire tingled up her spine and her heart beat against her ribcage as his hand held her head still.

As they broke apart, their breaths mingling in the charged atmosphere, Lotus's eyes watered with unspoken emotion. She whispered, her voice filled with newfound vulnerability, "I need to tell you something, Damon."

"Not now, I need you."

She knew she should tell him, but she wanted this more than air. She wanted to feel his hands on her skin, his lips against hers. Her heart pounded as he bent and nipped his teeth against her ear lobe, a frisson of pleasure shooting through her body.

She wanted to tell him about her secret, but the way he touched her was too much for her to handle. His hands moved down to her waist, pulling her closer to him. She could feel his hardness pressing against her hip, sending shivers down her spine. She moaned softly, giving in to the sensations that were overwhelming her. Gently he took the laptop and moved it to the coffee table, before pulling her across his thighs, spreading her wide open for his touch. Cupping her neck, his thumb skimmed her cheekbone as he looked at her with such reverence that it was almost too much.

He kissed her deeply, his tongue tangling with hers, their breaths mingling until there was only him. She felt him nip her lower lip as he wove a spell around her that she never wanted to wake from, before he pulled away, looking at her with a hungry expression.

“What is it that you want to tell me?” he asked, his voice husky with desire.

She hesitated for a moment but then decided now wasn't the time. “Nothing, it can wait.”

He didn't seem to mind as his lips crashed into hers, and she forgot all about the secret she was keeping. With his hands moving over her body, she felt like she was on fire and she wanted him more than anything else.

His lips trailed down her neck, leaving a trail of hot, wet kisses that made her knees weak. Her body ached for him as he lifted her top, his fingers skimming over her skin and causing a ripple of goosebumps to erupt over her skin. She clung to him tightly, her body arching against his as he brought her to the brink of ecstasy.

He let go long enough to pull her T-shirt over her head as she smoothed her fingertips over his hard abs, making his muscles tense under her fingertips. His eyes wandered over her and she revelled in the way he made her feel like she was soft and feminine without making her feel weak. He made her feel strong and sexy.

Finally, he lifted his head and looked down at her with fierce determination in his eyes. “I need you,” he said again, and she knew that there was no turning back.

Standing, he wound his arm around her back as her legs hooked around his hips, pressing his hard cock against the seam of her jeans and torturing the most sensitive part of her pussy. He took the stairs two at a time, Damon seemed as impatient to be inside her as she was to feel his hard cock filling her.

They moved to the bed, his hands working quickly to remove her clothes, and soon she was naked before him, her body aching for his touch. He stepped back and her gaze moved to the hard ridge of his jeans as he surveyed her nakedness.

“You're so fucking beautiful, Naz.”

She felt her body tighten around his words, her clit throbbing, and she wondered if she could come from his words alone. Lotus watched as he tugged his shirt over his head, revealing the cut muscles of his chest and abdomen. Her eyes moved over him, tracing every line and ripple as he moved, his big hands making quick work of the zipper on his jeans. As he pushed his boxers off, his hard cock bobbed free against his abs. Her mouth watered with the need to taste him, but he had other ideas.

He prowled towards her, her arms wrapping around his neck as he caught her, their lips meeting in a frenzy of tongues and teeth. It felt desperate as if both sensed that this could be snatched away from them, leaving a gaping hole of nothingness.

His hands roamed over her body, his fingers digging into her ass as he lifted her against him, his cock rubbing against her clit and drawing a moan of pleasure from deep in her throat. Damon was igniting every nerve and cell in her body until she was on fire.

Tenderly he dropped her to her back on the bed and came over her, his biceps on either side of her head as he rested his weight on his elbows. He bent his head and took a hard peaked nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. An unladylike keening sound flew from her as she clutched at his head, her fingers spearing through his hair as she held him to her.

Engulfed in the warmth of his touch, she surrendered to his mouth. It made her feel complete as pleasure zipped through her body and over her sensitive skin. She was lost, and she knew that she wouldn't want to ever be found as long as he was with her. Her fingers traced over the skin of his biceps, stroking and memorising his body and this perfect moment as his hands continued to move over her with hungry tenderness.

She moaned into him as his hand wound around her neck, dragging her to him for a deep kiss, their tongues tangling as he lifted her legs around his hips. She sucked in her breath as she felt his hardness press against her entrance. His lips were devouring hers, his mouth possessing her.

When she felt the head of his cock press against her, they both groaned. He paused for a moment, his eyes meeting hers, and she knew that he loved her just as much as she loved him, but neither would say it. Him because he expected rejection, and her because the thought of loving him terrified her. With one thrust, he filled her, and they both moaned at the sensation of finally being one. Her back arched, her nipples rubbing against the coarse hair of his chest.

As he began to move inside her, she moaned again as he stroked against the sensitive bundle of nerve endings at her core. "Harder, baby. Please don't stop."

His hips began to piston, and their heads bobbed against each other, their mouths never losing contact as their tongues moved feverishly against each other, searching for the release that would take them both over the edge. Each thrust, each movement, brought him just that little bit closer and took her to the brink of oblivion.

Her hands moved over his body, tracing over his shoulders, loving the way the muscles moved under her fingertips. She moved her hands to his chest, loving the way his skin felt against hers. She loved everything about him, but most of all she loved the way he made her feel safe and loved in a way she never had before.

She felt her body shuddering, felt the pleasure building inside her until she could take no more.

She screamed out his name as her orgasm wracked her body, her hips rolling into his as the pleasure ripped through her. Her nails dug into his skin, and she held on to him as her muscles clamped around his cock as she rode wave after wave of her orgasm. It had never been like this for her before.

He thrust into her one last time as he buried his face in the crook of her neck, groaning her name as his release shot through his cock, filling her with his warmth. Their breathing came hard and fast as he collapsed on top of her. Her heart hammered in her chest, and her body began to relax. She ran her fingers over his damp hair, loving the way he felt, loving the connection they shared and then she ruined it as she

blurted out the secret that couldn't seem to be contained a second longer.

“I'm pregnant.”

She felt him tense and his eyes flew to hers. “Are you sure?”

She nodded as she watched the smile spread across his face, and his arms tightened around her. “Yes, I'm positive. Do you think I'd tell you I was pregnant if I wasn't sure?”

CHAPTER 9

HE SCRAMBLED OFF HER, HIS DICK STILL HARD AND COVERED in the evidence of the hottest fucking encounter of his life. His fingers speared through his hair as he sat with his knees bent and tried to absorb what Nazareli had just said to him.

It was a dream come true. Here he was, a father. He knew his life would never be the same again. He was going to be a father and Nazareli was going to be the mother of his child.

The reality of it hit him and he began to laugh. Joy bubbled up inside him and he had to force himself to breathe to try and control the overwhelming emotions bubbling inside his chest. He pulled Naz into his arms, his lips taking hers in a tender kiss. He'd always dreamed of this moment and now it had finally arrived. He was going to be a father. They'd created a new life together, and he couldn't wait to meet his child.

He smiled against her lips. "Are you happy about it?"

"I don't know."

Damon pulled his head back and looked at her, seeing the fear on her face. Suddenly all the nausea made sense, and so did the sudden outbursts of emotion that weren't something he'd would normally see from her.

"Okay, talk to me." She tried to pull away and he wouldn't let her. "No, don't do that. Don't run, Naz."

She yanked away and he let her go this time, watching her pull the sheet around her nakedness as she began to pace. He wanted to go to her, to soothe all her fears but he knew she had to gather her thoughts without any pressure from him. He

knew already that he wanted this child, but he wouldn't ever force her to make a decision about her own body.

"I'm not running."

"Then talk to me. I'm assuming this child is mine."

She glared at him, and if he was a lesser man, he'd have shrivelled at the furious look she gave him, but it just made him want to roll her beneath him and fuck her until she was soft and pliant and screaming his name again.

"Of course, it's yours."

"Good."

"Good! How can you say this is good? I'll be a terrible mother. I have no motherly instincts at all. I'm a contract killer, for God's sake."

"And a very good one, and I'd trust you with my life or my child's life any day of the week."

"Stop it. Don't patronise me, Damon. I know what I'm capable of and I know what I'm not capable of. I don't have the same nurturing instincts as most women. I have shit for motherly instincts."

"You mean like the way you killed that guy by breaking his neck? So quickly it looked like he might have broken his neck falling down the stairs? No one could have done that the way you did it. Not unless you had years of practice. The fact that you did that without hesitation speaks volumes about you and how you'd handle a dangerous situation."

"How the hell do you know about that?"

He could see the shocked look on her face. "Nadia told Gideon how she was proud of you for taking out the trash, and any man who could hurt kids is worse than trash."

He watched her plop down on the bed and picked up his boxers with a sigh as he moved towards her.

"I know that it will be okay. I trust you. I trust that you'll be a wonderful mother. You care about people, Naz, and

you've already shown that this baby is important to you. I know it will be okay and I know you won't fail."

She looked up at him, her eyes huge on her face, the fear and anxiety plain in her features. "You aren't the first man to be horrified at finding out that they were going to be a father. But I need you to understand that I can't, and I won't, ever ask you to give up your job. I can't ask you to give up who you are because I can't do that either. I can't be with you and ask you to be someone you're not. I can't ask you for that sacrifice."

He shook his head. "You're not paying attention Naz. I'm not horrified and you're not asking me to do anything. It's not a sacrifice, it's my privilege. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you and our child safe. Whatever you ask of me, I'll do it."

She looked away and he hated the look of self-doubt on her normally confident face. "Listen, baby, I want you and I want this baby, but whatever you decided I'll support you."

"And if I don't want to keep the baby?"

He swallowed past the knot in his throat at the thought of her not wanting to continue the pregnancy. "Then I'll support you."

"Don't you want to be a father?"

"Of course I want to be a father, but I won't impose my will on you. I won't try to make you do anything you don't want to do. I respect you far too much for that. Only you know what is right for you, Nazareli."

She walked towards him, and he felt his throat tighten as he swallowed, trying to push down the emotions that were threatening to overwhelm him.

"I'm scared, Damon. I've never wanted children before. I'm carrying your child and we're not even together. It was just one night and I'm terrified. I don't know how to be a mother, I don't have any role models, and I've never even wanted to be a mother."

She fell into his arms and he wrapped her up against his chest.

“I’m scared.”

“I know you are, baby, but whatever happens we’re in this together. And you have Snow and Charlie, Aoife, and Nadia and Gideon.”

He lifted her chin with his knuckle and dropped a light easy kiss on her upturned lips and held her gaze. “You have me. I want to be with you. From the first moment I’ve wanted you. Me saying that has nothing to do with the baby. I want you with or without.”

Damon could see the hope and fear in her eyes and knew Nazareli wasn’t a woman to be pushed. She was too stubborn and strong-minded for that and it was part of her attraction.

“I don’t know how to be with someone. I’m almost thirty and I’ve never had a boyfriend. How sad is that?”

“Not sad, baby. You were off saving the world.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Stop doing that. Stop beating yourself up for everything, I won’t have it.”

Her eyebrow shot up and she gave him a look which would make most men shake in their boots but it just made his dick hard.

Gripping her hips, he rocked against her pelvis. “Fuck, you’re hot when you’re trying to be scary.”

Her face dissolved into laughter and his heart hitched at the beauty of her and the sound of her happiness, knowing he’d caused it. It would be so easy to fall in love with this woman if he hadn’t already, and he suspected he had.

“Not exactly what I was going for, but I suppose my lover being frightened of me isn’t the best.”

Bending his head, he nipped at the soft flesh between her neck and shoulder. “You can say ‘boyfriend’. You won’t come out in hives.”

Her light chuckle had him lifting her in his arms and turning them toward the bed. Sitting against the headboard, he

tugged at the sheet covering her perfect body. His gaze stalled on the perfect high breasts and the tight peaked nipples begging for his tongue.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“The things I want to do to you, Naz.”

“Why are you still talking?”

“No fucking clue.”

Then he bent his head and nipped at her sensitive nipple, loving the way her back arched as he smoothed his hand down her spine and over the sweet curve of her ass.

As he did, he felt her hands fumble with his boxers, so he raised his hips and helped her free his aching cock.

“Damon.”

“What, baby?”

“I don’t know if I should.” He pulled back to look at her and saw the anxiety and fear in her eyes. “I don’t want you to regret anything, ever.”

“I won’t, baby. I swear to you, I won’t.”

“I don’t want you to be with me out of some sense of obligation. I don’t want you to feel like you have to stay with me because we have a child together.”

“And I won’t, because I want to be with you. I didn’t know what I was before, but now, I know exactly what I am. You make me want to be more, Naz.”

“Okay.”

His lips twitched. “Okay?”

“I trust you to tell me the truth.”

“I’ll always tell you the truth, Naz, even if it’s not what you want to hear.”

“Good.”

“Now how about you be a good girl and ride my cock?”

She shook her head and smirked, scooting backwards over his thighs until her breath feathered over his aching cock and he groaned as her sweet lips wrapped around the head of his dick.

“Mmmm.”

He changed his mind. This was heaven.

He loved the way she sucked him, the way her mouth slid down his hard shaft. She was so good at it, and had no problem with taking him whole, using every skill she had to bring him to the edge.

Gripping her hair in his fist, he held it tight as he watched her take his cock to the back of her throat over and over until he was shaking with the need to come but he wanted to be inside her.

Scooping her up under her arms, he pulled her off his dick and positioned her over his cock.

Lifting her hips, he watched as she positioned him at her entrance and sank down his length with a throaty moan. Never in his life had he felt a connection like this. It wasn't just the tight squeeze of her pussy around his cock, the way her eyes closed in ecstasy, or even the way the breathy moans fell from her as if she couldn't contain them. It was everything, it was her.

The way she looked, her back arched, her hair spilling down her back, the way her breasts swayed as she moved, it was the most natural thing in the world. She was giving him her everything. It was the most amazing gift a man could ever receive.

“You are so fucking sexy.”

“If you can talk, I'm not doing my job right.”

He chuckled and gripped her hips, digging his fingers into her soft flesh. “Oh, yes, you are.” Reaching down he found the little nub and rolled it between his fingers. “God, you're perfect.”

“Damon.”

He took her hand and placed it on her clit, leaving his fingers intertwined. It was his turn to watch as she found her pleasure.

“Mmmm. Take your pleasure, baby.”

When he felt her muscles start to tighten around his dick, he knew she was close. So he dropped her hand and gripped her hips, moving her in a slow steady rhythm.

“Oh, God.”

“Come, baby. Come for me.”

She gasped and her eyes shot open, and her body arched as she shuddered. The feel of her pussy milking him to orgasm, his name on her lips, was like a drug sending him spinning, and he drove into her over and over until there was nothing but them.

He pulled her to rest in his arms, her head tucked under his chin, a smile on his face. Nothing could ruin this moment, not even the fact they now had to go back to the real world and a case that was becoming more complicated by the minute. He had the woman he loved and the child they created to think about.

CHAPTER 10

HAPPINESS WAS A WEIRD FEELING FOR HER TO RELAX AROUND. In the past when her guard came down, her life had invariably gone to shit, so to put her trust in that feeling was hard.

Lying in the bed, she knew she should get up and call Bás but she wanted to enjoy this peace for a few more minutes before the real world intruded and shattered the little bubble she was in. Hearing the shower turn off, she smiled at everything that had happened in the last twelve hours.

She'd never meant to blurt out she was pregnant like that and she sure as hell had never expected his reaction or declaration that he wanted her no matter what. It was heady and exciting but underneath she couldn't shake that fear that she'd lose him, or the baby that somehow felt more real than before.

Perhaps telling Damon and getting his promise of unconditional support had allowed her to hope a little and embrace it. Her hand skimmed over her flat belly and she wondered if she had what it took to be a good mother. Her own had been good, but she'd been shrouded in sadness, making her grow up quickly. Then she was gone, and her life had become one long line of disappointment and betrayal.

The bathroom door opened and Damon stepped out in a towel, his hair wet and body glistening. He wasn't built huge like some of the guys, but he was strong and cut, and the way he used his body for her pleasure had her clenching her thighs together.

“Woman, you need to stop looking at me like that or you’re gonna get fucked again.”

A coy smile teased her lips as she stretched, letting the sheet slip and expose her body to him.

A growl rumbled through him as he came to stand over her, his hands on either side of her shoulders. “You’re dangerous.”

“I know.”

He took her mouth, his tongue stroking over her lip as she opened for him, her arms coming around his neck as she pressed her breasts against his chest. He pulled back and looked at her and then kissed her firmly on her lips before he pulled away.

She was pouting as she watched him pull on jeans and a T-shirt. “Where are you going?”

“Time to get up and dressed.”

Resting up on her elbows, she watched him start throwing his stuff in a bag and frowned. “Why?”

“So we can leave.”

A slither of doubt tightened her belly. “Why would we leave?”

Damon frowned at her as if she had two heads. “You can’t seriously think you can continue this hunt in your condition?”

Throwing off the sheet, Lotus stood and grabbed her clothes, pulling them on angrily as she gave him her back and tried to get her temper under control.

Fully dressed, she had her armour back in place as she spun to him. “First, you can fuck right off with that bullshit attitude. I decide what I am and am not capable of, not you. Second, I knew I was pregnant when I set out and I know the risks and precautions I need to take.”

“Oh, really? So you think the risk of getting shot or ending up in a physical altercation is a reasonable risk?”

“May I remind you I know what I’m doing. I’m not some rookie with no experience or training, and I have a responsibility to fix this for those soldiers.”

“And what about your responsibility to our baby?”

She raised her hand to stop him from talking before she did something she might regret, but Damon continued.

“You’re being deliberately provocative with your safety. It’s as if you want to get hurt or maybe you’re trying to have the decision to keep the baby taken out of your hands.”

He was glaring at her now, his emotions high and she tried to keep calm, but he’d gone too far. “Fuck you, Damon. How dare you suggest that I’d deliberately try and cause a miscarriage. Do you honestly think I’d do something like that? That I’m enough of a monster that I’d take those risks with a baby?”

With his hands on his hips and breathing hard, he looked away, his shoulders falling. “I don’t know, Naz. I just can’t see why you’d put yourself in the line of fire knowing the risks.”

Pain split her chest at his words and all the hope she’d been feeling melted into a bitter puddle at her feet. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I am that selfish and self-absorbed. I’m the monster under the bed, so why would I possibly want to subject a child or another human being to that?”

“Naz, I didn’t mean—”

He moved to grab her arm as she pushed past him, but she snatched it away. “Don’t. We’re done here. It was a hormone-driven mistake to think we could possibly make this work. I’m not cut out to be a mother or a girlfriend. Let’s just leave it.”

Jogging down the stairs, she felt trapped, caged like an animal. His footsteps on the stairs behind her had her wanting to run, but she couldn’t.

“Naz, I didn’t mean that how it came out. I don’t think you’re a monster, I’m just being an over-protective asshole.”

She knew deep down he wasn’t a bad man, he was one of the best she’d ever met, but the fact he could say that to her or

even think it of her, proved it could never work. They were too different. He was good and kind, caring and so fucking smart, and she was a broken doll chasing ghosts from her past on a constant loop.

The fight seemed to drain out of her, leaving her feeling empty and exhausted down to her bones. “You’re not an asshole, Damon, but I don’t think this can work. You’re right. I take too many risks, I’m selfish and too rigid to change. Let’s just walk away and put this down to a mistake.”

“So that’s it? One wrong move and you decide we can’t work? That’s bullshit, Naz. You’re running because you’re scared.”

“Maybe I am, and I don’t know if I can ever stop.”

“I’m not giving up on us.”

“You don’t have a choice, Damon.”

“There’s always a choice, Naz. I was a prick for saying those things and I’m so sorry, but I won’t give up, because I see the woman you are and the one you want to be, and I’m head over heels for both.”

“Don’t say that.”

His hand cupped her face and her eyes fell closed to keep the tears that wanted so badly to fall from sliding down her face.

“I’m not going anywhere, Naz, no matter how hard you try and push me away.”

Her phone ringing felt like a reprieve, and she turned away, answering it gratefully. “Hey, boss man, what’s up?”

She knew her voice sounded off, but after a slight pause where she prayed Bás would let it go, he responded.

“Simon Dorsey just walked into the centre asking to speak to you. He has no recollection of the last few days.”

Relief tugged at her shoulders but also a tinge of melancholy because it meant this little trip was over and Damon would likely go home. He’d said he wasn’t going

anywhere but what man would wait around for someone like her?

“Thank God. Have we picked him up?”

“Yes, Snow and Titan are bringing him to us so we can question him before the police get to him.”

“Good, I’m on my way. Any sign of Jones?”

“No, nothing.”

“Well, I have information about that. She isn’t really Kelly Jones. Her name is Andrea Peston and she’s the daughter of one of the scientists working on the drug Rhea Winslow used on the soldiers.”

“Shit. How did you find that before Will and Watchdog?”

“Just luck. Something about her was niggling me and I fell down a rabbit hole because of something Damon said.”

She could feel his eyes on her but refused to look at him. It hurt too much.

“Well, thank God for that. I’ll get Watchdog on it and see what else we can find and you two head home. Good work, Lotus.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Lotus?”

“Yes?”

“We’re gonna have a long talk when you get back.”

Well, that sounded ominous and awful and like she’d rather pluck her eyeballs out with a spoon. “Sure.”

“I mean it. It’s well overdue.”

“Gotta go. See you soon.” She hung up knowing he’d give her shit for it and not caring. She didn’t have it in her right now to fight him too.

She was done.

“You gonna tell me what that was about?”

She turned to study Damon. He looked tired and she wished she could go back a few hours and redo it all, but it was too late now.

“Simon Dorsey just walked back into the facility and can’t remember a single thing from the past few days. Bás is picking him up now because he wants to talk to me.”

“That all?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Yes, but it felt like something more at the end there.”

“Just Bás and the long talk I have due when I get back.”

“You sure that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, we’ll talk later.”

“No, we won’t.”

“I don’t want to leave this like this, Naz. You’re not running away.”

“I’m not running. There’s nothing left to say or do. We had our fun, that’s it.”

Something dark flared in his eyes. “If you think that, then you truly are deluded.”

“If you don’t want to leave it like this, then fine, but I don’t want to talk about it now. I have a job to do, so let’s talk later.”

“No, you’ll just run away again.”

A growl of frustration left her throat at his annoying tenacity and his ability to read her so well. She knew she was running; she was self-aware enough to know she had issues, and denial was one of them. “I’m not running. I’m moving on and doing my job.”

“By running away?”

“No. This was temporary and now this part of the job has ended so I get to move on and be safe. That should make you happy.”

“Of course, your being safe makes me happy. I care about you, for fuck’s sake.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. I’m a bad bet.”

“I don’t care about the odds, Naz. I care about you.”

“Stop, just stop. I can’t think when you say these things to me. I need space.”

He must have sensed the panic in her voice or maybe he felt the fraying of her nerves because he listened.

“I understand. If that’s what you need to do then I’ll step back and give you time to sort things out, but I’m not leaving you to fight this alone and I’m not giving up.”

It was more than she expected, and she was grateful. “Thank you.”

She turned and grabbed her stuff, as he closed up the safe house and they headed for the car. The drive was silent, and she pretended to sleep as he drove, ignoring the way her heart ached or the way she just wanted his arms around her.

This was for the best.

CHAPTER II

AS THEY PULLED UP TO THE FACILITY, DAMON COULDN'T HELP but feel a sense of relief and dread wash over him. Relief that their mission was finally over and dread for the aftermath that was sure to come. Bás was waiting for them at the entrance to the mountain rescue facility that hid the true identity of what was below. He could see the questions in Bás' eyes but ignored them. He wasn't going to betray Naz by telling her boss and friend anything she wasn't ready to share.

“Finally, you're here. We have a lot to discuss.”

“We hit traffic on the motorway,” Damon interjected, wanting to step into any gap that might mean Naz was about to get shit from someone. This protective side was new to him, but he felt it so strong it was hard to control.

It was the reason he'd been such a dick earlier. He'd wanted to bundle her up and rush her home to safety. But in his awkward attempt to play the hero, he'd alienated her and spoken in anger and frustration, which was unacceptable. Seeing the way he'd hurt her, with his callous words and the way she'd shut down, left him feeling ashamed of himself. He'd meant what he'd said though, he wasn't giving up on her and he would prove to her that she could trust him to be there for her and still give her space. Which meant for now his role was back to being her trusty sidekick if she'd let him.

Naz couldn't seem to help but roll her eyes at his eagerness to defend her to Bás, and he offered her a lip twitch of a smile and saw a flicker of one in return that flooded him with a ridiculous sense of hope.

“Dorsey has no memory of the last few days.”

“Yeah, I heard. What’s the deal with that?”

Bás led them down a long hallway and into a small lift that was hidden by a panel in the wall. Damon had only been here a few times, but this didn’t feel like it was out of the normal for him. He could pivot in any given situation and being here felt right in a way his life hadn’t for the last year. Perhaps it had less to do with the place and more to do with the woman he was with.

“He’s being held in one of the interrogation rooms. He claims he doesn’t remember anything from the past few days, but I have a feeling he’s lying.”

“Why do you think that?”

Bás watched Lotus, and Damon felt like the man was trying to unpick her brain and see inside her thoughts. He knew her behaviour of late had worried the man, but it was up to Naz who she told what and when. Bás glanced at him and, if he’d been a lesser man, he would have flinched, but he’d faced down some of the worst criminals on the planet in his job. Fuck, he was related to some of them, and Bás might be a mean mother fucker but he was also a good man deep down and wanted the best for his team, and in the case of Nazareli, that was him. Bás gave a slight nod as if acknowledging the silent exchange and then moved on as the doors opened, drawing them into the world beneath the mountain.

“A feeling.”

“Have you drawn his blood?”

“Yes, it’s on the way to the lab now so we can figure out what he’s taken.”

The three of them carried on walking and stopped outside a set of doors he’d never been through that had even higher security.

Damon leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. “What do you want us to do?”

Lotus looked at Damon. “Us?”

“I’m coming in with you.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, he should. It would be good to get a second perspective.”

Naz cocked her hip and folded her arms over her chest as if readying for a fight. “And he can give that through the video feed.”

“Dorsey is gonna need a good lawyer if we can’t make this go away, so it would be good to have Damon inside, if he’s willing.”

“I am.”

Nazareli rolled her eyes, and he barely resisted the urge to kiss her until she smiled or punched him.

She dismissed him and turned to Bás. “What do you need?”

Bás handed Naz a file. “I want you to question him. Find out what he knows about Jones and how he might have ended up doing what he did, or if he’s lying. You know him better than anyone so you decide how you want to approach this.”

“Okay, let’s do this.”

Damon stepped forward and followed Naz inside. The room was small, with two chairs and a table between them. Simon was already seated in one of the chairs, his head bowed low. He looked up as they entered, his eyes dark and deep. Damon had expected him to be another hardened criminal but instead, he found a broken man who seemed genuinely relieved to see them.

“Lotus, thank God.”

Naz sat down opposite him, not making any sudden movements or giving away her emotions too easily. She studied him for a few moments before beginning the questioning in a gentle tone that surprised Damon with her compassion and understanding.

“Simon, what can you tell us about the last few days? We just need to know what happened, if you can remember anything.”

Simon shook his head sadly as he gripped his hair and pulled, his hands shaking with emotion. “Nothing, it’s like a big black hole in my brain.”

Naz pushed some water towards Simon, who took it and drank deeply, his hand shaking so badly that water sloshed over the table.

“Tell me the last thing you can remember.”

“I remember the kids coming to see me, and me and Elaine talking about Hannah’s end-of-year school performance and if I’d be able to attend.”

“Okay, good. What else?”

Damon could literally see the man relaxing and knew it would be much easier to get information from him in this state than the one they’d walked in on.

“Kelly was there but she wasn’t in a good mood.”

“Why?”

“She doesn’t like it when Elaine comes.”

“What did Kelly say?”

Simon blinked and frowned as if he was trying to fight for a memory. “I can’t remember. I just have these vague images in my mind that make no sense to me. It’s as if they were from someone else’s life altogether.”

“How did you and Kelly meet?”

Simon cocked his head. “In a bar, I think. It was when the doc cleared me. A few of us went out and had some drinks to celebrate. It felt like we were finally getting our lives back, taking control again.”

“Did she approach you or did you approach her?”

“She approached me.”

“Do you know where Kelly is now?”

Damon watched as Simon shook his head, defeat evident in every movement. This man had killed in a brutal and coldly efficient manner without any emotion, but it was like he was now watching two different people.

“No. I just woke up this morning in my bed and there were guns pointed at me.”

“From the facility staff?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, and what made you ask for me?”

“I don’t know. You make me feel safe when everything else is confusing.”

Damon glanced at Lotus, who reached out and gripped Simon’s hand with compassion.

“We’re gonna figure this out, Simon.”

“What did I do, Lotus? Did I really kill those people?”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Tears filled the big man’s eyes before he dropped his head into his hands and sobbed. “You should just put me down. I’m a monster.”

“No, you’re not. A horrific thing happened and we’re going to figure this out.”

Simon looked up, his watery bloodshot eyes only seeing Lotus as his beacon in the dark and Damon felt immense pride for what this amazing woman had achieved. He could see the toll it was taking on her, how her own guilt was trying to latch on and drag her down, but he wouldn’t let that happen.

“How? I killed those innocent people. I snapped.”

“No, you didn’t. I think you’ve been drugged again.”

“But how? It was all destroyed. You promised.”

“And I meant it. But we think it’s Kelly. She isn’t who you think she is.”

“What?”

“Her real name is Andrea Peston.”

Damon saw the colour drain from Simon’s face.

“Like Dr Peston?”

“His daughter.”

“Oh my God, how and why would she do this to me?”

“I don’t know but we’re going to find out.”

“Does it even matter? I’m still facing life in jail. I might as well be dead.”

“I’ll help you.”

Simon looked and seemed to notice him for the first time.
“And who are you?”

“My name is Damon and I’m a solicitor.”

He could feel Naz watching him but kept his gaze on Simon. He wasn’t doing this to win points with her. He wanted to help this man because he believed him.

“Why would you help me?”

“Because I believe you and I think an awful thing has been done to you.”

Gratitude passed behind the man’s eyes and he nodded.

“We’ll need you to stay here for a while, but we’ll get you some food sorted out and a book and bed.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Nazareli stood and moved past Simon, squeezing his shoulder as she did. “We’ll fix this.”

“I’m not sure I’m worth fixing. I have so much blood on my hands, redemption is impossible.”

“I don’t believe that. You did wrong, Simon, but you weren’t in control of it. Nobody is past salvation.”

Damon wondered how she could see that about Simon and not herself. She was so hard on herself, so determined to push people away because she deemed herself toxic, but he knew it was fear that drove her. She loved so hard and had suffered so

much loss in her life that she didn't trust anything good to last. He would prove to her that it could, and they would, because with every second he spent with her, he fell even more in love with her.

The door closed behind them and he watched her visibly sag from the emotion of the conversation. He couldn't not hold her and let his natural reaction to soothe her win out. He pulled her to him and she went, her arms coming around his waist as he cradled her close, kissing her head.

"You okay? That was rough."

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I just hate that this is happening to him."

"Yeah, it's shit, but we'll figure it out and help him."

Naz looked up at him through her long dark lashes. "Thank you for offering to help him."

"He deserves proper representation at the very least, and I can give him that."

"What they need is a fresh start, compensation, and an apology from the government and the army for turning their backs on them."

"Why didn't they get one?"

"How can we make them?"

"Hmm, I might have an idea. Leave it with me."

"You don't have to do this, Damon."

"I know but I've been feeling a little lost lately and this feels right. I want to help these men."

"Well, I'm grateful. Thank you."

She pulled away and he let her go. "You look beat."

A laugh exploded from her and he smiled in return.

"Did you just tell me I look rough?"

"Well, not in so many words, but..." He felt himself smiling as he teased her and she relaxed.

“Ass. I need food.”

“How about I make you something in your apartment?”

He saw her hesitate.

“I won’t mention us or the other thing unless you do. I just want to feed you and look after you.”

“Fine, but I want loaded fries dripping in grease.”

“Your wish is my command.”

He meant every word but he had to go slow. His stupid comments earlier had forced them back ten steps and now it was time for him to make amends.

CHAPTER 12

SHE STEPPED INTO THE WARMTH OF HER APARTMENT AND FELT a sense of belonging like she always did here, but then, maybe it was because this was just hers and not tainted by the actions that seemed to dog her every step.

Damon headed through to her small kitchen and Lotus noted how relaxed he looked in her space, or maybe it was just that she felt safe having him here. It was a silly thought to have, considering she was surrounded by the most dangerous operators on the planet. Fuck, she was one of them and yet this was different.

Her gaze wandered lazily over Damon. He was so mesmerizingly handsome that he could've been a model with those sculpted facial features and bright blue eyes. He strode to the kitchen and she watched him move. Her breath caught as she heard a few gulps and realized he'd pulled one of the beers out of the fridge for himself. Usually, she hated people in her space but she liked him being there. Tiredness and hormones were clearly doing a number on her today.

"I'm gonna grab a quick shower and change."

He looked up from where he was peeling potatoes, he'd found God knew where, and grinned at her and she had to fight the bolt of lust that blew through her. The man was a menace to her equilibrium.

Moving quickly to her bedroom, she shed her clothes and jumped in the shower, letting the hot water wash away all the tension in her body. As she soaped her shoulders, she noticed

the evidence of their lovemaking in the beard burn on her chest and shivered, her clit throbbing with the need to feel him inside her again.

Dismissing her wildly unbalanced emotions, she reached up to grab her shampoo and a wave of nausea hit her like a train from nowhere. Throwing open the shower door, she fell to her knees and heaved over the toilet bowl, sweat dotting her brow.

“Hey, hey.”

Lotus felt gentle fingers scoop her hair away from her neck as she heaved, her empty stomach clenching. Having Damon here seeing this was mortifying.

“I’m fine.”

“I know but let me help you. Please?”

She had no energy to fight him, so she nodded and took the warm washcloth he handed her, smoothing it over her face.

She sat naked on her knees, her modesty and dignity gone. If this feeling was a colour, it would be puce green.

“Better.”

Lotus nodded slowly, testing her body, and finding she could move without wanting to puke. “That came out of nowhere.”

“Here, let me help you up.”

She took the arm he offered and stopped, moving to the sink to brush her teeth.

“Do you want me to stop cooking? Was it the smell?”

Her belly gurgled and suddenly she felt ravenous. “What are you making?”

“Loaded fries, just like you asked for. I can make whatever else you want too if you’d like something different,” he said with a half-smile.

“No, you can cook. I’ll be out soon.”

“Okay, shout if you need anything.”

“I will.”

She absolutely would not call him if she began puking her guts up again.

After finishing her shower, Lotus got dressed in joggers and a loose T-shirt, rubbing her hand over her belly. “That wasn’t very nice was it, little one?”

She felt a little silly talking to a person she couldn’t see, but somewhere between yesterday and today, even as she argued with Damon about how she’d make a terrible mother, she’d decided that she couldn’t terminate this pregnancy. This baby was part of her and part of Damon and, against so many odds, was here. She wasn’t one to believe in fate but if she did then maybe this baby was fate telling her it would be okay.

Brushing her teeth, she pulled her hair into a ponytail and headed out into the kitchen. The scent of tangy zesty melted cheese and a rich béchamel sauce, jalapenos, and fresh hot fries hit her nose and her belly grumbled.

“Can I do anything?” she asked him.

“Can you grab some cutlery and glasses?”

“Sure.”

Lotus moved around her small kitchen as Damon plated up. He was standing on the other side of the counter with the food ready, looking way too good in her kitchen.

“What do you want to drink?”

“I can get it.” She felt guilty letting him wait on her after her outburst earlier. He wasn’t her boyfriend, was he? What was going on with them now, was this a peaceful truce? Was he giving her the space he promised and why, all of a sudden, did she feel like the one who needed to clarify their relationship?

“Lemonade, please. It’s in the fridge.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, please. It will help keep the nausea at bay.”

“Okay, there you go.”

She took an enormous gulp of the lemonade and felt the cold liquid slide down her throat. It wasn't very nice with the toothpaste but its effect on her body was almost instantaneous. She could feel her stomach contracting and thought it was a good thing. Taking a few more swigs, she watched as Damon dug into the fries, and picked up her fork.

Taking a tentative bite, the spiciness of the jalapenos on top combined with the cheesy sour cream flooded her senses with a burst of flavour.

She wanted more and dug in. "These are so good."

"You're not eating them with a fork, right?"

"What?"

"You're meant to eat them like a pile of potato chips and then lick your fingers. It's the only way to eat loaded fries."

She took a big handful and pushed them into her mouth, allowing the delicious taste to spread over her tongue. Some of the hot cheese escaped and burnt her fingers so she sucked them.

Damon's eyes darkened and he swallowed hard. "Is this the way you like to eat fries, then?"

"Not usually, but I want to eat as much as I can. They're really good."

"Thank you."

Lotus continued to eat as if it was her last meal, and stopped when she saw Damon watching her with so much heat in his gaze it was a miracle her apartment wasn't on fire.

She cleared her throat and glanced away, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"I love how you don't hold back in anything you do."

She huffed out a laugh. "So you like the way I just wolfed that food like it was my last meal?"

"I love how passionate you are about everything, including food. It's refreshing to be around someone real."

“I guess the women you date are prim and proper and eat lettuce and wake up looking like a catwalk model.”

“I guess, but I haven’t dated in a year. I’ve tried but a certain deadly sex kitten, had me dangling on a hook.”

Lotus couldn’t help the smile. “I did not have you on a hook.”

“Dangling, waiting for just one glimpse of her beauty, one crumb of attention.”

Lotus threw a fry at him. “Behave.”

He grinned and then sobered as his eyes moved over her body like a silent caress.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed but you’re showing.”

He hadn’t noticed when they had sex, but she guessed it wasn’t noticeable unless you were looking. “Just a little.”

“What will you tell people if they ask?”

“They won’t.”

Damon nodded. “Listen, Naz. I really am sorry for how I behaved earlier.”

“I know and I over-reacted. I know you didn’t mean anything nasty. I guess I’m just a little sensitive and a lot jumpy. I’m so used to making my own choices about my life that letting someone else have a say or an opinion isn’t natural for me.”

“I know and I get that. You’re your own person. It’s your body and I need to respect that.”

“I guess we need to figure out how to navigate things if you still want that?”

Her belly was awash with nerves and she was seriously regretting those fries right now. Damon remained silent and stood suddenly. Her heart fell as she waited for him to walk away, and tell her she was too much, too hard work.

A shriek left her mouth when he lifted her into his arms. “What the fuck?”

He carried her bride-style to the couch and dropped down, settling her on his lap.

“I thought we should get comfortable for this conversation.”

“And having a whale on your lap is comfortable?”

“Having a sexy, beautiful, amazing, annoying woman on my lap is.”

“You’re weird.”

“I guess I am a little weird.”

Her fingers smoothed over his chest as she tried to get her thoughts in some semblance of order.

“I’m sorry for how I’ve handled everything lately with us and the baby.”

“You’ve been through this before, Naz?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then you’re doing the best you can. Don’t beat yourself up for that.”

“When did you get so wise?”

“About a year ago when my life blew up.”

“I’m sorry about Carter. I know I hated him, but he was your brother, and I don’t think I ever told you how sorry I am that things turned out the way they did.”

A sad look passed over his handsome features and he shrugged. “Can’t look back, only forward.”

“And how does forward look for us?”

“I want to be with you. That hasn’t changed because we had a fight.”

“And the baby?”

Damon speared his fingers through his hair, and she noticed he looked tired. “I want the baby, but I want you to be sure and want it too. I’d never presume or force you to have a child. It wouldn’t be fair to you or them.”

“So if the baby wasn’t here, you’d still want me?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I’m a mess. I’m stubborn and annoying. I’m a prickly bitch with a sarcastic sense of humour who usually offends people.”

“Yes, you are but I’m in love with you anyway.”

Lotus felt her heart stutter like it was going to stop, the blood pounding in her ears. “Don’t say that.” Her voice was a little more than a husk as she spoke.

“Why? It’s the truth. I love you, Naz, and I know you’re not there yet and I know it scares you because of what you’ve been through, and I don’t say it to put pressure on you. I just want you to know that I’m in this.”

He pinched her chin and brought her lips close before taking her mouth in a drugging kiss that was imbued with every emotion he’d just said.

“I’m not going anywhere, Naz.”

“You can’t make that promise.”

Damon cocked his head. “No, I guess I can’t control fate, but I can control how I am and what I do, and I can promise you that I won’t walk away from you. You’re stuck with me if you want me.”

A part of her wanted to get up and run, to hide from the big emotions threatening to crush her. But for the first time in a long time, she didn’t run. “I want you, I want us. But unlike you, I can’t guarantee I won’t get cold feet and run.”

Damon kissed her nose and hugged her tight.

“Don’t worry, baby, I have my running shoes. I’ll just chase you down and bring you home.”

Home!

It was a funny concept, for some, it was a place, and, for others, it was a person.

For her, it was in the arms of a man who was the exact opposite of her in an apartment under a mountain.

CHAPTER 13

IT WAS TWO DAYS SINCE THEY'D RETURNED TO THE SHADOW Elite compound and he and Naz had decided to give things a go. She was still a little spikey and not on board with public displays of affection from him and he respected that. This was a marathon, not a sprint, and he knew pushing her would have the exact opposite effect from what he wanted.

Naz had her walls so high it would take a while for her to pull them down, but he was determined to prove to her that he wasn't going anywhere, which led him to why he'd asked her to meet him at Gideon's place.

They were taking it slow, with him staying with his brother and sister-in-law every night and giving her time to herself. He didn't like it. If it was up to him, he'd be with her night and day, but he wanted to play the long game.

The same could be said about Simon Dorsey. Kelly Jones, or Andrea Peston as they now knew her, was missing. Simon's blood results had confirmed what they'd thought though, which was that he had traces of the drug in his blood again. It was one of those times when he dearly wished he'd been wrong. Watching the man break down and cry when he realised he'd once again been violated and controlled, along with what he'd done, had been one of the worst things he'd ever witnessed.

He'd been seconds away from blubbing like a baby, but Naz had been a fucking goddess and handled it with the compassion and strength that he'd come to expect of her. Every day he was with her, he saw more and more of the

woman beneath the snark. Life had dealt her nothing but shit hand after shit hand, and still she rose.

He watched her walk up the gravel drive to meet him, her long dark hair blowing in her face, her body encased in skin-tight blue jeans with rips in the knee and a plain black T-shirt. She wasn't showy or loud in her appearance, she was just effortlessly beautiful, stealing his breath from his lungs every single time he looked at her.

He let his eyes linger on her belly and thought about the child he knew grew there, protected by a woman who'd die to defend those she loved, and not just in the way most people would say the words. He knew that, given a chance, she'd go back and save Rykov by throwing herself in the line of fire, and he felt like a complete asshole for thanking God that she couldn't or hadn't.

The only current fly in the ointment, personally at least, was the fact she hadn't come out and told him if she'd decided to keep the baby. They'd agreed to move forward, and he suspected she was leaning that way, but the uncertainty still niggled. After Carter's criminal acts and then his death, he craved permanence and stability. It was one of the reasons he wanted to be close to Gideon.

Naz stopped, her hands in her pockets just in front of him, and he curled a hand around the back of her neck and lifted her head for his kiss. The scent of lemon and vanilla he always associated with her wafted all around him as her lips parted, and her tongue flicked out across his lip. His cock thickened and he growled, hauling her closer and filling his hands full of her delectable arse.

"Hmm, you taste good."

"So do you. I missed you."

It was a huge admission for her and one he found pulled his mouth into a smile he couldn't contain. "I missed you too."

Her blush was so out of character, but he loved that he could make it happen and that she was being open with him when he knew how hard that was for her.

“Why am I here?”

He held her gaze and his lips curled into a smile. “I want to go house hunting,” he said, gesturing to the horizon with a wave of his arm. “I want to be near my brother and you.”

Nazareli seemed startled by the sudden request but nodded in agreement, regaining her composure quickly. “Okay.”

He’d been expecting more of a fight from her so was pleasantly surprised to see her relent without any pressure. He was buying this house for himself, a decision he’d made long before he knew she was pregnant, but he wanted her to like the house because his goal was for them to live there together as a family one day. Whether that was just the two of them or included the child she carried.

“Just like that?”

“Yes. You want to be close to Gideon and Nadia, that makes sense.”

“And you.” He slung his arms around her shoulders and kissed her head, as she laid her hand over his abdomen and cuddled into him, and he felt her touch in his cock. He didn’t think there’d ever be a time when he didn’t want her.

“So I take you have a list of viewings booked?”

“I do.”

“Come on then, hotshot. Show me these mansions,” she said as she climbed into the passenger seat of his car.

“What makes you think they’re mansions?” Sitting in the driver’s seat, he started the car and headed out.

Her eyebrow rose and she gave him a *come on* look. “Are you telling me they’re small two-bed farmhouses?”

He turned off down the dirt track they were calling a road and prayed they didn’t meet another vehicle. “Well, no, they’re six-bed farmhouses and a couple of barn conversions.”

“Oh, I love a barn conversion. I love that upside down feel and the open plan living.”

He took her hand and kissed her fingertips. “Then we’ll see those two last.”

The first two farmhouses were nice. One needed a lot of work done to it, but had potential, and the other had been completely renovated and was stunning with bi-fold doors across the back of the kitchen that led out onto a view of nothing but open fields.

“Well?”

“I liked the first because it had good bones, but it would be a lot of work. The second was stunning and those views just felt so tranquil, but neither felt right. But it’s not my house. How did you feel?”

“The same. I liked them both well enough, but I didn’t walk in and instantly get that feeling of home or that this was where I could see myself.”

“Yeah, I get that, and this is very different from your place in London.”

“I wouldn’t say my place in London feels like home either. I like it well enough, but I spend so much time at work, I just bought it because it was a good investment.”

“That’s the most billionaire thing you’ve ever said.”

Damon grinned as he pulled the car up to the first barn conversion. “What does that even mean?”

Naz wrinkled her nose and it was cute as fuck. “Only somebody with mountains of money buys a million-pound house in London he doesn’t really like and justifies it because it’s a good investment.”

“I think buying a house as an investment in London is the only reason.”

“You don’t like living in London?” she asked as they stepped out of the car.

“I don’t hate it, but I love the quieter pace in the country.”

Naz lifted her head to the sun and closed her eyes, and he could help but pull her into his arms. “Me too. It’s a good

place to raise kids.”

Damon felt his heart pounding fast in his chest but didn't want to assume or seem too eager with his response. “I agree.”

She lifted on tiptoes and kissed him quickly before ducking away, forcing him to follow her.

They walked around the property, hand in hand, and he could tell from her reaction this wasn't the one either. “One more to go.”

“Hey, don't sound so despondent.”

“I'm not. I just know properties like this aren't exactly plentiful around here.”

“You could always buy land and build.”

He hadn't considered that, but she was right. In this part of the country, land was abundant and he was lucky money wasn't an issue for him.

“What kind of house did you grow up in?”

Naz pursed her lips and he hoped he hadn't stood on a landmine. Her parents and childhood were a touchy subject, but he also knew talking was what she needed. She might not agree though, so he had to tread carefully. “Did I just overstep?”

Naz shook her head. “No, it's fine. I don't talk about it much because what's the point. I can't go back and change things.”

“Do you ever see your father?”

Again, she shook her head. “No, part of coming into Shadow was letting my past go. He thinks I died and, honestly, he didn't even go to the funeral I supposedly had. Apparently, a board meeting was too important to miss for his only daughter.”

“Wow, what a dick. Sounds like you're better off without him.”

“I am, but it still stings sometimes. No child wants to feel like they aren't wanted or loved.”

He took her hand and drew her close as they stood at the entrance to the last property. “I hate that you felt that way.”

“It’s fine. I’m mostly over it.”

“His loss. You’re an amazing woman.”

Her tinkling laugh filled his ears and a light jolt hit his chest. “I love you, Naz. I know you aren’t there, but I need you to know it. This house, I want it to be ours one day when, and if, you’re ever ready.”

Her head cocked to the side as if she was mulling over what he’d said. “Let’s go take a look and see what we’re working with.”

Her tone was playful as they met the agent and got the spiel about the property, but the moment they stepped inside, he knew it was the one for him. When he looked at Naz, he could see she felt the same way.

The second floor was the living space and was wide open with a large living area, with high vaulted ceilings and exposed beams. A wood burner sat at one end with huge arched windows looking out onto fields on both sides. The kitchen had a huge island facing the living area, with a utility room and bathroom behind it, hidden by a wall.

Downstairs, there were four double bedrooms, all with their own bathrooms. The property came with two outbuildings that had planning permission for conversion and four acres of land. It was home. He could imagine working in one of those buildings and then coming in and cooking dinner for Naz. Or reading in front of the fire, her feet on his lap and laughing with her and their family and friends as they entertained.

“What do you think?”

Damon watched her turn in a circle, her arms out wide.

“I think it would be an awesome home to raise a child.”

He blinked, not wanting to get his hopes up, but he could feel his heart racing. “Are you saying...”

“I’m saying I want to keep the baby. I’m still not convinced I’ll be any good at it, but I want to try, and I want us to do it together.”

Damon swept her into his arms and her laugh tickled his neck.

“Calm down, you might regret it yet. I’m a pain in the ass at the best of times, but pregnant and bloated, I’m likely to be a total bitch.”

“I can handle you.”

“Oh, you think so? And how do you plan on doing that?”

His teeth nipped her neck. “I’ll just fill that pretty pussy with my cock or tongue every time you get bitchy and make you come.”

“Yeah, that’ll do it.”

Her smile faltered. “Will you come with me to the scan?”

Damon could sense how uneasy she was and pulled her closer to him. His heart filled with tenderness for this complex woman as he caressed her hand in his. He leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her palm before locking his fingers with hers. “I want to be wherever you are.”

He saw the blush stain her cheeks and smiled.

“I’ll be right by your side when we find out about our baby.”

CHAPTER 14

LOTUS SMILED NERVOUSLY AND TOOK A DEEP BREATH. HER heart was racing with anticipation as she thought of the news she had to share with her closest friends. She could barely believe it herself, but she was going to be a mum. With her newfound courage, she decided that tonight would be the night that she told them all.

Duchess opened the door with a smile and ushered her inside.

“Throw your coat in the boot room, and then come on through. Aoife and Peyton are here already.”

Lotus hung her jacket up in the immaculate boot room and followed the sound of laughter.

“Lotus, you’re here.”

She let herself be pulled into a hug with Aoife and felt her protruding belly pressing against her own slightly rounded one. “Yep, I’m here.”

“I have wine, beer, cider, cola, or some fancy mango cordial Gideon brought because apparently, we’re too posh for orange squash.”

“Cordial sounds good.”

“Uh, why cordial when you can have wine? I don’t get it.” Aoife rubbed her belly and made a face. “I love this kid, but I can’t wait until I can down a glass of Malbec and eat proper sushi again.”

The thought made Lotus feel slightly nauseous, but she just smiled and tried not to look too guilty. She had no intention of saying all this twice, so she was going to wait to tell them when everyone was there.

Duchess flitted around the kitchen pouring them drinks so when the doorbell rang, she jumped up to answer it for her. “I’ve got it.”

Val, Snow, and Charlie were on the threshold when she opened the door and hugs and kisses were exchanged like they hadn’t seen each other all day at work as they tried to get a read on Andrea Peston. But tonight was fun, a girls’ night that had been started by Aoife and was now a monthly date.

Lotus had never really had girlfriends, or many friends at all, even at school. She’d been too wary of people even then. A childhood of watching her parents lie and cheat and then smile as if all was perfect in their home had led to her becoming very untrusting, and that had only worsened when everything about her mother’s death had come to light.

“What are you cooking, Duchess?” Her senses were more heightened now that she was pregnant and certain things she’d loved sent her running for the bathroom, and other things she couldn’t stand before, she quite liked now.

“Garlic and lemon chicken with wild rice and green beans, then salted caramel profiteroles with chocolate dipping sauce.”

“You never cooked that.”

“Hey!” Duchess threw a tea towel at Val but laughed as she did.

“She isn’t wrong, Duchess. Cooking isn’t your favourite thing to do.”

“Fine, it was Damon. I was going to get takeout but he nagged me about all the salt and sugar in take-out being unhealthy so I told him if he was that worried, he could cook, and he did.”

“I’m telling you, if I wasn’t head over heels for Bás, I’d totally hit on Damon.”

A sharp feeling of jealousy and possessiveness hit Lotus in the belly at her friend's words, which she knew was a joke. Val adored Bás, everyone had seen them dancing around each other for years and she loved them together. But it didn't stop her from feeling like she wanted to claim him and hiss and spit at any woman who dared to think he could be taken from her.

"I think Lotus might just rip your face off and use it as a dishcloth if you do," Peyton said, Lotus laughing at the violent visual.

"Funny."

"She didn't deny it," Aoife said, bumping Charlie's elbow.

Val looked at her. "Are you finally admitting you have feelings for him, then?"

All eyes in the room were aimed at her and she swallowed feeling slightly nervous. "Fine. Yes, I like him."

"And?"

Lotus glared at Duchess. "And what?"

"Are you guys together?"

"Yes, we're together."

A whoop went up and suddenly she was surrounded by hugs and warmth, and it felt good to bask in the love she was receiving from her friends. She'd never been one to show her emotions outwardly, but she loved hard and would die for these women.

"I'm so happy for you guys. Damon has been like a dog with two dicks since he put in the offer on the barn, and now I know why."

"Actually, it might be something else, but can we eat first?"

"Oh my God, yes. I'm starving. I could literally eat the arm off a cow."

Charlie spluttered on her wine at Aoife's comment. "Cows don't have arms."

Aoife waved her away. “You know what I meant.”

“What does it say about me that I actually did?”

“That you’re as crackpot as the rest of us?”

Snow shook her head like she was dealing with a group of children. “How did my life go so wrong.”

“Oh, yeah, your life is horrible. You have a sexy judge in your bed every night, a cute niece who’s like walking sunshine, and baby Florence who’s going to take over the world with her smile and sass.”

Snow grinned. “Yeah, I do have a pretty great life.”

“And you get to shoot people for a living.”

“True.”

“Okay, grab a plate. I’m not your servant.”

Lotus grabbed a heaped plate and took it to the table, a smile on her face knowing Damon had cooked it because he didn’t want her eating processed junk.

“What’s the grin for?”

Lotus glanced at Charlie, who was watching her as if she knew all her secrets and, to be fair, she probably did. Keeping any kind of secret when your friends were spies and secret agents was impossible. It was why she’d agreed to tell the girls tonight when Damon was telling his brother. “No reason.”

“Uh-huh.”

Charlie let it go as they ate and caught up on life things, like Fleur’s piano exam, Aoife’s cravings, Duchess’s plans for a herb garden, and Peyton’s wedding preparations. It was fun and just what she needed, and for the first time, she didn’t feel like an outsider.

“Shall we do dessert in the living room? I need to undo these jeans.” Charlie popped her top button and sighed. “Seriously, that man of yours can cook.”

An untamed feeling of happiness filled her chest at the words, as well as pride. Damon was a man any woman would

be proud to call her own, but no other woman did. He'd made it very clear he wanted only her and yet, in the background, there was still the slight niggle that it wouldn't last, that life would throw another curve ball and he'd be snatched away from her too.

“Yeah, he can.”

Duchess put her arm around Lotus' shoulders affectionately as they walked into the living room.

As soon as everyone was settled on the couch or chairs, Lotus took a deep breath and addressed her friends nervously. “I have something important to tell you all,” Lotus began. “I wanted you guys to know before anyone else...” She paused and looked around the room at her people, each one of these women had stepped up for her at one time or another and she loved them fiercely. “I'm pregnant.”

“Called it!” Aoife held up her hand for Peyton to slap.

“Oh my God, I'm going to be an aunty!” Duchess declared as she launched herself at Lotus and pulled her into a tight hug.

“This is good news, right?”

Lotus pulled away to answer Charlie's question. “It was shocking, terrifying news, and I won't lie and tell you I haven't had a lot of wobbles or doubts, but I've decided I want this baby. I never, ever imagined myself having a child. It was just never on my radar and, honestly, I'm not sure how good I'll be at it, but I know I want to try, and Damon will be one hell of a dad.”

Val gripped her hand and squeezed. “Oh, sweetheart, you're going to be the best mum.”

Tears pricked Lotus' eyes. “Thank you.”

“So how far along are you?”

“Eleven weeks. It happened the night of your engagement,” she said to Peyton.

“Oh, this is so exciting. Our babies can grow up together and they'll have Fleur and Florence and little Iris too.”

“Yeah, we need some boys in this mix so we can play matchmaker when they grow up.” Charlie laughed. “Oh my God, Noah would lose his mind. He already thinks Iris should be a nun and join a convent when she hits puberty.”

Lotus sat back and enjoyed the banter and the sense of family she always got from being around these women.

“So what about work? Will you continue with the Dorsey case?”

“Absolutely. This is who I am, and a baby won’t change that.”

Snow laughed like she was some movie villain. “Oh, girl, you have no clue just how much your life is about to change.”

“Maybe, and that’s scary. I’m good at what I do, and I don’t know anything else.”

“Listen, you’ll figure it out. Just don’t be rigid. Give and take is where it’s at.”

“I don’t want to lose myself like my mother did.”

She never spoke of her mother, and it seemed to catch her friends off guard, but they recovered quickly.

“Lotus, we all know the story from the files, but you never speak about it.”

“Not much to say. My mother had an affair with Marcus Preedy and he killed her. My dad loved his work and his mistresses more than us. I’m not the only person to go through something awful.”

“No, but you were never given any support. You were manipulated by others into a job that is violent and extremely stressful at a very formative age.”

Peyton’s job as a therapist meant that Lotus knew she was coming from a place of knowledge, and it hit harder. “I wanted to do it. I wanted to avenge my mother.” She also wanted to defend John Smith but a part of her was already doubting if he’d wanted the best for her. When she considered her child and someone treating her teenager that way, it made her blind with fury.

“Of course, you did, but it doesn’t mean it was good for you to do it. You were hurting and grieving and, instead of loving you and nurturing you, they put a gun in the hands of a child and sent that anger into the world to do harm.”

Tears pricked her eyes and her lip wobbled, so she bit down on it to stop the tremor, but a sob escaped her throat. “I did good, too.”

Duchess wrapped her arm around her as Snow appeared on the other side and leaned into them both.

“Oh, honey, of course you did. You stopped thousands of deaths and saved hundreds of soldiers from an awful life. You did so much good, but you sacrificed so much of yourself to do it and I don’t think you realise how much.”

Tears were pouring from her eyes now as the magnitude of it all hit her like a tsunami. “I miss Rykov.”

“I know, honey.”

Charlie thrust a tissue at her, and she wiped her eyes and tried to stem the tide of tears. “He was my friend, and he was the first person to see me for the broken girl I was inside, and he helped piece me together.”

“He was a good man and a good friend, but you pieced yourself together.”

“He sacrificed himself for me.”

“That may be true, but it was because he loved you. You were like the sister he lost, and I have no doubt that gave him a lot of comfort.”

“He was like a brother to me.”

“Lotus, you’ve suffered so much loss, it’s a wonder you can get up most days. But you not only get up, you kick ass and make a difference and you enrich the lives of those around you. Warren adores you.”

“So does Bram.”

“Noah too. This team is only as good as it is because each person plays a vital role in it. You’re loved, Lotus.”

Lotus gave Duchess a watery smile. “I love you guys.”

“We love you, too. Now enough with the tears. Tell us about the sex with Damon. Is it as hot as I expect it to be?”

Lotus laughed at Charlie, who was very similar in personality to her. “Hotter.”

“No, I don’t want to hear this about my brother-in-law. I’m gonna get the profiteroles.”

Lotus spent the rest of the evening laughing with her friends but also processing what they had said.

As she left, Peyton pulled her aside and handed her a card. “This is a colleague of mine, Henry Sharp. He’s a brilliant therapist and I think he could help you process everything.”

“You think I need it?”

“I do. Not because you aren’t brilliant and smart and clever but because you’re terrified to thrive. I want to see you thrive and take life by the balls without living in fear of losing it all.”

As she headed back to her apartment, those words went over and over in her head. She wanted to thrive and live without fear, and she wanted to do that with Damon, but was that an impossible desire? Did people like her get a happy ever after? She wasn’t sure but she wanted to try.

CHAPTER 15

THE SHADOW TEAM HAD GATHERED AT THE COMPOUND. BÁS had called them together to discuss the case of Simon Dorsey and how Andrea Peston was still evading them. It had been almost three weeks since they'd started investigating and they were no closer to finding her. He knew it was playing heavily on Naz's mind, and he didn't want her to have that added stress on top of the baby.

The first scan had been emotional and humbling, and he'd fallen instantly in love with the jumping bean on the screen. Naz had squeezed his hand and grinned with excitement as the tech took measurements and they heard the steady gallop of their baby's heartbeat. In that moment, he'd never felt more connected to another human being and, with the offer on the property being accepted, things personally looked to be going in the right direction.

The group sat around the table, Val to Bás' left-hand side with Monty and Scout at her feet. He'd made it a point not to hover over Naz in this environment, even though everyone now knew they were together and expecting a baby. He hadn't had it yet, but he was fully expecting a threat-of-death lecture from each of the guys here. It made him happy to think she had those people in her life, even if it was his balls they had on the chopping block.

Right now though, each of them was lost in thought as they mulled over the facts in front of them. The only sounds that could be heard were the low hums from the computers and the click-clack of fingers on keyboards as they searched for

clues. Watchdog was like a machine, focused on his task, but it was evident the frustration everyone was feeling.

This nightmare had been put to bed. Nazareli had thought it was behind her and so had the soldiers affected but it was back, and they were all potentially staring down the barrel of a loaded gun.

Bás stood up, his eyes scanning over everyone before he began to speak. “We need to come up with a plan on how we go about finding Andrea Peston. We can’t let this woman get away with what she’s done.” He paused for a moment, his gaze falling on Lotus before continuing. “I know that each one of you has your own unique set of skills which are invaluable in this situation, so I want to hear your ideas on how we can track her down.”

Lotus leaned forward, her facial features awash with possibilities. “We need to think outside the box. Andrea has been able to evade us for this long because she’s crafty and she knows how to hide. We know her father was the doctor who worked on the drug, so we need to look at that. Find out if he spoke to her or shared anything with her. He’s serving time in a maximum-security prison, and I thought he wasn’t allowed visitors.”

“He is, but nothing is infallible, and they could have paid off one or more of the guards.” Bein shrugged as if this happened all the time.

Damon had never given a whole lot of thought to what happened after he won or lost his case in court, but seeing this side showed a flawed justice system.

“I can pay the prison a visit.”

Reaper was former Australian SAS and always came across relaxed and chill, but he knew it would be a mistake to think the man was anything other than deadly.

“We need to use unconventional methods to flush her out,” Titan added.

Bishop nodded in agreement. “I have a contact who’s worked in the drug trade. He might have some information on

Peston's whereabouts. I can reach out to him and see what he knows."

Damon chimed in. "We could also try and trace the money she's been using to fund her operation. It might lead us to her or her accomplices."

Val added, "We have access to some of the best surveillance technology in the world. We could use it to track her movements."

"Done it. She's a ghost."

Damon looked up as Watchdog spoke, but his eyes didn't leave the screen and his fingers never slowed.

"We need to work backwards. Go back to the first time she ever met Simon and go from there. Speak to him again and see if he can give us any other clues," Duchess added.

Bás nodded, taking in their suggestions. "These are all good ideas. Let's split up and work on gathering information using these methods. Lotus, speak with Simon again, and speak to Smithy about the other men. They might know something they aren't telling us. See if you can talk to them."

"Okay."

"Damon, a word before you go."

Naz locked eyes with him and he saw her hesitate before he nodded for her to go on. "I'll catch up with you."

"Okay."

Damon followed Bás into his office where he motioned for him to take a seat. He'd known this man for over a year, but this was the first time Bás had ever asked to speak with him privately and he felt a chill run down his spine. Damon had faced some evil people in his time as a barrister and Bás wasn't evil but he was fucking terrifying in his intensity. Partly because he knew this man could and would follow through on any threat he was about to make next.

Bás cleared his throat before speaking. "I know you care about Lotus and I want to make sure you understand something very important. If you hurt her in any way, or cause

her harm in any way, there'll be consequences and I'll have to deal with them myself.”

Damon could feel the intensity radiating off Bás as he continued. “Lotus isn't just another member of our team, she's like family. And no one messes with our family. Do I make myself clear?”

Damon nodded mutely, understanding all too well what Bás meant by that statement. He appreciated that Bás was looking out for Naz's well-being, but he couldn't help but feel slightly offended. He'd never given Bás a reason to doubt his intentions with Naz, and he didn't appreciate being treated like a potential threat to her safety.

But he knew Bás was just being protective of his team, and he respected that. “I understand, Bás. And I want you to know that I'd never do anything to hurt Naz. She means everything to me.”

Bás studied him for a moment before nodding. “Good. I believe you. But I had to make sure you understood the consequences of your actions. Our team is our priority, and we protect each other at all costs.”

Damon nodded again, feeling a sense of relief wash over him. He was glad to have Bás' trust and support, and he knew he would do whatever it took to protect Nazareli and their child, and the rest of their team.

“She'll be a good mum, but don't kid yourself into thinking this will be easy. She has a lot of wounds that aren't healed yet.”

“I know that, and nothing worth having is easy. I don't want easy. I want her in whatever form that takes.”

Bás folded his arms over his chest and tipped his chin up. “You gonna force her to give up her job?”

Damon was pissed that this man would suggest it, but he didn't react outwardly. “I'm gonna let her be exactly who she is and do exactly as she pleases, as long as it includes her coming home to me and our child at the end of the day.”

“Good, you clip her wings and you'll lose her.”

“I have no intention of clipping her wings.”

“Good.”

“Did you give Gideon this lecture, or Sebastian?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then why me?”

“Because Lotus is different to Duchess and Snow. She projects a tough exterior, a hardened shell that at first glance is impenetrable but it’s all a smoke screen. She has a tender heart and it’s been battered enough. Her belief in herself is shallow and I won’t tolerate her being hurt any more than she has already. Lotus needs to fly so she can believe in herself again.”

Damon pondered that for a second, never one to be rushed into a response, but one word kept coming back to him. “Again?”

“What?”

“You said Lotus needs to fly so she can believe in herself *again*. That implies she ever believed in herself and she didn’t. Her father taught her that she wasn’t valued from such a young age that she’s never believed in herself.”

“Hmm, perhaps that’s true. I hope you can be the man who helps her find it, Damon.”

“She doesn’t need a man to help her find it, she needs to believe it herself and I’m going to stand by her side while she finds it and then I’m going to love her like she deserves.”

Bás’ eyes swept up, in surprise, before he smiled. “I think I underestimated you, Damon.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

“No, I don’t suppose I am. After this is over and we have a minute to breathe, I’d like to discuss bringing you on board fully. While we don’t operate within the law, having someone who knows the law and can help us and those we liberate so they can lead new lives would be good.”

Damon was surprised by the offer. “We can talk, but I’d like to spend my time helping the soldiers get justice from the

government and the military. They've been left to drown, if not for Naz and Smithy, and that isn't right. They were taken while on duty and nothing was done to help them. They deserve some sort of recompense."

"Like a class action lawsuit?"

"I was thinking something a little less public but sure, that kind of thing."

"That's a good place to focus. Let me know if I can help at all."

Bás walked him to the door and opened it. "We're not gonna tell Lotus about this, are we?"

Damon felt his lips spread into a grin. "You scared of my girl, boss man?"

"Fucking terrified, and if you tell her I said that I'll deny it."

Damon chuckled as he walked out of the office and Bás peeled off towards the tech room. The man was deadly and yet the woman who purred in his arms like a kitten, had him wrapped around her little finger, much like she did him.

Damon made his way back to the conference room where Lotus was already on the phone with Smithy. He took a seat on the couch next to her and waited for her to finish her call.

"That was fast," he remarked once she hung up.

"Yeah, Smithy didn't really tell me anything new. But I did manage to schedule a meeting with one of the guys tomorrow. Hopefully, he'll be more willing to talk in person."

"Good. Naz, I wanted to talk to you about something."

She turned to face him, concern etched on her features. "What is it?"

"Bás pulled me aside before we split up. He wanted to make sure that I understood the consequences of hurting you in any way. He made it very clear that you're like family to him, and he won't tolerate anyone hurting you. I also promised

not to tell you we'd spoken but I hate the idea of any secrets between us."

Naz sighed, rolling her eyes. "Of course, he did. He's always been overprotective of me."

"I know, but I think it's sweet. He cares about you a lot."

Naz smiled softly. "Yeah, he does. But you don't have to worry about that, Damon. I trust you completely."

"I'm glad to hear that. I just wanted to make sure you knew how seriously he takes your safety."

"I appreciate it. But I can take care of myself, you know."

Damon raised an eyebrow. "I have no doubt about that. But it's nice to know that you have people looking out for you."

Naz leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "Thank you for caring, Damon."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. "Always, Naz. Always."

"You want to sit in while I talk to Simon again? I think he'd appreciate it."

"Of course, if you think it will help."

"He trusts you and, unlike me, you aren't a reminder of his past."

"I can't imagine what he must be feeling."

Her expression fell and he wanted to kick himself for not thinking. Grasping her chin, he tilted her head back so he was looking into her eyes. "Baby, don't do that. None of what happened was your fault."

"I oversaw the drugs, Damon."

"Because you had to. If you hadn't, your cover would've been blown and you'd be dead and they'd likely be dead too. You ensured they got free, and then got help. You were the woman who walked through fire for them and with them."

"I know, I just hate that it happened."

Damon leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. “Me too, baby.”

Electricity crackled between them, and he wanted desperately to kiss her but he knew if he did, he wouldn't want to stop.

“Can I stay with you tonight? I miss you. I just want to hold you in my arms.”

“I'd like that, but feel free to do it naked so I can slide my pussy down your hard cock.”

Damon's dick was hard instantly, and he groaned, cupping her cheeks and taking her mouth in a savage kiss that mimicked everything he wanted to do to her. His hands fisted in her hair and she moaned before pulling her mouth away.

“Let's not give Watchdog a show.”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before you mentioned your sweet pussy and my dick in the same sentence.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes, handsome.”

“I have a feeling I'll always be on my toes with you, baby, and I wouldn't change a thing.”

CHAPTER 16

THE CONVERSATION WITH SIMON HAD BEEN FRUITLESS AND frustrating, with him so deep in his head that all he could offer was yes or no answers. It was understandable but didn't help her in the pursuit of information to stop this crazy elusive woman. For now, though, she could do little more than wait.

A buzz ran up her spine at the thought of Damon staying with her tonight. Truthfully it had been silly to keep him at arm's length, in an effort to slow things down, but everything between them had moved at warp speed and she need to take back a little control.

She hadn't counted on that space meaning she couldn't sleep, because she missed his arms around her, and the fact her thoughts had too much time in the dead of night to try and sabotage her.

Stirring the small crockpot she kept in her apartment for when she did cook, which wasn't often, she pulled in the delicious scent of the beef curry infused with thick coconut cream and aromatic spices. The first weeks of this pregnancy had been rough, emotionally and physically but now she was beginning to get a handle on both her emotions and her body, although the changes in it were still significant, not including her heaving over the toilet bowl every two minutes.

Being a mother had never been on her radar and she still wasn't sure she'd be any good at it. Her job was her life, up until now, and a family had never really figured into any picture of her future. Perhaps because when she looked to the future, she didn't see much of anything.

Since her first stupid, irresponsible attack on Drew Preedy, she'd been preparing to die young. It was a miracle she was alive to even be contemplating this journey, but she was, and she had to think that there was a reason this baby had come to be against the odds of her life.

A knock on her apartment door had her wiping her sweaty hands down her joggers. She glanced in the glass of the oven and groaned at the state of her. She should have made more effort, curled her hair, or put on some make-up or at least dressed in proper clothes, but it was too late now.

Swinging the door open, she felt her stomach dip and pitch with nerves and desire. Damon Cavendish was at her door, with a bag from her favourite bakery in the village and a smile that should be on billboards.

“You gonna let me in or am I sleeping on the doorstep?”

Her lips twitched and she forced a fake glare. “The doorstep if you keep up with that attitude.”

Damon stepped past her and as he did, he caught her around the waist and hauled her in for a kiss that had her going up on her toes, eager for more. She wanted to savour this moment forever, pressing her body against his and teasing his lips with her tongue until they were panting for more. His hands found their way to her hips, and he pulled her closer as they explored each other's mouths. After a few moments, Naz broke away and stepped back, leaving them both breathless and wanting more.

“You hungry? I made beef curry.”

The dark look in his eyes told he was starving but not for food, and suddenly neither was she.

The air seemed to still around them, her heart pounding in her chest as she waited for him to make the next move. Their eyes locked, his dark and heavy with desire as she waited, her body humming with anticipation. His lips parted, his breathing shallow as he lunged, his hands on her hips pulling her in flush against his erection. The bakery bag dropped to the floor, as their mouths fused, her arms wrapping around him, deepening

the kiss. Her hands wandered down his back and squeezed his ass, pulling him closer as she moaned.

He turned them, slamming her against the wall and pinning her with his body, his hands on either side of her head. He kissed down her neck, biting and sucking along the way as he made his way to her collarbone.

“I’ve missed you, baby.”

“Mmm, I know, Damon. I’ve missed you too.”

His fingers splayed across her stomach, and she felt him tense against her before she gave in to the burning desire for him. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she let her thoughts and fears run free in the back of her mind. She lived in the now, knowing better than anyone that tomorrow was never promised, only teased at.

Wrapping her arms tighter around his neck and nipping his lower lip, she felt him groan before he growled and picked her up, catching the door with his foot and closing them both inside.

In one smooth movement, he lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands clutching his shoulders. Prowling toward her bedroom, he tossed her on the bed, her body bouncing on the sheets as his eyes flared with desperate heat.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

She had no time to respond and couldn’t if she tried, her breaths lodged in her chest with how much she craved this man’s touch on her skin.

He was on her an instant later, his hands on her joggers and pulling them down her legs. His warm mouth found her neck and she arched into him, her hands going to his hair, pulling him closer. “Fuck, baby, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

Her hands went to his shirt, and she pulled at it, desperate to get it off. “Take it off.”

Damon sat up, taking his shirt off, his chest rippling with muscles, and she couldn't resist touching him. Her palms slid across the hot flesh, and she moaned, her head falling back as he shoved her T-shirt high. Finding her breasts bare to his eyes, he made a strangled groan before dipping his head and licking a path down between her breasts.

His hands moved to pull her top over her head, and then he was squeezing and stroking her breasts as he took one nipple in his mouth. Pinching and rolling her on his tongue, he sucked and licked, teasing and tugging at her hardened nipples until her head thrashed from side to side.

“Oh fuck, Damon.”

“Mmmm. So delicious. I could survive on nothing but your taste for the rest of my life.”

Her hands fisted in his hair as he moved to the other breast, worrying it lightly between his teeth, his words only inflaming her pleasure. Her breath came in shallow pants as he sucked and nipped before moving down her body, planting wet, hot kisses along the way.

“Spread your legs for me, baby.”

She did as he asked, her breath hitching as his teeth nipped the inside of her thigh before he licked a hot path to her needy core. Her hand found his hair again as he flicked his tongue from her soaked pussy to her clit.

“Oh, God. Damon.”

Her body tingled as his warm breath brushed across her sensitive flesh. His fingers slid through her folds, and she moaned as his tongue took her clit between his lips, sucking and licking before he plunged his tongue deep inside her. She lifted her hips into his mouth, wanting more, as he teased her with the tip of his tongue, before thrusting it deep, again and again. Her body quivered as she felt her orgasm building and her breath came in short pants as he continued to tease and taste her.

“Oh, fuck, oh, God. Damon!”

Her body trembled as he licked down her folds, his tongue returning to her clit and pushing two fingers deep inside her. She panted shallowly, her body quivering as he sucked her clit into his mouth, his tongue flicking and teasing her with abandon.

“Yes, please. I’m going to come. Oh God, Damon!”

Her body tensed as she fell over the edge, the orgasm ripping through her as her head fell back and she cried out his name.

Damon drank in her screams of release, sucking her clit into his mouth as her body trembled and twitched in pleasure. She continued to writhe as she came and he lapped at her like she was his favourite dessert, tasting the sweet, salty tang of her release.

Their eyes met as he lifted his head, and a hundred unspoken emotions passed between them. She watched in a languid satiated stupor as he stood and shucked his jeans, his hand fisting his thick, hard cock. Lotus flicked her dry lips, hungry for a taste of him on her tongue.

Her body still trembled slightly with aftershocks from her release as he shifted on the bed, coming over her, his biceps rippling as he held his weight off her body, his rigid cock nestling between her slick folds. His head dipped and he kissed her neck softly and reverently, and she could feel the strain of his muscles as he tried to control the desire sweeping through him. It was a heady, powerful feeling, but she wanted him untamed and wild. The control he mastered so effortlessly was teetering and she wanted it snapped like the fine thread of a spider’s web. Lotus rocked her hips, causing his cock to slide through her wet heat.

“Baby, please, I’m trying to be gentle. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Lotus knew he meant the baby, and her heart flipped over with love for this man who she knew loved fiercely. Cupping his face in her hands, she forced his eyes to her own, the bright blue orbs cloudy with inner struggle as he fought for control. “You won’t, Damon. You’d never hurt me.” She knew the

truth of her words as if they had been tattooed on her heart from birth. “I want you to fuck me like you mean it.”

Damon groaned against her neck as he teased her core with the head, plunging into her hard and fast and then stilling, his entire body straining as she adjusted to the full feeling of having his cock buried deep inside her.

“You good?” His gaze caressed her, watching for any sign that she was uncomfortable.

“I’m perfect.”

“Fuck, yeah, you are.”

His words caused a flood of pleasure, and he groaned as her pussy got wetter. Damon slowly thrust back and forth, testing her and she could feel the drag of his cock on her pussy.

“You’re so fucking wet. I want to be inside you forever.”

She rocked her hips against him, loving the sound of his voice, raw with lust. “Then fuck me. Fuck me hard, Damon.”

His breathing hitched and he groaned, plunging inside her as the tether on his control began to break, her back arching and her eyes fluttering closed at the fullness of him buried inside her.

He paused and her eyes shot open as she felt him tense. “Damon?”

“When you come, I want you on top of me so I can watch those gorgeous tits bounce and see that beautiful untamed look as you come all over my cock.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and she felt her cheeks flame with heat as he withdrew and lifted her legs so that her knees were bent and her legs draped over his shoulders. She felt her body shudder as the new position allowed him to penetrate deeper, and he took his time, thrusting slowly at first, giving her body time to adjust.

“I thought you wanted me on top?”

His wicked smirk caused her body to tingle from her toes to her hair. “Oh, I do, baby, but not just yet. I want to fuck you every which way I can and play out every fantasy before I let you come again.”

From anyone else, his words would piss her off, but she knew from Damon it would only make the pleasure that much sweeter when she did fall.

She gasped as he pulled out, leaving her empty and grabbed her hips and pulled her to the edge of the bed.

“Mmmm. Keep those sexy legs just like that, baby.”

He shifted and knelt between her thighs, his hands sliding up her legs, and her body trembled as his hands slid up her torso, his fingers skimming over her ribs until he cupped her breasts. He kneaded and pinched her nipples before teasing them between his fingers and Lotus felt her body tense around his cock.

One hand left her breasts and began to circle her clit, and her body began to shudder in pleasure.

“Damon, please.”

“Still need more, baby?”

“Yes. Please.”

She could hear the strain in his voice as his hips began to pump his cock in time to his fingertip circling her clit and her pussy quivered as she felt the first ripples of pleasure building. Damon stopped just as she was about to fall over the edge and she glared as he withdrew his cock and climbed up the bed, his back to the headboard, and then patted between his spread legs.

“You gonna ride my cock, baby?”

Lotus crawled up the bed, making sure her hips swayed slightly. His eyes were feral as they moved over her skin like a caress.

“I’m gonna ride you so hard you’re never gonna want to leave me.”

Even in that moment, she knew it was a strange thing to say, but she dismissed it.

“I’m never leaving you, Naz. I told you I’m yours for as long as you want me.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his words, and she knew she’d never tire of hearing them. Rearing up, she braced her hands on his shoulders. Lowering, she felt his cock head poised at her entrance and she steadied herself as she impaled herself on his cock, his eyes closing as he groaned, her pussy trembling at the sound.

Damon’s hands came up, one to grip her waist as she began to ride him, sliding up and down his hard shaft, his other hand teasing her nipples. She felt his hands tighten on her body and his hips thrust up as he began to meet her downward motion and she cried out as he fully seated himself inside her. They began to move together, her body trembling at the feel of his hard cock stroking her inner walls, his thick girth stretching her as she strove to take him deeper.

The room was filled with the sounds of their mingled breathing, her whimpers and his groans as their bodies moved together, the slap of his balls on her pussy as he thrust into her and the sound of their bodies meeting in an erotic melody of flesh on flesh.

Her body began to shake as the orgasm began to build and she rode him harder, needing to feel him deeper, her pussy clenching around him as her orgasm built.

Damon’s eyes flashed to hers as if he could feel the change in her body as it shifted from being wracked with pleasure to being on the edge. Her arms wrapped around his neck and her breasts pressed against his chest she felt her wet heat surround him and she knew he wouldn’t last much longer either. His groans and the feel of his body under her touch as she began to shudder was heady, and then he reached down and begin to stroke her clit with two fingers and her body shattered as she came apart around him.

Damon couldn’t seem to hold back either as she felt his body tense as he thrust up into her hard, and her eyes slammed

shut as she came again. Her body began to convulse around his cock and, as she milked him of his seed, he thrust up into her and yelled her name, his body arching beneath her fingers as he came deep inside her.

Lotus lay in Damon's arms for a while, her head resting on his shoulder as they both gradually came back to earth. Lotus was the first to break the comfortable silence.

Her mouth curved as she mumbled softly against his skin.

"What's that? I couldn't hear you."

Slowly she shifted so she could look up at his handsome face and he could see she was teasing him. "You're a man of many talents, Damon."

"And you, beautiful, are a woman of insatiable needs."

Laughing out loud, Lotus looked up at him. "Talking of needs, your child is making me hungry for food."

Damon turned, rolling her to her side and kissing her lips before he got up and began to draw his boxers over his sexy ass. "You want rice or naan with the curry?"

"Both, but I can do it."

She moved to get up and he pushed her back down his hand on her chest. "I want to look after you."

"I can look after myself."

"I know, but I like doing it. I want to take care of you even if you don't need it. It's my love language."

"Your love language, hey?"

"Yeah, you got a problem with that?"

His lips were tipped up into a teasing smile.

"Well, as it involved orgasms as the starter and food as the main, then I do not."

His lips pressed to hers and she sighed in utter contentment.

"Good."

They spent the evening, eating and watching re-runs of Friends in bed, and she'd never felt happier. Despite the storm threatening her professional life, her personal life was pure heaven.

CHAPTER 17

A PERFECT NIGHT WAS BROKEN EARLY THE NEXT MORNING AS his and Naz's phones began to ring at the same time. He grabbed it and saw it was an alarm of some kind that Watchdog had put on his phone when he'd gone after Naz a few weeks back when all this began. He groaned and turned to pull Nazareli into his arms, but she was already up and dressing.

"Hurry up."

The soft pliant woman of the night before was gone and in her place was the tough, focused soldier. "I'm coming. What could possibly constitute an emergency at five in the morning?"

She pulled her T-shirt down her torso and went on tiptoes to drop a light kiss on his lips, which he tried to deepen but she was already stepping back.

"Poor baby isn't used to having his nap broken."

"I can give up the sleep. It's that sexy, naked body I have trouble giving up."

"You'll live."

He pulled on jeans and a black hoodie and shoved a cap backwards over his hair which was stuck up from having her fingers pulling at it.

"I know I'll live, I just don't like it."

"You're grumpy in the mornings."

“Am not.”

He was and he knew it, but she seemed to take it in stride as she grabbed his hand, and they hauled ass out of the apartment and headed for the tech room. When they got there, everyone else was already waiting and they all looked bright and sharp, leaving him feeling even more bleary-eyed.

Bás eyed him and Damon felt his stomach churn as his arms slipped around Naz from behind. He expected her to pull away, but she laid her hands over the top of his on her belly and leaned into him. He kissed her hair as they waited for the axe to fall.

“We just got word that Tim Cooper went on a violent rampage at the centre and killed two of the staff members.”

He felt Naz physically sag in his arms and held her tighter, giving her his strength quietly so she wouldn't lose face with her teammates.

“Who?”

“Kathleen, the cook, and Gerald, the guard.”

“Fuck.”

“Where are we on Andrea Peston? I need answers, people.”

“Naz and I have a meeting with Smithy today, but Simon was of little help yesterday.”

“Talk to him again. Make him understand that his freedom rests on his ability to give us something useful. Why did Tim snap? Why was he a target specifically? The man is a decorated soldier with, up until now, an impeccable record at the centre.”

“We'll get some answers, Bás. You have my word.”

Naz stood up straighter and he let her go, knowing she needed to hold her head up high and not show how much this was affecting her. He'd personally prefer it if she never came into contact with this centre again. The constant reminders of her past were, in his opinion, not good for her, but it wasn't his call. His role as her partner was to be what she needed him to

be and that was to take her worries and bolster her when she flagged and stand behind her, not block her.

“Good. What else?”

But Naz wasn't waiting to hear more, she was heading for the door and with a chin lift from Bás, he followed her. “You okay?”

She stopped and spun on her heel. “No. I'm fucking fuming. How dare someone fuck with these men again. Kathleen had just welcomed her second grandchild and Gerald was saving for a trip to Australia to visit his son and grandkids. How fucking dare these people take that away.”

Damon gripped her shoulders. “You have every right to be angry, Naz, but don't lose focus. Let it guide you and don't you dare take on any blame.”

“But—”

“No, I won't hear it. This is on these assholes, and we're gonna catch them and when we do, they'll pay the price.”

“You won't hear it?”

He paused, watching her expression and waiting for her to flip at his overbearing comment. “I don't want you hurt, Naz, and those thoughts hurt you. I'm not trying to be an alpha asshole.”

“I know, and I know you care.” She twined her fingers with his and kissed his knuckles. “Let's go shake down Simon.”

He grinned as she headed toward the area where Simon was being detained. “I love it when you go all gangsta on me.”

“Gangsta?” Her laugh was light and filled all the empty spaces in his chest.

“Yeah, you know. All cool and down with the kids, saying shit like shakedown.”

“Shakedown isn't gangsta and you even saying ‘cool and down with the kids’ just proves how uncool you are. Our poor peanut has an uncool dad already, and he isn't even born yet.”

“Hey, that’s rude.”

“But true, baby.”

“Fine, you can be the cool one, I’ll be the strict parent.”

At that comment, Naz tipped her head back and laughed. “Oh, you’re hilarious. You so won’t be the strict parent. You’ll be like putty.”

“I can be hard.”

“Oh, I know.” Her hand cupped his dick, and he groaned as they stopped outside the door.

“Fuck, Naz.”

“Maybe later, baby.”

Her smile was all tease as she punched in the code and winked. When she turned to the door, her entire demeanour had slipped back into the ice-cold operator he knew her to be and he knew the banter they’d just shared had stopped her from spinning out and blaming herself for the most recent attack.

Damon stepped in behind her, schooling his features as Simon looked up at them.

“Okay, Simon, time to stop dicking around and give us something useful. If you want our help, you need to get in the boat and row with us.”

Damon had to bite the inside of his lip to stop the proud smile at the way she handled things. Naz was a force of fucking nature and he loved it.

“I told you...”

Naz raised her hand. “No, stop. I don’t want your sob story. I want something that will help me.”

“Has something happened?”

“Why do you think that?”

“You coming in here like this. Something is different.”

“Two people at the centre were murdered.”

Simon's face paled and he looked at Naz in clear distress.
"Who and how?"

"A soldier named Tim Cooper went crazy and, in his rage, killed Kathleen and Gerald."

"Oh my God, no. Kathleen was sweet. She always made tiffin when she knew the kids were coming to see me."

"Listen, Simon, we know Andrea Peston is the person behind this and, after today's attacks, we don't have a clue who is next on her list."

"But I don't know anything."

"Then tell us what you do know and maybe we can help you out."

"Maybe?"

"Well, right now, we all have to work together. But if we don't get anywhere with this, and if you're still being less than forthcoming, we may have to change our stance."

"What do you want from me?"

"New information. Why would she target Tim?"

Simon frowned and Damon crossed his arms over his chest.

"I don't know of a Tim at the centre."

Damon caught Naz's eyes. "Does he have a nickname?"

"Yeah, they call him Popeye."

Simon's head shot up. "Popeye did this?"

"Yeah, you know who I mean now?"

"Yeah. Popeye is the last person who'd hurt someone, especially Kathleen. She was like a mother to him."

"Well, he did, so any idea why or how he managed to get the drugs, which I'm assuming caused his episode?"

"Yeah, maybe."

Naz rolled her hand impatiently. "Well?"

“Kelly and I, or should I say Andrea, weren’t exclusive. I was just fucking her.”

“Are you saying she was sleeping with other men at the centre?”

“Yeah, but I can’t say who for sure. I saw her hanging with Popeye a few times, and Johnson.”

“Eric Johnson?”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn’t tell me this before, because why?”

“My head’s fucked up, Lotus. I lost everything again. You know what we went through, you were there.”

Damon saw her soften and wasn’t totally comfortable with the way Simon Dorsey was playing with her guilt, but he kept quiet, knowing stepping in would only lead to him ending up in the firing line.

“I do know, and I hate that it’s happening again.”

His gaze roamed over Naz and something about it flipped his instincts to red.

“I need out of here, Lotus. I need air. I need to train or see my kids. I’m going crazy locked in this box.”

“It’s a tough one, Simon. You’re a wanted man and I don’t think putting you where Andrea can get at you again is wise.”

“Please? I can hide or go into a safe house with one of your team. I just need to see my kids.”

“I’ll see what I can do but no promises. Now, have you got any more information I can use as leverage?”

Naz wasn’t stupid, she was using his desire to get out to try and gain as much information as she could. He knew her well enough now to know that her ability to be two things at once with him wasn’t due to some skill she’d learnt along the way. No, the first time he’d laid eyes on her, he recognised her as a person who could compartmentalise.

His Naz was a beautiful, intelligent, and complex woman who had a temper that could level a building and yet she could still be vulnerable in the way she interacted with him. The truth of it was, she was his. She'd made that claim on him, and he was going to do everything in his power to ensure she never regretted it.

Damon gripped her shoulder, whether in warning or solidarity, he didn't know.

Simon looked from one to the other and shrewdly guessed the rough edges he'd rubbed off. Damon didn't like it, but he was self-aware enough to know that he was overprotective of Nazareli.

"I don't. I'm sorry but I'll keep thinking and, if you need me to draw Andrea out, I'm happy to help. I just want this nightmare over."

"I'll see what I can do."

Damon kept his own counsel as they walked back towards Bás' office but she knew him well enough to know he had something on his mind.

"Spit it out."

"I don't trust him."

"Well, I can't say I do completely, but I do think having him in a safe house somewhere close could work in our favour."

"You think Bás will go for it?"

"Think Bás will go for what?"

They both spun to see Bás walking out of the large gym with Val behind him with Scout, who was limping. Naz went down on her haunches to pet the animal who, if you weren't one of his pack, wasn't exactly friendly. Lucky for him, he'd been adopted into the pack, but it hadn't been easy.

"What happened to you, my little French mushroom."

Her baby voice, which she used on the dog, was cute. "French mushroom? What does that even mean?"

Naz shrugged. “No clue. Are French mushrooms even a thing?”

Bás looked at Naz like she may very well have lost her mind. “Are you talking about truffles?”

Val laughed. “Yeah, those.”

“Why is Scout a truffle?”

“Because he’s delicious and lives underground like us.”

“Lotus, focus. What did you want to talk to me about?”

Naz stood. “Simon Dorsey says Andrea was sleeping with Tim Cooper too, and there might be one more man in the mix.”

“Who?”

“Eric Johnson.”

Bás turned to Val. “We need to bring him in before he goes all berserker on us too.”

“On it.”

Val pressed a kiss to Bás’ shoulder and walked off to do as he’d instructed, no question, no discussion. She trusted him wholeheartedly to know what to do.

“What else? Because I know my life isn’t easy enough that you’d only want that.”

“Rude.”

“True. Now out with it, Lotus.”

He rolled his lips as Naz sighed.

“Simon needs out, Bás. He misses his kids, and being here isn’t good for him.”

“May I remind you he killed three people in cold blood.”

Naz tipped her head back defiantly, propping her hands on her hips. “May I remind you he was drugged and his choices were taken away.”

Damon placed his hand on the small of her back, an intimate gesture of support, but also to calm the fire he could

feel building in her. Bás noted it and glanced back at Nazareli.

“Lotus, I know you have compassion for him but it’s also about keeping him safe.”

“We can put him in a safe house close by. We can have Watchdog set up a secure comms so he can see his kids, and he offered to be bait for Andrea.”

“You think that’s wise?”

“If we put enough protocols and security in place, then it might be our best bet.”

“I don’t like it. Not with Tim Cooper still out there too.”

“I’m not saying let him roam the streets free, just think about it and see if we can make it work. I can even go to the safehouse with him.”

“No.”

It was out of his mouth before he could stop it, but Bás nodded as Nazareli glared at him like she was about to make a purse out of his ball sack.

“I agree with Damon. I don’t want you there in your condition. At least not alone.”

“Having a baby doesn’t make me disabled.”

“No, but it does make you more vulnerable and I know you’d never forgive yourself if something happened and you could have prevented it.”

“Fine, but will you try? Please. Damon can come with me and maybe someone from Eidolon?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks, Dad, you’re the best.”

Bás blew out a frustrated breath and gave him a pained look. “Will you please control her?”

“No way. I love her just the way she is.”

“Sap.”

“Like you can talk. Val has you wrapped around her little finger.”

Bás grinned and it made him look less formidable, but only just. Then he turned on his heel and left them standing there without another word. Most likely going to find Val. Damon knew love. He'd seen it happen with Gideon and Nadia and the other couples around them, and he wondered if they all realised how unusual it was to find the kind of connections they had.

“Let's go.”

Damon smiled as they walked off.

“Shut it.”

“I didn't say anything.”

Naz rolled her eyes. “I read your mind.”

He hooked an arm around her and kissed her head. “Baby, if you could read my mind, you'd already be naked and screaming my name.”

“Don't be cute.”

“Can't help it.”

Her exaggerated eye roll made him chuckle but the fact she hadn't flipped out at him was a good sign that maybe they could muddle through this without her running or him fucking up.

CHAPTER 18

LOTUS HAD BEEN SURPRISED WHEN BÁS CALLED HER AN HOUR later, as she ate breakfast with Duchess and Gideon, to tell her the safe house for Simon was set up and ready to go.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Lotus?”

Her gaze found Duchess watching her as she spread blackcurrant jam onto a piece of toast. “Honestly, I don’t know, but we’re spinning our wheels here and we can’t keep him locked away forever. It isn’t fair to him.”

Duchess looked at her with compassion, but not pity, and she loved her friend for that. She wasn’t to be pitied; she had a good life. She was glad Damon had stepped out to have a private word with Gideon about something though, and the question had been asked in private.

“For what it’s worth, I agree. I don’t like it but it’s using what we have.”

“Thanks, Duchess.”

Her friend squeezed her hand lightly. “Of course. We’re family and that was long before these handsome billionaire brothers stole our hearts.”

A smile twinged on her lips. “Little thieves are more dangerous than any foe I’ve ever faced.” She was only half joking with her assessment. She knew deep down that, if she lost Damon, it would destroy her in a way she’d never recover from.

“They are but they also offer us the greatest gift in return.”

“What’s that?” she asked as she took a bite of the sweet toast covered in thick butter and jam. She thought she knew but hearing it would make her realise it wasn’t just her being floored by this feeling.

“Their hearts, their absolute love and devotion. Completeness.”

It was the last word that rang so true with her. Damon did make her feel complete as if a part had been lost and now it was found and returned to her.

“Does it scare you?” Lotus voiced the concern that sat at the root of her hesitations.

“Terrifies me every day, but the thought of not being with Gideon terrifies me more.”

“Thanks, Duchess. It’s good not to feel like I’m in this alone. That someone like you shares my fears and it’s not just because I’m broken inside.”

Duchess narrowed her eyes, her brows pinching together in displeasure. “Don’t say that. You’re not broken, you’re a fucking warrior and don’t you forget it. All the best warriors have scars that show they fought and won. Some you just can’t see.”

Duchess’ words played over in her mind as she and Damon travelled to the safehouse location just behind Simon, her eyes sliding to him every few minutes. He caught her watching and grinned, his hand catching hers and pressing a kiss to her palm, which made her belly roll in her chest as waves of love barrelled over her. She’d tell him soon. When they were alone, she’d tell him how much she loved him, how terrified it made her, and how she was willing to risk it all to love him.

When they arrived at the safehouse, it was a small cottage on the outskirts of Hereford. She could see that it had been fortified with state-of-the-art security, but the surveillance systems had been disabled due to a virus in the network that Watchdog was dealing with. Two Fortis agents, she recognised as Zin and Nate, stood guard at the entrance with an air of

authority. She had a history with both men because of Rhea Winslow and her past, but it was Zin who eyed her warily. He still hadn't forgiven her for firing shots at Drew Preedy and putting his now wife, Celeste, in danger. Having Damon, she now understood that anger. She wasn't sure what she'd do if someone put him in the line of fire like that, but it wouldn't be good.

As they entered, she gave them a weary smile and thanked them for their help in getting them out of the public eye. "Thank you for helping out. I know I'm not your favourite person."

She could feel Damon watching her with interest but he didn't ask.

"We're all on the same side and a lot of water has passed under the bridge."

Lotus dipped her chin at Zin's words, gratitude filling her belly. "Well, thank you anyway."

She carried on inside the house, her training meaning the first thing she did was clock the exits and weaknesses of the property.

Inside, the house was sparsely furnished but with multiple layers of protection to ensure safety, which she was relieved by. Now they just had to wait.

With them now safely tucked away, Lotus started to focus her efforts on stopping Tim Cooper from continuing his massacre spree. Simon was in the living area using a secure link Watchdog set up to speak with his children. Hearing the giggles and laughter made her smile and think of the life growing inside her.

A warm, heavy hand on the back of her neck made her look up into Damon's handsome face.

"Can I get you anything?"

"I'm good."

"Need any help?"

"Some company would be nice."

She had never been the type to need company or crave another person's closeness, but she found she missed Damon more and more when he wasn't around. He pulled up a chair beside her at the kitchen table and draped an arm over the back of her chair, his warmth seeping into her skin.

Using the skills Watchdog had given her, she infiltrated the dark web and began poking around for any clues on where Andrea might be. What Lotus discovered, though, made her sick to her stomach. Post after post taunting her with messages about how she was responsible for all the killing he'd done and how he'd never be stopped before he killed her too. Despite her best efforts to stay composed, Lotus found herself becoming increasingly distressed as she read each message, her hands shaking while she heard Tim's twisted thoughts. When Damon caught wind of what was going on, his face filled with fury and protectiveness as he turned to Lotus, ready to do whatever it took to keep them out of harm's way.

"Stop reading them, Naz."

"I have to find out if there are any clues here."

His hand rested on her neck as he looked at her. "Then let me or Watchdog do it."

"It should be me."

"Why, baby? Why torture yourself?"

Lotus sighed, leaning into his touch. "I feel like I need to do something, Damon. I can't just sit around and wait for him to come for me."

"You're not just sitting around, you're actively trying to find him. But you don't need to subject yourself to his sick messages. Let the others handle it."

She nodded, feeling the weight of his words. "Okay."

Damon stood up, pulling her with him. "Come on, let's take a walk and clear our heads."

They stepped outside, the crisp air filling their lungs. Lotus breathed in the fresh scent of the countryside she loved and let it soothe her frayed nerves. Damon laced their fingers

together, leading her along the winding path that surrounded the safe house.

“It’s going to be okay, Lotus. We’ll find him and stop him and Andrea.”

“I know,” she said softly, leaning into him. “It’s just... I can’t shake the feeling that I’m responsible for all of this.”

Damon halted their walk, turning to face her. His eyes were filled with love and understanding. “You’re not responsible for Tim Cooper’s actions. He made that choice on his own.”

“But if I had just—”

“Stop. There’s nothing you could have done to prevent this. You’re doing everything you can to stop him now. That’s all that matters.”

Lotus nodded, feeling the weight of his words lift a little of the burden she’d been carrying. Damon leaned in to kiss her, his lips soft and gentle against hers. As they pulled back, Lotus felt a sense of longing deep within her. Damon seemed to sense it too, his eyes darkening with desire. Yet they couldn’t do anything about the mounting heat and desire building between them.

“You thought about when you might want to move in with me?”

Her gaze shot to him, gratefully acknowledging the way he was changing the subject. She tossed the ball back in his court. “When do you want me to move in with you?”

“As soon as we have the keys. I want us to start our life together now.”

“Isn’t that a little soon?”

His warm chuckle danced along her spine as he took her hand in his much larger one. “I think that ship has sailed. We’re having a baby and, honestly, I don’t believe in time limits. When you know, you know.”

“Oh yeah, and when did you know?”

He stopped them just feet from the entrance to the house and gazed at her with everything he felt for her exposed on his features. “The second I met you.”

Lotus raised a brow. “The second I met you, I threw a cloth bag over your head and kidnapped you.”

His smirk made the pulse between her legs pound. “Maybe the second moment.”

“You’re a crazy man.”

“Crazy for you.”

“Oh, that was some extra mature cheddar cheese right there.”

His laugh was cut short as her phone rang in her pocket. They stilled at the door as she looked down at her phone. “It’s Duchess.”

Damon nodded as she answered.

“We have a location on Andrea.”

“Oh my God, that’s fantastic. I’m heading back.”

“No time. Stay there and we’ll update you as soon as we have her.”

“Duchess, don’t you dare shut me out.”

“I’m not. We need the numbers on Simon as we have no location on Tim Cooper, and the chances are he’ll come for Simon. We did pick up Eric Johnson and he’s completely unaware of anything, so it looks like just those two were involved.”

Lotus didn’t like not being there when they took down Andrea, but she had little choice. “Fine, keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

Lotus hung up and looked at Damon. “They have a location on Andrea.”

His eyes locked with hers, reading her so easily. “Why don’t you look happy about it?”

Lotus shook her head. "I don't know. Something just feels off. It's too quick."

"Maybe we just caught a break."

"Maybe."

She let him lead her back inside the house where they waited for news, but she couldn't shake the feeling something was very wrong.

CHAPTER 19

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, WHILE LOTUS AND DAMON WERE still waiting for updates on Andrea, Nate rushed into the house.

“What’s wrong?” Urgency was bleeding out of his every pore.

“We just got a call from Zack. There’s a fire at the Fortis training facility and both our wives are there with the kids for an event Ava is running. It’s bad and we can’t get hold of Skye or Celeste. Zack is on his way after getting an alert but we can’t seem to contact anyone there.”

The news was shocking and Lotus shoed them away without a second thought, seeing the fear in Nate’s eyes. “Go, get to your families. We have this covered.”

Nate looked torn and she knew he was a good man and would want to stay and fulfil his duty, but family came before everything.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to leave you here two men down. We should stay.” He looked utterly torn between his duty and professionalism and his absolute terror for his wife and children.

“One hundred percent. Go make sure your families are safe.”

“Thank you. We’ll come back as soon as we know they’re safe.”

Lotus nodded and watched him back out of the house, his legs pumping as he ran to the car Zin already had waiting to go.

“Shit, that’s not good. I hope they’re all okay.”

Lotus looked at Damon who looked as shaken as she felt. “No, it’s not.”

“I know I’d do the same in their situation.”

Lotus smiled at Simon, who she knew adored his children and missed them every day. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Yet she couldn’t help the feeling that all the dominoes were falling into place, just not for her. The timing of the fire felt off but what options did she have? She’d never have stopped Nate and Zin from going after the people they loved, and she knew they would have if she’d asked but she couldn’t do that. Yet everything about it made her instincts scream. The feeling made ice skitter up her spine as Simon walked into the kitchen. She sent a text to Bás who confirmed the fire and said he’d send back up as soon as he could. That made her feel slightly easier knowing someone was coming.

“You okay?”

She looked tiredly at Damon, offering him an exhausted smile meant to reassure. “Yeah, fine.”

“Anything I can do?”

“No, read your book.”

Damon, she discovered, had a penchant for cosy mysteries and the book was lying open on the side of the couch arm.

Simon walked back into the room, a teapot and two cups in hand.

“I thought you might want some tea while we wait,” he said with a warm smile on his face, but Lotus was distracted. The looming feeling that something was wrong, coupled with Zin and Nate getting a desperate call that something was wrong at Fortis, left her feeling vulnerable and exposed. Her very veins pulsed with a warning that something bad was coming.

Lotus eyed him warily for a second, her suspicious mind unravelling before she shook her head. “Not for me, thanks.”

“I’ll have a cup.”

Lotus watched out of the corner of her eye as Simon poured the tea, taking one for himself too. A fine drizzle of rain had started to fall outside the windows, casting a cold feeling around her bones. It wasn’t cold, but the dark clouds and insistent rain made her feel chilled.

Damon seemed off as he placed the cup on the coffee table and pulled at his collar. His eyes flashed to her as he moved to stand, and she watched in horror as he stumbled and fell. She rushed to him, and his weight sank into her as his body went slack and his eyes closed.

Easing him to the couch, she turned to glare at Simon. “What did you do?”

“Just gave him something to help him sleep.”

He smiled at Lotus, but his eyes had turned cold as he watched Damon sleep soundly on the couch. Her hand smoothed over Damon’s brow, her fingers checking his pulse in his neck and finding it strong and steady.

Fear bubbled to the surface as he smiled a cruel smile at her. Lotus fought against the urge to run, but she knew that would only end badly. Instead, she swallowed down her fear and met his gaze head-on. “What do you want from me?”

Simon chuckled darkly, a sound she hadn’t heard from him before. “You know what I want. I want you to pay for what you did to me! You have something that belongs to me, and I want it back!” He stepped closer to her, his face twisted in anger and resentment. She felt herself cowering from him before she forced herself back up tall again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! I don’t have anything that belongs to you!” Her voice was shaky as she spoke, but she refused to show him any weakness.

“Oh, don’t play dumb, Lotus. You know exactly what I’m talking about.” Simon’s voice was low and dangerous, sending shivers down her spine.

“I swear to you I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fine, then maybe I’ll just have to take it from you.”

Before she could react, Simon lunged towards her, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her towards him. Lotus tried to fight him off, but he was too strong, and she knew she was no match for him in a physical battle, not if she wanted to keep her baby safe. She could feel the panic rising in her chest as he pulled her closer, his face only inches from hers.

“Please, Simon, don’t hurt me.” She didn’t want to fight him, but she would if she had no choice.

“You should have thought about that before you stole from me.”

“What did I steal from you?”

“My family. You stole my fucking family, you bitch.”

Spit flew from his mouth as he thrust her away and paced the small living room, his anger palpable. Lotus sat closer to a passed-out Damon, thanking God that he wasn’t here to get in the way of this. He’d want to stand between her and Simon and she knew, without a doubt, that Simon would kill him for it. The focused determination in the man’s face, coupled with anger, proved that to her.

“That was Rhea, not me.”

“You made sure we had the drugs. You used us as pawns in your game to beat her.”

“It wasn’t a game, Simon. You know as well as I do that if Rhea had been allowed to continue, we’d be living in a very different world right now.”

“You used me. My wife left me. My kids barely know me.”

Lotus threw up her hands. “So what, this was all a lie? You killed those people to get to me?”

Simon snorted angrily and moved suddenly, grabbing a knife he’d hidden under a cloth, and waving it at her wildly. “I

was drugged. She used me too, but at least Andrea offered me something in return.”

Lotus felt bile churn in her belly, her eyes flickering to Damon.

“Justice. You’re going to find out exactly how it feels to have your choices taken from you and, once I deliver you to Andrea, she’ll bring my family to me.”

“Simon, don’t do this. You’re a good man. I see it.”

He lunged, pressing the knife to her throat and she knew she could avoid him, could fight him even and have a good chance of winning but then he’d likely hurt Damon and she would rather die than see him hurt.

“I was a good man, now I’m nothing but a shell. Now get moving. I have a car arriving any minute now to take us to Andrea.”

Lotus stepped over Damon’s feet, which were sprawled out in front of him on the couch. She wanted so badly to touch him or kiss him one last time. But she knew any movement she made in his direction put him in danger.

“Here, take this for the ride.”

Simon jerked her head towards him, his cold hands wrapped around her neck as he forced a pill onto her tongue. She’d been planning to fake swallow it but as soon as it touched her mouth it began to dissolve. Closing her eyes, she began praying it wouldn’t harm her baby.

He shoved her in the back as the sound of a vehicle outside hit her ears.

“You’re going to kill me?”

Simon smiled at her, his eyes cold. “I told you, I don’t kill women. That’s a rule I have.”

“You’re going to give me to Andrea?”

“What do you think?”

She knew the answer she didn’t know the reason. Woozy now from whatever he’d given her, she stumbled as the front

door opened and she saw Tim Cooper looming in the doorway.

“She ready?”

“Yeah, chuck her in the trunk.”

Her body swayed as she was lifted, and she fought the effects of the drug as hard as she could, but it was no use. The last thing she did before everything went black was glance at Damon and pray the team could track her before it was too late.

CHAPTER 20

DAMON WOKE IN THE SAFE HOUSE, HIS HEAD POUNDING AND his mouth dry, feeling like it was stuffed with cotton wool. He opened his eyes slowly, trying to remember what had happened. The eerie silence told him he was alone and the thought sent a shiver down his spine. Naz was gone, and the fear of it had him stumbling to his feet. His legs felt weak and wobbly like a newborn foal, and he gripped the edge of the door frame that led to the kitchen to stop himself from going down as he stumbled.

“Naz.” Her name rang out with desperation and the echo of quiet was the only thing that came back to him.

Simon had taken her somewhere while Damon lay unconscious, it was the only explanation that made sense. The fact she'd left him unconscious proved she hadn't done so of her own free will. Naz would never have left him like that. He felt a chill go through him as he realised he must have been drugged by the tea that Simon had made, yet Naz had refused it. His mind was clearing quicker now, his body metabolising whatever he'd been given. The rain still fell but the light from the window showed the late afternoon sun trying to peak through the clouds, causing a rainbow on the horizon that seemed to mock him, meaning that it was most likely hours since she'd been taken.

Slumping back onto the arm of the couch, he rubbed a hand over his face trying to clear the fog that hung off him like sticky sap on his brain, making everything sluggish. He felt

frenzied and panicked as he searched for his phone and found it crushed on the floor.

His eyes traced the room looking for a clue, a sign of a struggle, but there was none, and he didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified. A struggle meant she was alive at least, but then it also meant she could be hurt. Damon jumped off the couch and ran outside, but it was too late; there was no trace of them left. He honestly hadn't expected there to be any, but still, his shoulders fell in defeat.

Trudging back inside, he knew he had to get back to the team and tell them what had happened or at least get word to them. They'd be able to track them with their resources, but it would take time and every second counted now if they wanted to save Nazareli, the woman he loved beyond his wildest expectations from whatever plan Simon and likely Andrea had in store for her.

Damon took a deep breath before running back to the car. This was going to be a long drive and he wasn't sure what awaited him at the end of it. All he knew for certain was that it had to be good, no other option could be tolerated. Before he could open the door to the car, he spied the slashed tires and cursed, lashing out with his fist as a roar of frustration bellowed from him.

Hopeless wasn't a feeling he was used to. He had more money than he could ever spend in ten lifetimes, and yet what good did it do him now?

He was trapped, alone, and the love of his life was vulnerable, and he could do nothing to help her. He had to think fast and come up with a plan. He looked around, searching for anything that could help him, but the safe house was barren and empty. Every piece of comms equipment or technology had been destroyed, including his mobile phone.

He had no choice but to start walking, to find a way out of this godforsaken place. He pulled his coat around him, trying to fend off the biting wind and rain that lashed at his face. The weather was the least of his worries. He needed to make it to the village or any kind of civilisation so he could raise the

alarm. He had a woman to save, a woman he loved more than life itself.

As he walked, Damon replayed the events of the past few hours in his mind, trying to piece together any clues he might have missed. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was something he was missing, some detail that could help him find Naz. He racked his brain, trying to remember anything that might be useful.

Headlights blinded him as a vehicle flew around the corner and he lifted his arm to shield his eyes from the bright light of the headlights. As it braked and pulled to a stop beside him, he tensed, not knowing what or who to expect, but relief flooded him when he saw Duchess and his brother.

“Get in.”

Damon jumped in the back seat and Duchess hit the accelerator. “Talk to me. What happened?”

“Simon drugged me and took Naz.”

“Fuck. How long?”

Damon shook his head trying to clear it as his brother watched him with worry in his eyes. “A few hours maybe.”

Duchess glanced at him in the rearview mirror, her expression grave. “We'll track them down. We won't stop until we find her.”

Damon gave a nod, his heart pounding in his chest. “We have to hurry. They could be doing anything to her.”

“We'll find her, Damon. We always do.”

He knew she was trying to reassure him, but he wouldn't rest until Naz was safe in his arms.

As they drove, Damon's mind raced with possibilities of what could be happening to Naz. He couldn't bear the thought of her being hurt, or worse. He clenched his jaw, feeling powerless with each passing second.

Duchess pulled up to the safe house, the engine still running. “Let's see if we can find any clues.”

The three of them got out, the rain still pouring down on them. They searched every inch of the place, turning over furniture and checking for any signs of a struggle. But once again, there was nothing.

“We need to widen our search,” Damon said, his voice tight with tension.

Duchess was on the phone to Bás as Gideon gripped his shoulder.

“We’ll find her, brother.”

Damon looked at the man he’d hero-worshipped all his life and prayed he was right. “What if they don’t? I can’t do this without her.”

Damon knew his brother understood, he loved Duchess with the same ferocity as he loved Naz.

Gideon gripped his face and looked at him with the same formidable expression he’d seen on his face so many times in the boardroom. “We will, and then you’re going to have a beautiful life, Damon. I know it.”

Damon nodded his throat too closed for words to pass.

“They just found Simon Dorsey on his family’s doorstep, shot and almost dead but he’s alive.”

A surge of rage had Damon striding to the door. “Let’s go.”

He would get answers from this motherfucker if he had to beat him to death to get them. He never considered himself a violent man, which in itself was laughable considering the woman he fell for traded in violence, but right now, he thought he could kill anyone who stood between him and Naz with his bare hands.



SEEING Simon Dorsey hooked up to machines and drips, his face ghostly, gave him more satisfaction than he’d expected. He’d never considered himself vengeful but, right this minute,

he felt that it was only right he was fighting for his life after what he'd done.

Damon crossed his arms over his chest, an energy that he couldn't expel pulsing through him as he addressed Bás who stood beside him. "He tell us anything useful?"

"No, just mumbled he was sorry over and over and then passed out."

"Can we bring him around? Wake him up?"

"Yeah, we can do that, but Watchdog is working on locating Lotus. We'll find her."

"Everyone keeps saying that and yet here we are sitting here with our dicks in our hands while God knows what is happening to her and my child."

"I know, believe me, I understand how you're feeling."

Damon rounded on Bás. "Do you? Have you ever had the woman you love kidnapped and felt like you were living a thousand deaths while you waited for news on if she and your baby were alive?"

"Yes, and no."

Bás looked away and Damon felt a flicker of regret for pushing him. "I'm sorry. I know you care about her too."

"I do. I love Lotus like a sister, although a very annoying one, but I also know what it is to feel like your entire world is crumbling because the person you love more than your own life is in danger. I felt it when Val was kidnapped, but I never had the added fear of my child in the mix and I can't imagine what that feels like."

Bishop walked in, his eyes moving to the bed with utter disdain on his face before he glanced at them. "Let's wake this fucker up."

Bás nodded. "Turn down his pain relief. It might make him more inclined to cooperate."

It didn't take long for Simon to begin to stir after Bishop had pushed something through his IV. His low groans of pain

only made Damon see red and he strode to the edge of the bed and yanked the man up by the gown covering his weak body. Both Bishop and Bás stood back, arms crossed and let him.

“Where the fuck is Lotus, you pathetic prick?”

Simon moaned his eyes bleary and scared. “I... I... I’m sorry.”

Damon shook him, his head lolling as Duchess and Gideon walked into the room. His brother smirked and nodded like he approved.

“I don’t want your fucking apologies, you piece of shit. I want to know where Lotus is.”

“Andrea.”

“What about her?”

Simon’s eyes began to roll in his head and Damon slapped his face, gaining his attention again. “Where the fuck is Andrea holding Lotus? You have three seconds to tell me or, I promise you, you’ll know more pain than you ever imagined possible.”

He wasn’t sure if it was his threat or the way all four people in the room stepped closer as if they couldn’t wait to get in on the action.

“The old cider mill, out towards Ledbury.”

Damon didn’t know it, but the reaction on the other’s faces showed they did. “What does she want her for?”

“Soldiers.”

Damon shook his head not understanding. “What?”

“Andrea wants to make a team of female super soldiers and she wants Lotus as the prototype.”

Motherfucker.

Shoving Simon away, he turned to Duchess and saw the worry flit across her face before she could bury it.

“Get the team ready.”

It took less than ten minutes for Shadow to move into action and they stood, taking their orders off Bás, each member focused and driven on getting Naz back. The air was tinged with simmering anger, fear, and death. He knew that people would die today, and he knew it would be the people who stood between them and Naz.

“I’m coming too.”

“So am I.”

Damon glanced at Gideon, who was glaring at Bás as if to dare him to say no.

“Neither of you are operatives.”

“She’s mine, Bás. I have to be there.”

“Fine. But, Gideon, you stay here.”

“Not a fucking chance. I’m going with my brother so if you want to stop me, you better shoot me.”

“He should come.”

Damon watched the silent interaction between Bás and Duchess, and a poisonous bile swirled in his belly.

“Fine, but do as you’re told. Reaper, get him a vest.”

As he waited, his fingers itching to rush out of the building and run to her no matter the consequences to himself, he saw Duchess pull Gideon aside. He moved closer, torn between wanting to hear and not as she began to speak.

“Gideon, you need to keep a close eye on your brother because there’s a very good chance Lotus is dead.”

“What?”

“Andrea isn’t a scientist like her dad was, and the dosage for that drug needs to be perfect. Just a few mills over and it will kill her.”

“Fuck, this will crush him.”

“I know, so stay close to him.”

Damon had to step away, the words like hot brands on his skin as anguish he could hardly stand tried to crush his chest.

She couldn't be dead, he would know. A love like that didn't just die, he'd feel it. He had to believe she was alive or he'd go berserk and lose his mind.

CHAPTER 21

WAKING UP WITH A START, LOTUS WENT TO WIPE HER FACE and found her arms bound behind her back. Suddenly assaulted with what had happened at the safehouse, her mind went to her baby and the pill she'd planned to fake swallow dissolving on her tongue before she could spit it out. She should have known Simon was too savvy to trust her to take it and that was without him even knowing about her condition. She'd been so focused on Damon, her concern for him had overridden her sense and she just prayed it didn't harm her child.

Barely three months in and she was already fucking up her kid. What was she even thinking having a child? She'd be better off handing it over to Damon and walking away. He'd be a great dad. He was everything she wished she'd had as a kid. Kind, funny, caring, loving, and unafraid to wear his heart on his sleeve.

Her musings were cut short when the door to a bland, boring, almost empty, room, which only contained a chair and a filing cabinet, pushed open. Lotus took in the space and realised it was a stone outbuilding of some kind. The sweet, sickly smell of apple pie coated her throat and made her already delicate stomach object.

Lastly, she gave her attention to the woman who was watching her from the door; Andrea Peston. She was of medium height with mousy brown hair and cold, yet beautiful, blue eyes. Her business suit was immaculate, but she wore a white lab coat as if to add more authority to her presence. She

was trying too hard, and it was clear this woman was trying to be something she wasn't. A dangerous game for her to play with someone like Lotus, who liked to play with her food.

“The great Nazareli Holt, what a pleasure to meet you. I'd shake your hand, but you seem a little tied up.”

Ah, so that was the game afoot. Trying to belittle her and make her feel less so she could feel important. Lotus almost laughed out loud at her sad attempt to bait her. She'd been up close and personal with Rhea Winslow, who was a true monster. This woman was a pathetic imitation. That was the thing about Rhea Winslow, she'd been true evil, but she'd also been fucking smart and cold and calculating in a way that you could almost admire. If she'd put her brain and energy into good, there would've been no way to stop her, and the world would've benefitted.

“I apologise. You have me at a disadvantage. I have no idea who you are.”

Lotus saw the tick of her jaw at the jab to her ego before she hid it behind a feigned mask of indifference.

“Then let me introduce myself. I'm Andrea Peston, and you and I are going to be very good friends.”

“Oh, my friends don't usually tie me up, at least not unless we're really good friends if you know what I mean, and then only if I ask them to.” Lotus winked and chuckled and she could sense she was already getting to the woman.

“Very droll, but you can cut the sarcasm.”

Lotus inclined her head. “Okay, so tell me why you have me here. I assume it isn't for my wit and company.”

Andrea stepped forward, her high heels clacking on the concrete floor, as she stopped just a few steps away. So not completely stupid then.

“You're here because my father saw something in you and I'm here to finish his work.”

“And who is your father?”

Andrea pursed her lips in obvious irritation, showing how much the little digs were getting at her that, with a woman like Lotus, was unwise.

“Dr Clive Peston. The man who oversaw the scientific programme for your very dead boss.”

That was interesting to Lotus because she clearly believed that Lotus had been on the same side as Rhea, which meant she didn't know anywhere close to what she thought she did.

“I remember him. A bald little man who had a habit of talking to my breasts and not my face.”

The slap was swift and stung, making Lotus grit her teeth to stop the natural fury she would normally exude from such an action.

“Watch your mouth when you speak of him. He was a great scientist, and I'll finish his work.”

“You're a scientist too?”

Her cheek throbbed but it only increased her focus and told her more about Andrea than she wished her to see. Her father was her weakness, and not because she loved him or worshipped him, but because she was aware of the distasteful traits the man had had. He'd blatantly ogled the other female scientists and, if it wasn't for his genius in the lab, Lotus would have ended his sorry life years ago.

“No, I'm a businesswoman, but luckily for me, I don't have to be a measly scientist. My father left all the recipes and equations for his drug in his journals. I have everything I need to finish his work.”

Andrea seemed to have no understanding of just how dumb she was if she believed she had what it took to become the next Rhea Winslow. “And how does that work exactly? What's the end game here?”

The hands at her sides fluttered excitedly as if she'd been dying for her to ask that exact question. “I'm happy you asked.”

“I'll bet.”

Andrea frowned at the comment but was too engrossed in herself to realise she was being insulted, or perhaps it was too subtle.

“You’re a fine specimen. Smart, fit, beautiful, calculating, and your heart is made of pure stone. Your time with Winslow proves you take orders well and because of your size, you have the ability to look unassuming.”

“Thank you.” Lotus gave a fake smile at the not compliment, but her brain was rushing ahead, and a slither of fear took root in her chest, not for her but what this meant for her child and others if she was right in her suspicions.

Andrea paced slowly in front of her as if teasing her, baiting her when in fact Lotus was just biding her time.

“Rhea Winslow was smart, no doubt, but she made a fatal mistake that cost her, and I won’t do the same.”

“Which was?”

Lotus wiggled her wrists, testing the binds and finding them secure. Likely Simon or Tim had made sure she wouldn’t be a problem. Her mouth was dry, and she’d kill for a glass of water, but she wouldn’t touch anything these people gave her. She just needed to find a way out or wait for her team to find her.

“She used men as the soldiers in her army when every woman knows that we’re the far more dangerous sex.”

Yep, her worst fear was becoming a reality. “That’s your plan? To use me as a member of your zombie army?”

“Not just a member, Nazareli, but the pinnacle. The woman others will look to. I want you to lead them.”

“But I’ll still be your zombie.”

Andrea gave a tinkly little laugh, which sounded more unhinged than girlish. “Well, of course. I can’t have you turning on the hand that feeds you, can I?”

Tension was tingling in her body now at the thought of that poison entering her bloodstream. That drug was made with the intention of giving it to men and held huge quantities of

testosterone, as well as God knew what else. Who knew what it would do to her.

“It won’t work, Andrea. It was designed for men, to make them aggressive and compliant. The quantities alone would be impossible to work out without the risk of killing your subject.”

A delicate hand waved in the air. “Don’t be silly, my father said it would work before he died. I just have to adjust, based on weight and body mass.”

Lotus had no idea why he had told her that because it just wasn’t true. She had not a scientific bone in her body, but she realised the risks involved. Andrea was in no way smart enough to pull this off. All she would succeed in doing would be to slaughter countless women.

“I don’t know why he said that, but he was wrong.”

“Don’t you fucking dare dismiss his legacy. My father was a great man, he sacrificed time with his family for this mission and I will finish it for him.”

“You mean he neglected you, and now you want to justify Daddy not loving you by killing people with a drug you have no idea how to administer.”

Another slap, this one with the back of her hand, the ring on her right-hand splitting Lotus’ lip. The bloody metallic taste on her tongue made her want to gag.

“You know nothing.”

It wasn’t in her nature to give up and, bound like she was, she only had her ability to piss people off to get under Andrea’s skin. “I know a woman who’s pretending when I see her. I know a pathetic imitation trying to be something she isn’t. What’s the plan? Will Simon or Tim guard you when this is done if you succeed? Because let me tell you, Andrea, if you make this happen and get hundreds of women like me, killers, who are cold and calculating, under your control, and you make the slightest mistake, they’ll kill you and not only not think twice, they’ll enjoy it. And let me tell you, I’ll be first in that line.”

“Simon is dead. He served his usefulness.”

Despite his betrayal, Lotus felt sad that the man who'd worked so hard to get better had been killed. All he'd wanted was his family back, and now she was here, and he was dead. Perhaps that was poetic. She was now where she'd forced the men under her leadership, albeit undercover, to be. Now she was about to lose the man she loved and possibly her unborn child.

“I'm pregnant.”

It was a long shot, but perhaps the maternal part of this woman would kick in and buy her some time.

Again, her hand fluttered in the air, making Lotus want to snap her wrist like a twig.

“Easily dealt with. A simple pill and that little problem will flow down the drain. Perhaps the drug will even take care of it for us.”

Andrea turned to the open door and beckoned to someone she couldn't see, and Tim Copper stepped into the room. He was clearly already under the influence, but he hadn't been before. It made her wonder if he was on board with this or whether he'd seen what happened to Simon and got cold feet, resulting in Andrea having to drug him.

Lotus' eyes zeroed in on the needle in his hand, the hypodermic looked more terrifying than any weapon she'd ever faced.

Her fight or flight was usually under control but now, with the stakes so high and her child's health and well-being at risk, flight took over. Her body began to thrash as she tried to fight her way free.

“Please, Andrea, don't do this. Keep me here if you must, but please don't use that on me. I'll do whatever you ask of me.”

Tears and fear clogged her throat and her breaths felt stalled in her throat as Tim moved toward her, grabbing her shoulder to still her. In a fair fight, she could take this man, she'd trained with Hurricane and Bein enough to know that

big men had weaknesses too and she knew them all, but she had her arms tied, her legs bound to the chair, and her instinct to fight in any way that risked her baby was hampering her.

“You’re right. You’ll do as I say because I have the drug to make you.”

Andrea nodded at Tim. “Give her half.”

She felt the first sting of the needle as it was shoved into her arm, the drug-like poison moving through her veins as she sobbed, feeling more helpless than she ever had in her life.

Tim stepped back beside Andrea and they both looked at her like she was the specimen in a cage. Never had she felt so violated, so afraid, so helpless, but as they watched for what felt like hours, that fear and hopelessness began to wane and a blessed emptiness took over. It was a relief and Lotus leaned into the feeling of nothing, her head falling forward as her breathing calmed. This was better, no pain, no fear, no worry for the baby she carried inside her. Just the readiness to do what was asked.

Looking up, she saw Andrea watching, and waited for her to give her a mission. Her only job was to do as she was asked. No other thought entered her head and then she heard it, a sound that meant the enemy had arrived.

“Nazareli, you’ll do as I say and defend me. I want you to kill the people sent to hurt me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“You will kill the enemy.”

“Yes.”

Her arms and legs were cut loose, and Lotus rose, rocking her neck to remove the kinks before turning to the sound beyond the door. The enemy was here, and it was her job to kill them, at all costs.

CHAPTER 22

THE OLD CIDER MILL WAS EXACTLY THAT, AN OLD STONE building where apples were crushed and processed to make cider. The original owners had moved on, upgrading their process so it was done by machines for bigger volume, but the buildings had been left abandoned.

Secluded as they were, it was the perfect place for Andrea to begin her ridiculous plan. He had no doubt she didn't have what it took to achieve it, but the devastation she could and had already caused trying would leave a ripple effect on those affected that reached far and wide.

He'd been quiet as Bás and Duchess came up with a plan, discussing and dismissing different approaches and possible scenarios until they had what they deemed the best plan. Normally, they'd have time to evaluate and plan, but with Naz at risk, they had little time.

Luckily, Watchdog had the plans for the mill and a drone in the air, giving them vital feedback. From what he could see on the heat signatures, it was just the three of them, Andrea, Tim, and Naz. Which begged the question as to why Andrea didn't have a bigger team around her. When Watchdog had looked deeper, he'd found a lonely, isolated girl who'd become a lonely, isolated woman obsessed with pleasing a father that wasn't interested in her, only his work.

"I want you to stay in the van."

Damon shook his head. "No way. I'm coming in and seeing this through."

“God damn it, Damon, this isn’t a joke. You could get hurt or we could find something you won’t ever recover from.”

He knew Duchess was trying to protect him, that the chances of Lotus being hurt or worse were extremely high, but he wouldn’t sit here safe while she was at risk. He loved her and he’d be there no matter what.

He turned to Gideon. “Would you stay here if it was Nadia?”

Gideon shook his head, even as his jaw tensed in displeasure at the thought. “Nadia, he needs to be there. We can both stay behind the team.”

Duchess growled and then sighed. “Fine, but if you die, I’m going to kick both your asses.”

The team consisted of Bás, Duchess, Bein, Reaper, and Hurricane inside, and Snow, Val with Scout and Monty, and Titan outside. They were concerned about an ambush and wanted to be ready.

“We ready?”

Damon nodded, even as his gut churned at what awaited them inside. “Yes.”

“Okay.”

In a practiced move, they alighted from the van and he and Gideon fell into step behind Duchess and Bás, which he knew wasn’t easy for Gideon. Standing behind your wife in a fight was alien and felt wrong, but it was the only way she or Bás would allow them to be there. He had to remember they were trained, and he and his brother were not.

Slipping inside the mill was easier than he’d expected, almost as if Andrea wanted them inside. The scent of apples hit his nose and he knew he’d always associate it with this moment and whatever came next.

They rounded a corner behind the team, his view impaired from what was in front of them by the hulking bodies of Bein, Reaper, and Hurricane. Weapons up and on alert, he wasn’t

ready for the blur of movement in front of him as he stepped into a wide-open space.

Damon's eyes widened as he watched two figures collide in a flurry of fists and feet. Lotus' flowing hair twirled around her body as she dodged Bein's jabs, executing swift and precise counterattacks with panther-like grace. Despite her incredible skill, Damon could feel fear coursing through his veins as he watched his beloved dive into the fight with unyielding aggression. Bein was clearly trying not to hurt her, but each time their bodies clashed, it felt like an eternity before they parted ways again. The only thing on her mind seemed to be ending this battle once and for all.

Bás and Duchess had warned him of the possibility of Naz being used as a weapon, but seeing it was almost too much to bear. His eyes burned into Andrea Peston, radiating with hatred for the woman who seemed to be enjoying watching Lotus battle her own team. His heart pounded in his chest as he saw the gun in her hand pointed at Lotus' head. He knew that if anyone tried to stop her, she'd pull the trigger without hesitation.

"It seems you came unprepared."

"Let her go!" he bellowed, desperation colouring his voice.

"Oh no," she cackled, "I'm having far too much fun watching this show."

For once, he felt helpless. Bein held back his blows against Lotus yet still drew blood. In that moment, he'd have done anything to keep them safe—even get down on his hands and knees to beg.

He knew Bein had a weapon, but he seemed to be holding back from using it. Probably because he didn't want to risk hurting her while she seemed to have no such qualms about fighting dirty. She was getting hurt too but she kept coming at him, never slowing down for even an instant as they traded blows.

At one point, she had his shirt collar gripped in her fist and threw him across the room, managing to land two heavy kicks

before he recovered and came after her again. Now they were both sporting bruises and cuts from where their punches landed, but neither of them seemed willing to back off or give up, but he knew Bein was doing everything in his power not to hurt her, just control her or tire her out, so she could be overpowered without getting hurt. The red dot from the gun Tim held focused on Lotus also kept the rest of the team from going after him. One wrong move and she'd be dead. Those sick assholes had complete control of them and all they could do was watch.

Lotus violently blocked Bein's strike, snarling as he tried to put her in a chokehold. With power and grace, she used her legs around his neck to pin him. A sickening crack resounded from Bein's shoulder as Lotus violently wrenched it out of its socket, eliciting a howl of agony from the man she thought of as a brother. Tears of pain and unconscious guilt welled up in Lotus' eyes. Damon knew that what happened here today would linger with her for years and she didn't consciously realize it yet but she would and he would be there to hold her together when she fell apart.

"Tim, stay and ensure she does as she's told. I have someplace I need to be."

Damon wanted to claw at the walls as Hurricane and Reaper stepped up to try and take down Lotus, but Tim jerked his chin as he held the gun pointed firmly at Lotus as she moved..

"One at a time or she dies."

Hurricane moved to drag Bein away as Reaper stepped up to fight his friend. The magnitude of it was etched on his face.

Andrea slipped out through a side door, and it was the first good thing to happen since this nightmare began because it was something he'd foreseen.

Andrea Peston wasn't a criminal mastermind, and he knew his brother Carter had been just that.

Moments later, Titan's voice came over the radio. "*We got her,*" he said with a satisfied tone in his voice.

Val, with Scout and Monty, must have seized Andrea while Titan led her away to secure her.

His relief was short-lived as Damon watched in horror as Lotus charged forward, her body a blur of motion and rage as she hurled herself at Reaper and Duchess, who was slightly off to the side. His sister-in-law was tall and strong, but Lotus was faster and more agile than Duchess expected, and she didn't want to fight her. She managed to pin her arms behind her back in a split second, using all her strength to force Duchess onto her knees.

Gideon jumped in and dragged his wife away, his eyes locking on him, begging him to do something.

Reaper, however, wasn't so easy to take down. He was bigger than Lotus and seemed to be holding back from fighting with full force, obviously not wanting to hurt a pregnant woman. He saw her as a sister even if she was under mind control. His hesitancy cost him dearly though as Lotus used it against him, delivering powerful blows that eventually knocked him off balance and onto the ground with an audible thud.

Lotus descended on him like a feral beast, her fists pounding and legs thrashing as if driven by an inhuman rage.

"Damon, you need to talk to her, try and get through to her."

Damon looked at Bás who had edged toward him, a look of powerlessness on his face that he knew didn't sit well. "You think she'll listen?"

Bás shrugged and shook his head, his hands completely tied even as he edged sideways again trying to get closer to Tim so he could take him down. "Just fucking try or she's going kill herself or someone she cares about and that will be a different kind of death for her."

Damon could only watch, helpless to his own terror until he remembered the person she was beneath that mask of hatred. A woman who loved so hard she almost broke herself in two. Clearing his throat, he cried out for her to stop. To his

shock, she diverted her wrath in mid-swing, turning towards him, stalking him with eyes so cold and empty they left him broken inside as she stopped mere feet in front of him, leaving Reaper forgotten on the ground. “Baby, please. It’s me.”

Her head tilted slightly in what looked like confusion and then she continued her attack with a fist so powerful it made Damon see stars. He scrambled away just in time for Naz to miss her follow-up kick and jumped back as she advanced again. Blood dripped from her lip and brow, but there was no fatigue on her face—just pure destructive energy. Damon circled Lotus, desperately trying to salvage something familiar in her deadened gaze. She was a soldier now; no longer the woman he loved, only a merciless weapon the drug had taken control of. His heart pounded like drums against his rib cage as he searched for any possible way to save her from this hellish trance. “Naz, baby, it’s me. It’s Damon,” he begged even though he knew it might cost him his life.

He knew he had to be careful, one false move and she’d be on him again, but he had to do something before it was too late. “Naz, listen to me. You have to fight it. You have to remember who you are.”

Lotus’ eyes flickered for a moment as if she was trying to focus on his words, but then they went blank again and she charged at him, fists flying. He could see Tim Cooper hesitating in the background as if he wasn’t sure what to do, the drugs were clearly wearing off or not as effective as Andrea had hoped, but he kept his weapon aimed on Lotus the red dot bouncing around her body the only thing keeping this team from taking him down and keeping him alive right now.

He managed to dodge her blows, backing away slowly as he tried to think of something else to say. A memory flashed in his mind of the first time they’d kissed. They’d been bickering about him paying for her drink at the bar and he’d been smiling like a loon, just enjoying every second of his interactions with the contrary woman when she’d gone on her tiptoes and kissed him hard, biting his bottom lip and turning his dick to stone. She’d stepped away before he could lean into her and told him they were equal now because a man would

never buy a drink for a woman without wanting something in return. He'd told her she was wrong and thus begun another heated debate.

“Do you remember the first time you kissed me?”

He watched her gait slow as she came at him, a flicker of something flashed in her eyes before it was gone. “I bought you a drink and you kissed me because you said I'd never do it without wanting something from you.”

She was in his face now, breathing hard, her chest heaving.

“You were right. I did want something, I wanted you. I wanted your today, your tomorrows. I want a life with you and me together in whatever format that takes.”

“Nazareli, finish this.”

Damon glanced at Tim who looked cold but less sure than he had, hesitant almost, confused by his own words. His eye caught on Bás from his peripheral as he moved towards Tim slowly, waiting for the right moment to strike. It made him wonder at the effectiveness of the drug because he didn't think fear was possible in this state.

Before he could decide, his legs were taken from under him and his body hit the ground with a bone-jarring shudder, his head smacking the edge of the door. Lotus straddled him, her knees digging into his shoulders as her hands came around his neck.

He could hear the team shouting at her, trying to get through to her, their hearts breaking too, as Bein cradled his arm, Duchess was in Gideon's arms, Bás looking fit to be tied, and Reaper bleeding from a wound on his face as he held his ribs.

Yet he focused on her as her hands squeezed and his breaths became harder to draw into his body. “I love you, Naz. I won't fight you. I love you so much. You've made my life complete. You and our baby.”

Each word was scorched and jagged, torn from him as he tried to make contact with her through the drugs. Lifting his hand, he laid it against her lower belly and she stilled, her

arms relaxing just enough to allow oxygen into his burning lungs.

Scalding hot tears cascaded down his face as he watched her. “I love you, baby. Now and forever, I’ll always love you.”

Naz blinked once, twice, and then slowly, oh so slowly, he saw the spark of life return to her eyes, a spark that brought with it an indomitable hope. Her body went limp as she let all the pain and anguish she had been suppressing for years come pouring out of her in rivers of tears. He rolled her to her back, his body coming over her’s, ready to protect her from the bullet that would surely kill him when Tim fired.

“I love you, baby.”

A deafening roar ripped from her throat as if the torment and heartache were too much to bear any longer. Around him, Shadow was moving, taking out Tim, with a lethal efficiency, but his sole focus was Naz as she clung to him and wailed like her soul was being ripped apart.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Her broken whispers echoed around them as he embraced her. He caressed her hair and kept repeating it would be alright over and over, though deep down he knew there was no guarantee of anything anymore. He just knew whatever happened, whatever future awaited them, he’d be beside her every step and he’d never let her go again. If she ran away one more time, he’d follow her to the ends of the wilderness and back.

CHAPTER 23

DAMON HAD TAKEN HER STRAIGHT TO THE PRIVATE HOSPITAL to get her and the baby checked out after they'd cleared the scene and she'd been so out of it she hadn't seen anyone but him and Bás.

"It's going to be okay, Naz."

Her wet gaze found Damon's worried one and guilt assailed her so hard she slumped back in the chair. "I'm sorry."

He came to kneel in front of her, taking her hands. "Stop saying that."

"I was so stupid. How could I have let myself be taken in by Simon like that?"

"Because you're human and he played on the weak point of your guilt over the past."

"Is he going to live?"

Damon nodded, dropping his head. "Yeah."

"And Andrea? She's locked up right?"

This sense of panic had never been her. She was always calm, unflustered, but being out of control like that had changed so much. She'd always taken for granted her right to choose her actions. While she'd said she understood what the men at the centre had gone through with Rhea Winslow, she hadn't. Not then. "Do they hate me?"

"What? No! They love you, Naz. We all do."

"How bad did I hurt them?"

“You just knocked them around a bit.”

She had no memory of the fight or what transpired after, just the feeling of Damon when her mind had somehow snapped out of the fog it had been trapped inside.

The door opened and a doctor she didn't recognise walked into the room.

“Hello, I'm Dr Suarez. What seems to be the problem?”

Lotus could feel the doctor's gaze move over her, taking in the bloody lip, the cut on her brow, and the bruising already forming on her cheekbone. Her accusing glare moved to Damon who didn't even notice, as he was too focused on her.

“I was mugged and I'm pregnant. I just need to see if my baby is okay.” She didn't mention the drugs. Their own people would take her blood and check that.

“Okay, let's look and see how your baby is doing. Hop up on the table.”

Lotus did as she was asked and then lay back as the doctor positioned the ultrasound machine and motioned for her to lift her top. The cool gel felt nice on her hot skin.

“Any cramping or bleeding?”

“No, nothing like that.”

Damon held her hand and she squeezed it tight, terrified of letting go and not being able to find her way in the darkness of her mind.

The loud drum of a heartbeat filled the room and her belly hollowed out with relief. Damon grinned, his wide smile tinged with relief and guilt assailed her again. Why was he still here putting up with all the shit that came with being around her?

“Everything looks great. Your baby is safe and sound in its mummy and I see nothing to suggest that the situation will change.”

The doctor offered her a tissue to wipe the gel and Damon took it gently, wiping the gel away and dropping a kiss on her

slight bump, which made her eyes water.

He looked up with tears in his eyes. "I love you, Naz."

"I love you too, Damon."

Dr Suarez looked between them and smiled, seeming to decide Damon wasn't the enemy.

"You should rest for a few days and get some ice on those cuts and bruises. I can clean them and put some steri-strips on the cut on your brow, but it doesn't need stitches."

"I can do that at home."

Dr Suarez shrugged. "Military?"

Lotus looked at her again and saw the same no-nonsense attitude she'd seen from other ex-military physicians. "Something like that. You?"

"Royal Marines. I recognise a tough nut when I see one. Just make sure you rest and call if you have any concerns."

"I will. Thank you."

She smiled at Damon and dipped her head, walking out and leaving them alone.

"Feel a little better now?"

Damon helped her off the table and took her hand, bringing her into his arms. "I feel like I never want to let you out of my sight."

Lotus hung on tight, letting his strong arms bolster her. "I don't ever want you to let me go, Damon." Her gaze rose and she pinned him with a serious expression, praying she didn't scare him away. "Promise me, you won't ever let go."

"I promise, baby. I won't ever let you go, not ever."

"You saved me."

His head shook. "You saved yourself."

"No. It was you who pulled me from the clutches of the drug. I can't explain it. I felt dead inside, like there was just empty space. When you began to speak, all these emotions rushed at me. At first, I tried to fight them because it hurt. All

the grief and fear was overwhelming but then you kept saying you loved me, and your voice, it felt like home. You're my home, Damon. It was your love for me, and mine for you and this baby, that broke through when nothing else could."

"Are you happy about the baby?"

"I was so unsure about being a mum and, honestly, I'm still not sure I'll be any good at it, but when I thought my baby was in danger, I was so afraid. Then when I was drugged, I thought I'd lose him before I had the chance to meet him and tell him how much I loved him."

"Him? You know something I don't?"

Lotus shook her head. "No, just a feeling."

His fingers played with the hair at her nape and she shivered. "Why didn't you spit the pill out?"

"I planned to, but it dissolved on my tongue before I could."

Damon nodded in understanding, and she knew it wasn't an accusation, it was a genuine question. She could let her guard down with him because he'd always want to believe the best about her.

"Tired?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Let's go home, baby."

Exhaustion was trying to take her down, the adrenalin of the day and the last weeks hitting her like a sledgehammer.



"HEY, did you iron out that virus issue with the network?" It had slipped her mind until now.

Watchdog barely looked up. "It was nothing."

"You sure?"

Watchdog sighed, sounding annoyed. "Yes, now drop it."

Her friend had changed, and she missed the man he'd been. Her heart broke for him because she understood what he was going through. Although nobody but Peyton had the full details, not even Bás.

“Knock, knock.”

Lotus looked up from where she was hiding in the tech room with the mostly silent Watchdog and saw Duchess looking at her. She hadn't been able to face either her, Reaper, or Bein since that day a few days ago when she'd tried to kill them.

“Hey.”

“Can we talk?”

Her future felt uncertain right now. The teams' trust and belief in her ability must be shot, and Bás had refused to talk about it until she was rested but had reassured her that her job was safe.

“Sure.”

“The dining hall okay? Val made biscotti.”

Lotus grinned. Biscotti were her weakness. “Why didn't you lead with that?”

She felt tense as she walked beside the woman she thought of as a sister, knowing she'd tried to kill her. Even though she hadn't been in her own mind, she was still the one that had executed those blows. Andrea Peston would be locked up indefinitely for her crimes, and Simon and Tim too. It had turned out they'd only been given a small dose of the drug and so still had some capacity and choices, and they'd chosen vengeance. Damon had withdrawn his offer to represent Simon and she understood why. If it had been Damon this had happened to, she would have murdered every last one of them and lost no sleep over it. She felt sad that two decorated military soldiers had ended up like they had, but she was finally realising it wasn't her fault.

She was glad the man who loved her wasn't like that. He wasn't vengeful or angry and he forgave but never forgot. It was something she was working on being better at, although

she doubted she'd ever be the forgiving type. She was learning slowly that it was okay to be who she was. She'd done some awful things in her life, but it didn't make her a bad person.

Thankfully the fire at Fortis had been small, an out building on the edge of the property and as they suspected, a distraction, but nobody was hurt and the damage had been paid for by Shadow.

Peyton had put her in touch with the grief councillor and she had her first appointment next week. She hoped it helped but wasn't sure she'd ever get from under the heavy blanket even with all the good she had in her life.

Her step faltered when she saw Bein, Reaper, and Hurricane sitting around the table in the far corner waiting for her. "What the hell is this?"

Duchess gave her a gentle shove towards them. "It's time to stop hiding."

"I wasn't hiding." Her denial was full of bite, and she knew they saw right through her.

"Oh stop, just sit the fuck down and listen."

Lotus raised a brow at Duchess, who didn't often lash out at her. Sulkily, Lotus moved to sit opposite Bein, Reaper, and Hurricane as if it was some kind of them and her thing.

"Oh, for God's sake."

Bein stood and moved to sit beside her, his free arm, the one not in a sling from a dislocated shoulder, came around her shoulders.

"Listen up, Naz. You're not to blame for what happened. We hold no grudge, no anger, so stop beating yourself up. We love your prickly ass so stop hiding from us."

Tears hit her eyes and she blinked them back as she leaned into his hold. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh God, don't cry. Damon will castrate us if we make you cry."

Hurricane moved and sat on the other side, his big hand covering her own. “You have nothing to be sorry for except maybe that roundhouse kick you used on Reaper. Your form was awful, like a jungle cat after an all-night bender. Sleek but messy as fuck.”

Lotus laughed despite herself, and Reaper caught her eye and winked.

“He’s right. You need some work, my girl.”

For the first time, perhaps ever, she realised how fucking lucky she was to have these people in her life. She’d thought she knew but this last year they’d stepped up over and over again and shown her how much they loved her, and she needed them to know she loved them too.

“I love you guys, all of you.” She reached for Duchess’ hand and squeezed. “I hope you know how much.”

“Weirdo alert if I ever saw one. Someone call an exorcist because I think Lotus just grew a heart bigger than her ego.”

“Shut it, Bein.” She playfully shoved him away and chuckled at the same time. The silly banter between them was back and the atmosphere in the room lightened up.

“Uh-huh, sure. We know you love us. Love you too, Lotus.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever, Hurricane.”

Lotus nodded as Reaper tossed her a knowing smile. “All good?”

“Yep, all good here.”

Bein gave a dramatic sigh, “Good thing too since I have to be at this posh event with the King of Spain tonight.”

“Oh wow! Do you get to wear a crown too?”

He scoffed. “No... But something worse—a tuxedo. Ugh!”

She was about to respond when Titan rushed into the room with a bundle of clothes in his arms, looking panicked as fuck. “Help!”

What the hell, would her life ever be calm? They all stood as he thrust the bundle at Duchess.

“Jesus, is that a baby?”

“I found it outside the doors of the rescue centre with this note.”

Lotus grabbed the note and flipped it open.

PLEASE TAKE CARE OF HIM. I wish I could, but he isn't safe with me. Tell my baby boy I love him and always will, but I'm leaving him with people who can protect him.

His name is Tarique.

XX

“HOLY HELL, SOMEONE CALL BÁS.”

EPILOGUE

THREE YEARS LATER

EVERYTHING HAD CHANGED, BUT NOTHING MORE SO THAN their relationship. They were now living in the barn conversion Damon had bought for them, part of an old farm estate that time had forgotten, and she couldn't have been happier. All the pain and suffering she'd endured had led her to this moment, to this life that she loved with every part of her being. Their son, Oliver Rykov Cavendish, a product of their love and commitment to one another, was also the reminder of how much they needed each other and how far they'd come since those early days when fear had controlled her every move.

The only thing she hadn't done was say yes to the marriage proposal Damon made at least twice a year. He was so patient and loving and every time she said no, she felt guilt slam into her for rejecting a man who she loved with her whole broken, cracked heart, but he reassured her that her being his wife was only the cherry and he loved the entire cake.

He knew her fear was that making that commitment would change things, would take the perfect life they had and mess it up. She was so happy with him and Oliver, and it terrified her to think it would ever change, but she knew change wasn't always bad. She'd changed so much these last few years and all for the better, and Damon seemed to love her harder with every day.

He always made sure to let her know how much he loved her, even when she had doubts or felt lost. He'd recount stories from those first few months—like the time he'd kissed her without wanting anything in return—as a reminder that sometimes life had a funny way of leading people to where they needed to be. Things were different then, but it was those moments that kept her grounded when things got tough and her memories of what they shared kept her strong even through the darkest times.

Over the course of two years, Damon had set up his own practice to help victims of crime seek justice when nobody else cared to find it. Lotus admired his need to make the world a better place and loved him for being that man. Not a day went by when she wasn't grateful for his love and for the way he'd fought for her, and sometimes against her, to get them to this place.

Being a mother had mellowed her, but she was still her, still the same person who barked and snapped on occasion. Who gave her teammates hell and showed her love for them with sarcasm and snark.

Only Damon and Oliver got her soft side. They were the two people in her life who saw the gentle, vulnerable side and as scary as that was sometimes, especially when having Oliver felt like her heart walked outside her chest, the rewards were indescribably beautiful. Perhaps it was time to shed the fear and do something selfless for the man she loved.

“Hey, what you doing out here, in the dark?”

Lotus turned from where she sat on the balcony off their bedroom and offered Damon a soft smile as he loosened his tie and came towards her. “Waiting for you.”

Damon dipped his head and kissed her, and she fell into the familiar taste of home that never failed to soothe and ignite her. Pushing up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against him.

Damon cupped her hips and ground his already hard cock against her belly.

“Perhaps I should go away more often if this is the welcome home I get.” Her teeth nipped his bottom lip and he hissed in pleasure. “Hmm, my girl wants to play rough tonight.”

“I just want you to love me, however you please.”

Letting go had never been easy for her, but Damon always seemed to know what she needed and when, and not just in bed. He watched, he listened, and he anticipated. She'd said

more than once he'd have made a great operative and he'd shuddered.

“Easiest thing I've ever done was loving you, Naz.”

Her head cocked and she regarded him, the moonlight and the lamp beside their bed casting him in shadow. But it didn't matter, she knew every curve on his handsome face. “I'm not easy to love.”

“You are to me. I know you don't see it, baby, but Oliver and I adore you. He looks at you as if you hang the moon because, to us, you do.”

Tears stung behind her eyes and she blinked, burying her nose on his shirt, and drawing in the intoxicating scent of him. “Don't make me cry.”

“Not trying to, just telling you what I see.”

Lifting her head, she gazed at him. “I love you so much, Damon, that sometimes I can't catch my breath because of the fear of losing you.”

“I know, baby, and the selfish part of me hopes that never goes away because I know it means you love me as much as I love you.”

“You're the least selfish man I know.”

“I'm selfish with you, Naz. I want you all the time. If I could, I'd move us to our private island and never let you go.”

“You'd miss Gideon and Nadia and the family.”

“I would but the payoff would be you, twenty-four-seven.”

Her laugh was low. “Not sure if that's not a punishment rather than a prize.”

“A prize. Always a prize, baby.”

“How about you give me a prize tonight?”

“Oh yeah, and what would that be?”

“Me riding your thick cock.”

“Fuck, baby.”

He moved quickly, spinning her around and pushing her against the glass railing of the balcony that overlooked nothing but fields. Shoving her nightdress up over her hips, he pressed down on her back and smoothed his hands over her skin.

When his fingers found her wet and needy pussy bare for him, he groaned.

“God, I love you, but tonight I want to pound this tight pussy under the stars.”

His fingers dug into her ass, as she heard him unzip his trousers and free his hot cock before driving into her in one hard thrust.

Her head went back on his shoulder as her fingers gripped the railing.

“You like that, Naz?”

“It’s so good, but I want more.” She craved his loss of control.

“You’re greedy, baby, but I’ll give you what you want.”

He withdrew fully, his hand wandering over her body, the strap of the nightdress slipping down as his rough hands palmed her tits, pinching her sensitive nipples until she cried out.

“Fuck me, Damon.”

His arm came around her belly and his firm fingers gripped her pussy, stroking her clit in hard unforgiving circles. She felt him line his cock up to her entrance, ramming into her in one swift move. She cried out and he leaned over her and took her mouth in a hard kiss as he fucked her.

“Mmmm. I love how wet and tight you are.” He kissed her again and she felt his hand leave her tit and his fingers funnel into the hair at the nape of her neck so he could hold her head in place. “I love the feel of your pussy gripping my cock tight and hot as you come around me.”

“I love you.” She bit into his lips, and he fucked her harder.

“I love you too, baby.”

He kissed her again and she heard him murmuring sweet words of love and need as he pumped into her hard enough to make her clit ache with the friction on the railing.

“You feel so good, so tight. I can’t wait to feel you come around me.”

“Please,” she whispered, and he kissed her again and she felt his cock expand inside of her.

“I’m coming.”

“I know, baby. You’re so beautiful when you come for me.”

It was always like this with them and sometimes she wondered why on earth she had ever resisted him.

“Love you, Naz,” he whispered, and she felt her orgasm tear through her, and Damon cried out as he came inside her.

His fingers brushed her clit again and she moaned. “Not done yet, baby. I want to feel you come again.”

“Yes.”

He carried on thrusting into her, his dick still hard, his gaze focused on her face as she let him make her burn. Her pussy clenched his cock as she struggled to breathe. His fingers left her clit and wrapped around her neck, and she moaned.

His thumb brushed her chin and he leaned down and took her mouth in a hard and demanding kiss as she felt him pulse inside of her.

“Take me over, Naz. I want to feel you come.”

“Fuck” she cried out as she felt her orgasm tear through her once more.

Panting, she heard Damon chuckle as he withdrew from her. “I think it’s time for bed.”

“You don’t mean sleep though, do you?”

“Of course not. I’m gonna fuck you until the sun comes up.”

She laughed and his hands roamed over her skin as he held her. “Good job Oliver’s a deep sleeper.”

“Good job indeed.”

Much later as she lay in Damon’s arms, she wondered at the beautiful life she had and if she deserved it after all the pain she’d caused. She still did the job she loved, though these days she was more selective about the role she played in them. She had a man who worshipped her, who she loved beyond her imagining, and a son who was her moon and stars and everything in between. Her team were the family she chose and she knew, with them, no matter what, she’d never be alone or feel alone.

“I can hear your brain working.”

Damon’s drowsy voice pulled her from her musings, and she smiled at him before dropping a kiss to the one and only tattoo on his perfect body, the date they’d met and he’d said he fell in love with her and the date Oliver was born, over his heart. “Just thinking about life and how lucky I am.”

“How about you thinking about sucking my cock instead?”

He shoved the sheet down, exposing his hardening dick and his hand lazily stroked before she took over. Any other woman might be annoyed he’d dismissed her thoughts, but he knew her. He knew her getting in her head could be a bad thing, so he took control and changed the course of her thinking with sex. She loved him for it, but she was still her, and Nazareli Holt would always have an attitude.

“Or you could let me ride your face, while you fuck me with that talented tongue. If you do a good job, I might suck your dick.” She’d definitely be doing that. She loved to see him at her mercy, she just loved him.

“Get that sweet ass up here.”

Damon tapped his chest, and she swung her leg over him and then her mind was on nothing but him.



LOTUS HELD Oliver's small hand, the pads of her fingers, rough from her job, rasping against his silky baby skin. Together they walked along a path in the field behind the house, the wildflowers dancing almost as tall as her son, their colours dazzling and bright under the sun's warm glow.

Oliver excitedly pointed at every creature and bug he saw, whether big or small, furry or feathered, stopping to admire and investigate the world around him and Lotus answered all his questions with patience and love.

They finally reached a little pond where small newts and frogs scrambled to get out of the water onto rocks to bask in the sun, seemingly unafraid of the chatter from her small son. She lifted him up so that he could see them better, knowing full well how much he loved watching the creatures move about. She imagined he had a future in nature or ecology, but at two it was impossible to tell what he might be. All she wanted for him was to be happy.

"Oliver," she said gently, "what do you think those little guys are doing?"

He peered forward with rapt attention before replying, "Maybe they're playing hide and seek!"

Lotus laughed and hugged him close to her heart, feeling the love pour out for her son. "You might be right about that."

She knew that these moments with Oliver were precious beyond measure. He was growing up too fast already but no matter what life would throw their way, she'd always be there beside him.

For a moment, she allowed herself the luxury of taking in the beauty of the day, the sun warm on her face before being interrupted by a deep sexy voice that made her shiver with longing coming up behind them.

"My beautiful family."

She turned around to find Damon standing there with bright eyes and open arms. His embrace was strong and loving as he pulled her into his chest and then kissed Oliver on the

head before gathering both of them in one strong swoop into his arms.

The sun shone brightly above them, its rays beaming down on their little family. She felt a sense of peace wash over her as they stood there together—safe, loved, and content. Ignoring all her worries for just that one moment, she closed her eyes and snuggled deeper into Damon’s embrace, letting out a content sigh as he told them both, “You two are my everything”.

“You’re everything to me too, Damon.”

She would always miss Rykov, the first man to ever truly love her for who she was but she also knew that what he’d given her was precious, friendship, a sense of worth. If not for him she possibly wouldn’t have had Shadow Elite and met the love of her life. For that, she’d forever be grateful.

Turning her head to look up at the love of her life, she smiled. “Yes.”

He stilled, his entire body freezing as hope and love splashed over his features. He didn’t pretend to misunderstand or play games. He’d never play games with her heart.

“Yes, you’ll marry me?”

“Yes, I’ll marry you. I want to be your wife. I’d be proud to call you husband.”

His thumb caressed her cheek as he looked at her. “Are you sure, Naz? I don’t ever want you to think this is an ultimatum. I’ll love you until the end of time even without a ring to show my commitment to you and our family.”

“I know, but I want this. I want to be yours in every way I can be.”

“You are, baby, and I’m yours too. It’s been that way since the first moment, we just didn’t realise it.”

“I think you might be right.”

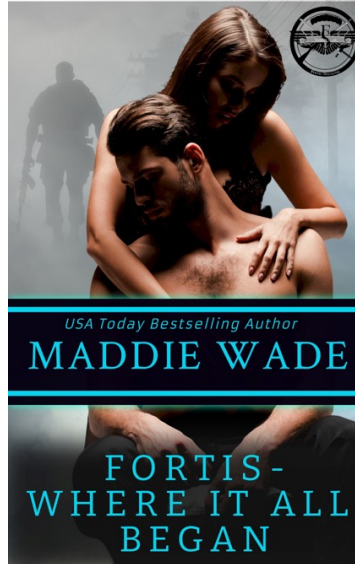
Love was a risk, but the reward was more than she would ever be able to explain, in words so she just loved hard and held on tight.



THIS MIGHT BE the happy ever after for Lotus and Damon, but if you want to find out what's going on with Titan and the baby left on the doorstep, then pre order [Seeking Salvation](#) now.

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