

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SYBIL BARTEL



DELTA

THE ALPHA ELITE SERIES

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DELTA

Dominant.

Mercenary.

Navy SEAL.

I had one job on the Teams. Predict the unpredictable. See what no one else saw. Analyze, assess, anticipate. Then execute with deadly force.

Calculating the enemy's moves, including the ones they hadn't thought of yet, was my specialty. I did it for the Navy, but I was now private sector, utilizing my skills at Alpha Elite Security. I had a hundred percent mission success rate... until her.

Make no mistake, I saw the blonde coming. I predicted her every move. But this time, I wasn't going to stop it. I was going to do something much worse.

Code name: Delta.

Mission: Dominate.

DEDICATION

For my only child, my beloved son, Oliver.
You were my greatest gift. The world was a better place with
you in it.

Everything in my life was better because of you.
Thank you for teaching me unconditional love, perseverance,
and compassion.

You are and will *always* be my entire world.
I love you, Sweet Boy, and I miss you beyond measure.

[Oliver Shane Bartel 2004-2020](#)

For my readers, thank you so very much for all of your love
and support.

Gratefully yours, XOXO

PROLOGUE

Fifteen years ago.

My hands pressing against my ears as she screamed, I crouched in the corner.

“Don’t just sit there!” Her cheeks puffed out like a balloon, and she panted like a dog. “*Get me my medicine.*”

“Y-y-you’re bleeding.” Tears fell.

Sitting on the kitchen floor with her legs spread funny and blood between them, she held on to the edge of the counter as she growled, “I don’t care. Get my medicine, NOW.”

I looked at one of the bottles on the counter that she called her medicine, but I was eight years old, and I could read. The sticker on it didn’t say medicine, and her tummy looked like a basketball under her wet dress.

Her mouth opened, and her eyes squeezed shut, then another scream came out. “What is wrong with you, girl? GET ME MY DRINK.”

The front door banged open. “What the fuck are you yelling—*Jesus Christ.*” He kicked the door shut when he saw her on the kitchen floor.

She yelled at him, “Get my drink, boy!”

Sneering at her with his angry face, he dropped his school backpack that I knew didn’t have any books in it, and he walked the slow kind of walk. The one that meant trouble was coming. “Yeah? You want a fucking drink?”

I pushed myself back into the corner as far as I could.

She screamed again like she was hurt real bad, but then she growled at him. “Get. My. *Drink.*”

“This?” Grabbing a bottle, he held it over her. “Is this what you want, you fucking junkie whore? More vodka? You think that’s smart in your *condition?*” His lip twisted with the devil of hate.

“GIVE ME MY DRINK.”

“No fucking problem.” Grabbing her hair, he yanked her head back and poured the bottle over her face. “Drink, you worthless bitch.”

Opening her mouth like a baby bird, she drank until she started choking.

He didn’t stop. “Is that enough?” The bottle of her medicine empty, he took the next one off the counter and opened it. This time he grabbed her face real hard and forced her mouth open before he started pouring. “You want more? There you go. *Fucking drink.*”

She coughed like she couldn’t breathe.

Then her tummy moved, her body twisted in half, and she got sick all over herself and the floor.

Shoving her, he jumped back and said the bad words again. “You fucking worthless cunt!” Her head bounced on the floor, and he kicked her shoulder.

My mouth opened. “Stop!”

Turning fast, his angry eyes met mine. “What did you just say to me?”

“Sh-she’s hurt.” I swiped at the stupid tears. “She’s bleeding.”

He made the super-angry, twisted face. “What the fuck did you think would happen, freak?”

“She needs a doctor.”

He snorted. “No doctor is gonna help her.”

She let out a scream that hurt my ears. Then all of a sudden, she went still, and a new kind of screaming filled the kitchen.

Both of us looked.

I shot to my feet. “Th-th-that’s a *baby*.” Lying right between her legs, in the mess on the kitchen floor.

“No shit.”

“P-p-pick it up.”

“Fuck no.”

“Y-you can’t leave it there.” It was screaming. And had a red face. And blood and goo in its white hair. And it was making a funny gurgling noise now between the screaming cries.

“Yeah, I can.” He took out one of his stinky cigarettes and lit it. “It’s just gonna die like all the others.”

“Is she dead?” She wasn’t moving.

Dragging more smoke from his cigarette, he made a sound of disgust. “Dead drunk.” He kicked her shoulder again, then tossed his cigarette in the sink and ran water over it. “Get in the closet.”

My chest suddenly hurt, almost as much as it did when I looked at the baby. “No.” I hated the closet.

“Do you want to be taken away? Do you know what they would do to a freak like you?” Shoving me as veins popped on the sides of his neck, his really mean face came out. “If I say get in the fucking closet, *you get in the fucking closet*.”

I didn’t know why I was doing it. I knew better than to try to fight him anymore, but I puffed out my chest like he did when he wanted to be big and brave, except I didn’t feel brave. I felt as sick as the stink of her vomit all over the floor. “I want to pick it up.” But maybe with a towel.

All of a sudden, he was gripping my throat and yelling in my face. “You so much as touch that fucking thing, and I will kill you. KILL YOU, you hear me?” He pushed me hard.

I fell back, the baby screamed louder, more tears came, and she suddenly moaned.

“*Drink.*” She picked her head up, looked between her legs, then her eyes rolled back, and her head made a bad sound as it hit the tile floor.

“FUCK.” Grabbing the phone that hung on the wall that I wasn’t allowed to touch, he pushed three of the buttons. Yanking the cord that looked like coiled spaghetti, he walked to her and held the handle part I knew you were supposed to talk into right in front of the screaming baby for a few seconds. Then he slammed the phone back into its holder on the wall.

Stepping around her and the baby, he wiped his boots on her ruined dress before turning toward me. “What the fuck did I tell you to do?”

I scrambled back on my hands and feet. “You’re supposed to talk into the phone.” Even I knew that.

Coming toward me, he made his eyes go narrow.

I moved back more. “Wh-who did you call?”

“Who the fuck do you think?” Grabbing my arm, he yanked me to my feet. “Walk.” Dragging me to the front door, he cracked it and picked up his backpack. Then he forced me toward the closet.

The baby choked between its screaming, and I started to breathe too fast. “No. I-I don’t want to go in there.”

“Too fucking bad.” Opening the door, he shoved me in first, stepped right behind me and yanked the door shut.

The closet went dark. The baby’s scream turned into a horrible gurgle. He slid the latch-lock thing he’d screwed into the wood on the inside of the door, and the kitchen went quiet.

I started to really cry.

“Shut up,” he hissed, slapping his hand over my mouth. “Or I’ll tell them to take you away along with the fucking mess out there.”

I didn't ask who *them* was. I didn't need to. Nothing good came in a uniform, so I stopped the loud part of my crying.

But he didn't care.

He kept his palm crushed over my mouth. My tears dripped onto his stinky hand. The front door banged open. Men called out, and heavy footsteps sounded in the kitchen.

Yanking my back to his chest, he whispered real quiet against my ear. "Don't say a fucking word, freak."

ONE

Delta

Watching the security camera feeds, I studied the woman.

For the third time in as many days, I thought there was something familiar about her.

The card reader on the outside of the command room door was accessed, and I dismissed the thought for the same reasons as I had before.

No intel, no supporting analytics, no collaborating evidence.

November walked into the command room. “Delta.”

“November,” I returned, not taking my focus off the screens as the skittish blonde in oversized clothes did the same thing she’d done yesterday and the day before.

Scanning the underground garage but keeping her head down, she hustled to the furthest aisle and ducked behind a company Range Rover parked in the last spot at the end.

Setting his motorcycle helmet on his desk, November dropped his messenger bag on the floor. “You flying out with Alpha and Zulu this morning?”

“Supposed to.” I glanced at Alpha Elite Security’s resident hacker. “You’re in early.”

“Probably for the same reason you are.” November tipped his chin at the feeds. “I see she’s back.”

I refocused on the wall of monitors that had every inch of the forty-five-story Miami high-rise that was AES’s

headquarters under surveillance. “She is.”

November powered up the three monitors on his desk. “What are you thinking?”

That she was homeless, on the run, and she’d been abused. She was also a submissive. “She’s here for a reason.”

November glanced at the large monitors as he logged into AES’s network from his keyboard. “Reprieve from the heat.”

South Florida was relentlessly hot and humid most of the year, but that wasn’t why she was in the underground parking garage of a downtown high-rise. “Have you run facial rec on her?”

“Tried to. Twice.” Taking a seat behind his desk, November focused on his screens as he started typing.

So had I. “No results.”

“No,” November agreed. “No cell phone or electronic devices on her either. She’s also been careful. Haven’t captured a full facial on her yet.”

He wouldn’t. She’d clearly spotted the security cameras before she’d come into the garage, but it didn’t matter. His software compensated for it. That wasn’t the issue. Her not being in the system was. “Working theory?” I knew he had one.

“Digital footprints, technology, facts—I dig through what is. Speculation’s your department.” Pivoting in his chair, he woke up the system on the desk behind him. “But I might have something. After I run a test on some new software, I’ll scan her again.”

“New software?” I hadn’t seen anything on the servers.

“More like a tweak to one of my existing programs. I’m integrating it now.”

“What kind of a tweak?”

November glanced up. “New code that will account for common plastic surgery procedures.”

“Her nose.” I looked back at the screens. I’d already noticed it. Perfectly symmetrical in profile, it didn’t match with her appearance or the scars on her arms.

“Not sure, but it’s highly questionable that someone in her age range has no hits in any system or on any socials.” Still typing, he glanced from the setup behind him to one of his screens. “She’ll make a good test subject for the upgraded software.”

“How long before you can run her through it?”

“Ten minutes.”

The command room door opened again, and Adam “Alpha” Trefor, the owner of Alpha Elite Security and technically my boss, walked in. “Morning.” He glanced at the screen. “I see our visitor’s back. November, I thought you were handling this yesterday.”

“Working on it. Ten minutes.”

“Ten max,” Alpha acquiesced as he pulled out his cell and glanced at it. “But after that, go down and see what she needs. If it falls under our purview, we’ll help her. Otherwise, get her to the women’s shelter I mentioned yesterday. I already called it in. They’re holding a space for her.” He fired off a text.

My jaw ticked. “She doesn’t need a shelter.”

Alpha glanced at me. “We don’t know what she needs, but camping out in our garage isn’t it.”

Agreed, and I’d been letting this go on two days too long, but something wasn’t adding up. “I’ll go talk to her.”

November glanced up, and both he and Alpha stared at me.

Then Alpha pocketed his cell and crossed his arms. “What do you know?”

“Nothing.” Yet.

Alpha gave me the same look he’d used on anyone who was full of shit when he was Team Leader. “I’ll rephrase. What are you thinking?”

“DV.”

November went back to typing, but Alpha kept fucking staring. “Elaborate. We both know what you do.”

I glanced back at the screens even though she was now out of view. “She’s someone, and she’s on the run. Both November and I ran her through facial rec and came up empty, which is statistically improbable. There’s a reason she’s off the grid. Same reason for the baggy clothes in this heat and the way she scans her surroundings.”

“She’s hiding from someone,” Alpha stated.

“Yes.” Someone with money, influence or reach. “She won’t squat here much longer.” With only one backpack, she was traveling light so she could keep on the move.

“All right. Go talk to her, but make it quick. Whatever intel you gather, hand it over to November.” Alpha glanced at his watch. “Zulu’s waiting for us at Executive. We’re wheels up in thirty.”

“Copy.” I turned toward the door, and it opened.

Alpha’s woman looked from me to her man as his cell rang. “Adam.”

He glanced at her, then his cell. “I see it.”

“They’ve called twice,” she warned in her reserved voice.

“Priority or parameters?” he asked her.

“Urgent,” she replied as his cell continued to ring. “They haven’t mentioned parameters, but my sources say you’ll need Kilo.”

“Understood. Thank you.” Alpha glanced at me. “I have to take this. You’re on deck with Zulu for the New York client meet and greet. We’ll regroup once you get back.”

“Copy.”

Tipping his chin at me, Alpha answered his cell as he followed his woman out of the command room.

The door shut, and November spoke up. “I got something.” He turned one of his monitors toward me. “You were right. Looks like she had rhinoplasty.”

Images of five different IDs filled the screen. Blonde hair, brown hair, red hair, black hair, and blonde again—different names, addresses and states—all were the same woman, but all the IDs had a filter on the facial image like they were an AI-generated rendering of a photo. Close enough image-wise to work for whoever would use the ID, but not identifiable with facial rec software. “Are you seeing that?”

“Yes.” November glanced between his screens. “Artificial intelligence imaging.”

“All the IDs are fake.” And in each picture, she had the remnants of a broken nose.

“They are. I’m attempting to trace the original image now.”

He wouldn’t find it. “Don’t bother.” I quickly scanned the dates on the IDs, looking for the newest one. Hanna Smith. The picture had the same shade of blonde hair as the woman currently in our parking garage. The telltale bump on the bridge of her nose was there, and she had brown eyes, but something about that particular image struck me. “Map the Hialeah address on the Florida ID.” I knew what he’d find.

November typed, then zoomed in on his second screen. “Vacant lot.”

“Run the images of the five IDs through facial rec.”

“Already on it.” His third screen started populating. “Over twenty potential hits.”

From security cam footage of executive airports and expensive hotels, I followed the pictorial trail from Los Angeles to New York that unfolded over nine months, then stopped. There was a lag before it picked back up in Virginia, but it wasn’t in five-star hotels. Four weeks of bus stations, public transport and shit motels before the trail came to an end in Miami eight weeks ago. Then nothing until she showed up here. “What about before Los Angeles?”

“Nothing,” November replied.

“Run it again.”

“Copy.” He entered the command, and the screens repopulated. “Same results.”

Quickly scanning the photos again, I pointed at one where she had dirty blonde hair and bruises on her collarbone and cheek. “Take that image and smooth out the break on the bridge of her nose a fraction more, then rerun it through facial rec.”

“On it.” November brought up a program, quickly made the adjustment, and reran the image. No new results came up. “Nothing.”

I scanned all the images again, looking for patterns, anomalies or inconsistencies. “Try a few more images with that same adjustment and scan them again. I’m going downstairs to talk to her. Text me if you get any new hits.”

“Copy,” he replied.

I headed to the door.

“She’s a submissive,” he called after me.

“I know.” November and I were not the same, but we both had certain proclivities.

“Then you see the type of behavior she’s exhibiting.”

I did. Which was the exact reason why I was the last fucking person who should be going down to talk to her, but there was something about her.

Something I was missing.

“You’ll intimidate her,” November warned.

I didn’t reply.

I was already walking out the door.

TWO

Hanna

Rationing my water, I sipped from the dented metal canteen I'd bought secondhand before carefully twisting the failing plastic lid closed.

The concrete degrees cooler than the air, I lay back on the underground parking garage floor and used my backpack as a makeshift pillow as I tried to ignore the twinge in my tailbone.

All I wanted to do was close my eyes and drift.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't ever fall asleep.

Not completely.

Tucking my hands between my knees, I focused on my sightline under the row of black Range Rovers. Today, there were eight of them. Yesterday, there were only six. Five the day before that.

The extra SUVs today were making me nervous.

I couldn't stay here another day.

I shouldn't have even been here at all, but I was tired, the ground was cool, and it felt... I didn't want to think the word, let alone feel it, but my tired mind betrayed me, and the thought was there.

It almost felt safe here.

Almost.

Slipping two fingers into a small tear on the side of my backpack that'd accidentally created a concealed hiding space, I pulled out a business card and reread the address I already had memorized. For a moment, I allowed myself to fantasize about a different life. But then I quickly shoved the card back between the two layers of worn material and chastised myself.

I didn't live another life.

I lived mine, safety was an illusion, and I couldn't afford to let my guard down for any reason. Not fantasies, not what-ifs, nothing. I just needed to stick to the plan.

Keep moving.

Head down.

Stay hidden.

Stay focused.

One goal.

That's all that was important now. The future wasn't mine anyway. At least not yet, or maybe not ever—it didn't matter.

I was sticking to the plan, and I had one goal.

One goal.

I was silently repeating the mantra when the elevator doors opened.

My heart rate spiked, the thought died, and muscle memory kicked in.

Swift and without hesitation, I shouldered my pack, tucked the canteen into the side pocket, and squatted on one knee and one foot before placing my palms on the cement floor.

Raising my knee and back, I shifted my weight to my feet and hands.

Sprint position.

I'd run my whole life, but never with my eye on the finish line.

This time was no different.

Except here I had precious little space to sprint from, and I didn't have my head up for optimum momentum.

Never have your head up.

One ear to the ground, looking under the vehicles across the parking garage, my gaze fixed on the open doors, I watched.

My heart pounding, I waited.

And waited.

No one came out of the elevator.

Ten seconds, twenty. Twenty-five seconds. The doors closed.

Prone, trying to keep my breath even, fear spidered across my skin and sank into my veins.

Someone should've come out.

One of the men.

Or the woman.

But no one came.

Maybe....

Oh God.

They knew I was here, and they'd kept to the furthest side of the elevator where my view was obstructed by the front tires of the vehicles all lined up in the row.

Forcing myself to slow my breathing and not focus on my panic but on the vibrations, I listened.

Footsteps, echoes, movement, reverberation, voices, tires, engines—anything.

But there was nothing.

No extra sounds.

No noise besides the distant daytime traffic outside the garage.

No vibrations.

My breath started to come short. My chest began to tighten. I dropped one knee back down to the ground and tried to reason.

This was a lit garage.

I didn't see anything.

This wasn't a darkened bedroom.

I didn't hear any—

“Get up,” the deep voice ordered.

THREE

Delta

Stepping off the elevator, keeping out of her sightline, my movements stealth and silent, I glanced down the row of AES Range Rovers.

Then I made a wide arc.

Thirty seconds later, I rounded the farthest parked company vehicle she was hiding behind and caught her crucial tactical mistake.

Arms spread, palms flat, her hands and ear to the ground, left knee bent, right one on the ground, she was only looking under the cars.

For half a second, I took her in.

Worn backpack secured over both shoulders, hair falling everywhere, linear scars on the backs of her hands and forearms, her fingertips pressed hard against the concrete.

She was a runner.

But this woman wasn't running track.

With one foot poised to sprint but her positioning off as if to favor an injury, her chest rapidly rose and fell. Letting fear rule her, she didn't notice my approach.

Widening my stance, I issued a concise order with zero give in my tone. "Get up."

Startled, she flinched, then shot upright. Gripping the straps of her backpack, favoring her left leg, her head down, her hair covering her face, her gaze focused on my feet, she

both shrank in on herself and stepped toward me. “I apologize, sir. I was just leaving.”

Her voice gave me pause.

Compellingly submissive and feminine, with a slight rasp from either misuse or dehydration, fear-tainted and soft-spoken, it didn't carry. With practiced intentionality, it did the opposite.

Eliciting my full dominance, the little sub had me doing something I never did.

Reacting.

Instead of cataloging observations, running down behavioral patterns and predicting her motives and next moves, I raised my arm, braced my hand on the SUV, and gave her a silent warning.

Fear made her suck in a breath and halt. But either abuse or conditioning made her arms drop and her hands go flat against the outside of her thighs as she went completely fucking still.

My cock stirred. “Name.”

“I wish to leave.”

No, she didn't. This was Alpha's building. AES's name was discreetly etched into the glass lobby doors. Company vehicles lined the garage. Designated visitor parking spaces were marked for AES clientele use only. She knew where she was.

This woman didn't want to leave. She wanted to feel safe. “We're going to have a conversation first.”

With her head still down, she didn't react. She also didn't request to leave again, a fact I took note of as she inhaled. “I would like to speak to the other man, please.”

So that's how she wound up here. “Which one?” I knew her presence wasn't random.

No reply, she tilted her head away from me.

“Answer the question,” I demanded.

“I... can't say, sir.”

Fuck, that voice. She almost sounded familiar. “Can't or won't?”

She got quieter. “Can't.”

I didn't have to study her to figure it out. She didn't have a name. “Description?” Already mentally running down the list of everyone at AES, I came up with four men who wouldn't have given her their call sign. November was top of the list, but he would've said if he'd interacted with her. That left Kilo, Blade and Whiskey. The first two would've scared her too much for her to seek shelter here.

“Blue eyes,” was all she gave me.

It was enough. “Whiskey. Where did you encounter him?”

Not replying, tilting her head more, she tucked her chin against her shoulder.

I noted her tell, but I was out of time to deal with it, and I'd already decided I wasn't handing her over to November or calling Whiskey. That left me with two options. “I'm on a flight in twenty-five minutes, and you're not staying here. You're also going to answer my questions, and we're going to finish this conversation. That leaves you with two choices.”

“I would like to leave now, sir.”

I bet she would. “Not one of the choices.”

Her hands returned to the straps of her backpack that were noticeably worn from overuse. “I... I don't understand.”

Yes, she did. “You can come with me, or you can wait for me to return. Decide.”

Nervously glancing to my left and right as if looking for a way to get past me, she took a step back instead. “You said I wasn't staying here.”

“Not in the garage.” I checked my watch, then put some force behind my next command because I was out of time. “Make a decision.”

It was instant. Her head dropped to the center of her chest, her arms fell to her sides, and she went so fucking still, I knew what she'd done.

This wasn't subspace or anything to do with that lifestyle.

The woman had checked out.

Lowering my arm and my tone but steeling my voice, I did the last fucking thing I should have to her. "Kneel," I demanded.

She flinched, giving me the exact reaction I was looking for.

"Do I have your attention now?"

Gaze still downcast, not lifting her head, her hands returned to the straps of her backpack as she glanced again at the space between me and the Range Rover.

"Go ahead." Run. "I'll welcome the challenge."

She didn't fucking move.

"Smart choice."

"With all due respect, sir, I did not have a choice."

I wasn't a sadist. "You always have a choice. Are you ready to answer my question?"

No response.

"Then we'll do this the hard way." Not tempering my dominance or authority, I repeated my earlier command. Decisively. "Kneel."

"Wh—"

"Kneel."

Immediately dropping to her knees, she placed her hands on her thighs.

Satisfaction going straight to my cock, I issued another order. "Look directly at me."

The woman slowly raised her head.

Then she sucked in a shocked breath, and for the second time in my life, I didn't predict or anticipate.

I fucking reacted.

Staring at her eyes, which were a different color than every damn ID that'd shown up on November's screens, I couldn't believe what the hell I was seeing. "Do you have contacts in?"

Holding my gaze, her throat moved with a hard swallow, but she didn't answer.

"Answer," I demanded.

"No, sir," she barely whispered.

"That's your natural eye color?"

"Yes, sir," she replied even quieter.

Violet.

Her eyes were fucking violet.

A distinct shade I'd seen exactly once before. Sixteen years ago.

FOUR

Hanna

“Get up,” he sternly ordered, turning away to stride out of the small space.

The air in my lungs gone, shock prickling across my skin, my chest squeezed tight, and one of the memories I’d buried so deep that it never came to the surface mocked me.

“Did your dad plant this lavender for you?”

I looked up from the clutched bunch of picked flowers in my hand. “It’s not lavender. It’s Royal Purple.” Daddy told me so.

The man in a uniform like the one Daddy used to have squatted next to me. “They’re pretty, like you.” He looked at my flowers with his bright green eyes. “And strong.” He touched one. “Also like you.”

The dirt scratching the backs of my legs more than this stupid dress, I pulled my hand back. “They’re mine. You can’t touch them, and I’m not strong.” More tears fell, and I angrily swiped at my cheek. “I can’t hold my breath long, and I can’t swim like the seals in the big waves.”

“When you’re ready to learn, let me know.” His grass-green eyes looked at me. “I’ll teach you.”

“I don’t want to be teached.” Clutching my flowers, I kicked at the dirt, soiling the shiny Mary Jane shoes I hated as much as my dress. “Daddy’s dead because he swam like seals.”

The man in the uniform didn't lie to me and say Daddy was in some place called Heaven. "Your father isn't dead because he knew how to swim. He died saving his brothers."

"Daddy didn't have brothers," I argued as tears fell on my flowers.

"He had me."

"Then how come he's dead?" Daddy said family protects each other.

"What have you been told?"

"They say Daddy's in Heaven, but I know that just means dead. Now he's dead like Mommy, and they're not coming back."

"Your mother's not dead. She's in the house."

"No, she's not. My real mommy's dead. My daddy told me so. He said she died when I was a baby so she could be in Heaven waiting for us when we got there. I didn't want my mommy to be in Heaven, but Daddy said it was okay. Then Grammy got sick and couldn't babysit me anymore, so Daddy brought a new mommy home. I told him I didn't need a new babysitter—I was five and a half years old. But he brought the new lady to our house anyway. He said I had to call her Mommy and that she would take care of me when he had to go swim like a seal. But my new mommy wasn't alone, and now I have a stupid brother. I hate him. Except Daddy says I can't say hate because hate is the devil, and you can't ever let the devil in. So I didn't say that word to Daddy, but I told him that when my new mommy isn't watching, the boy who I'm supposed to say is my brother is mean. He says I'm only his stepsister, and my new mommy is only my stepmommy, which is stupid because our house doesn't even have stairs. I hate steps."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"That's because you weren't my daddy's real brother." If he were, he would've known.

"Sometimes family isn't blood related."

I didn't know what that meant, but Daddy had said the same thing, that sharing blood wasn't the only way to be family. "I'm not sharing my blood with you."

"You don't have to. But I still consider your father my brother, same as all the other men on the Team."

I knew what that word meant. Daddy said it all the time, but he used it different. "You don't play sports."

"No, I don't."

I looked up at him. "But you're in a uniform."

"Yes, I am."

"My stepmommy said she hates your uniforms." My throat hurt when I swallowed. "She said she wants them all to go away and never come back." More tears fell, and I looked down at my Royal Purple. "Now Daddy's gone."

"I'm sorry she feels that way." His big hand grasped my chin and tipped my head up. "Your stepmother is not the reason why your father is no longer here." He wiped at my face.

"I don't believe you," I whispered.

"In time, you will. Until then, you have me." His rough thumb softly rubbed my cheek. "You will always have me, little one."

My tummy hurt. "I'm not little. I'm seven."

"I know." He stared.

I stared back. "Your eyes are strange." Different like mine, but not the same kind of different. "Do they make fun of you?" I'd never seen any other people with eyes like his.

"For what?" He dropped his hand.

My cheek got cold. "Your eyes."

His face got stern like Daddy's used to when I told him something that made him mad. "Someone is making fun of you?"

“Zoey told Kennedy that I have a disease, and that’s why my eyes are like a cartoon.”

“Zoey and Kennedy are in your class at school?”

“Yeah, and they’re mean.”

“What’s your teacher’s name?”

“Miss Finnegan, but she doesn’t care. I already told her, and she said not to be a tattler.”

“I’ll speak with her.”

“About what?” He didn’t even know Miss Finnegan.

“Let me worry about that.”

I didn’t like those words. “Those are the kinds of things adults say when it’s bad, and I don’t want to get in trouble again.”

“Again?”

“For being a tattler.” I hated school.

His jaw made a funny movement. “I promise you won’t get in trouble.”

Looking away, I kicked at the dirt again. I didn’t like promises. Daddy made me a promise that he was coming home, but he lied. “My chest hurts,” I whispered.

His big hand landed on my back, and the funny-eyed man’s voice got quiet. “I know.”

“How? Because yours hurts too?”

“Right now, yes.”

I shoved my face in my flowers. “Do you cry?”

“On occasion.”

“When?”

“When your father died.”

“You’re lying.” I squeezed my arms tighter. “I saw you and the other swimming seals at the cemetery. You didn’t cry.”

You all pounded your fists on Daddy's special box like you were mad at him."

"We weren't mad. We were honoring your father by giving him our Tridents. The pounding was to make sure they were secured to his casket. Do you know what a Trident is?"

I shook my head.

"When a sailor becomes a Navy SEAL, he earns a special medal called a Trident. It's a privilege and an honor to have that medal. It symbolizes that you are the very best at what you do. It means that you're an exceptional breed of warrior. Your father was brave, honorable, and the very best at what he did. He saved my life and the lives of all the men in uniform you saw today."

"I wished he'd saved his own life."

"For me to say I wish the same would be a dishonor to your father, his service and his commitment to protect you and every American. That said, I won't lie to you. I wish it were me and not him in that casket."

My chest hurt more, and I looked up. "You want to be dead?"

"I want to serve my country and protect you and my brothers. If that means I die while doing so, then I have no regrets."

Tears blurred my eyes. I whispered, "I hate dying."

"I understand."

His hand warm on my back, I looked down at my flowers and whispered again. "I don't want you to die."

"I'll do my best."

"Are you a warrior?" With my front tooth loose, the word didn't sound the same when I said it.

"Yes."

"Is your best better than my daddy's?"

"Doubtful."

“Then you’re going to die too.” I twisted away from him, and more dirt filled my stupid shoes as my sleeve got caught on the tall flowers. “Go away.” I yanked my arm, and the top of a stalk bent, breaking it.

“Not yet.”

“I don’t want you here.” Seeing the broken flower made my chest hurt worse. “These are my flowers.”

“May I have one?”

“No.”

“Not even for your father’s brother?”

“I already told you that you’re not Daddy’s brother.”

“He was mine. How about I be your uncle?”

“I don’t want any stupid uncles.” I choked on a sob. “I don’t want any more people who swim like seals and don’t come home. Go away. Go away and never come back.”

“Violet!”

I shrank further into the Royal Purple.

“Violet, get out of the dirt,” my stepbrother scolded as he walked across the lawn and grabbed my arm too hard. “You’re not supposed to be talking to them. Mom needs us. Stop crying and let go of those ugly flowers. You’re not bringing any more of that stink into the house.”

This time, unlike others, when he yanked me up, I didn’t fight back.

Dragged to my feet, holding my flowers tight, I looked at the man in the uniform with grass-green eyes as he stood up, but he wasn’t looking at me.

Towering over us, he was glaring at my stepbrother. “Do you always grab your sister like that, Steven?”

Shoving his drumsticks into his back pocket, my stepbrother grabbed my other arm and puffed out his chest like a rooster. “Only when I have to rescue her from a dirty pedophile.”

I didn't know what that last word meant, and I barely had time to get a good look at the man's uniform before my stepbrother yanked me away, but I saw enough.

He didn't have a speck of dirt on him.

“Let's go,” the deep voice commanded.

Shocked from the past to the present as the frighteningly dominant man gave an order with a voice from my memories, I mentally tried to shake away the possibility that it was him.

I was still trying to tell myself it wasn't possible as I pushed to my feet and followed his broad shoulders and incredibly tall frame.

The man in the suit in front of me had emerald eyes. Not grass green.

It couldn't be him.... Could it?

FIVE

Delta

Striding toward my company Range Rover, I played the possibility through every scenario even though I fucking knew.

Her footfalls quietly landing at my six, I didn't look back until I'd opened the passenger door for her.

Holding the straps of her backpack, head down, focused on the ground ahead of her, she stopped three feet short.

"Get in," I ordered.

She didn't move. "I prefer not to, sir."

Remembering the last time I saw her, cursing my own culpability, I issued a command. "Look at me."

She lifted her head, and her striking gaze met mine for exactly one second before drifting.

"How long do you want to play this game?"

Looking like she wanted to bolt, she stared at the fucking SUV. "Sir?"

"You know my name."

She turned her head to the side again, and her voice dropped. "I'm sorry, but I don't, sir."

Letters, birthday cards and annual checks. For eleven years, I'd written to her, and she didn't know my fucking name? She'd never once responded. I hadn't expected her to. I wasn't keeping in touch for myself. But she knew my goddamn name.

She also knew my voice and what I looked like.

When she'd turned eighteen, I'd sent a larger check with an equal amount deposited into a new bank account I'd opened in her name. I'd given her the account details, a commitment to make the same annual deposits, my cell number and an open-ended invitation to reach out if she ever needed anything. Money, a place to crash, someone to have her six—any goddamn thing—but the check was returned with an unsigned note to never make contact again.

Suspecting who was behind the bullshit, I'd destroyed the check. Opening another new account, I transferred the money from the previous one, added the funds from the uncashed check and closed the old account. Then I'd requested a few days of leave and took a new letter to her high school.

Showing up in service dress blues, posing as a Naval Legal Service Command Officer from JAG Corps, I'd gone to her principal and demanded to see her on an estate-planning matter pertaining to her deceased father.

The principal had respectfully refused and told me to contact her mother. When I'd informed the woman that her biological mother was deceased, Violet Hanna Traylor was of legal age, and I had documentation pertaining to Petty Officer Second Class Quentin Traylor's will, the woman had relented—with the condition that she was present throughout the entire interaction.

I remembered that day like it was yesterday.

The principal glanced at my uniform again. "Officer, as I'm sure you can understand, this is not a... usual situation. If you give me time to contact Miss Traylor's mother and have her come in, she can be present while—"

I cut the woman off. "With all due respect, as I've already informed you, Violet Hanna Traylor is of legal age. Sandra Saunders is not Violet's biological mother, nor is she listed in this particular legal document. My presence on your campus is a mere formality and courtesy. If you prefer for me to wait for Miss Traylor on the sidewalk directly outside the legal boundary of the school's property, I will."

“No, no, of course not, and I appreciate your courtesy.” Exhaling, the woman pressed the intercom on her phone and called her secretary. “Delilah, will you please have Violet Traylor brought to my office?”

“Yes, Principal Atkins,” the older woman answered. “Just give me a couple of minutes.”

“Thank you.” The principal clasped her hands but didn’t sit.

Standing at parade rest, my gaze focused over her head, neither did I.

“May I ask you a question, officer?”

I didn’t correct her on the proper way to address me. “You may.”

“Why isn’t the Navy contacting Miss Traylor at her home?”

I lied. “Those weren’t my orders, ma’am.”

“Of course.” She lasted ten seconds with the unasked question I knew was coming. “Is this usual?”

“Is what usual, ma’am?”

“Contacting next of kin over a decade after the fact with a legal document?”

I met her gaze. “Taking care of our fallen heroes and their last wishes is always usual.” I paused a fraction before decisively levying my tone. “Ma’am.”

The older secretary knocked, then opened the office door. “Principal Atkins, I have Miss Traylor here.”

“Send her in.” Atkins pasted on a fake smile. “Violet, thank you for coming.”

My gaze cut to the door, and rage hit me faster than a fucking IED. “What happened to your cheek?”

Her white-blond hair hanging over her face, her head down, she didn’t look up past my waist as she nervously fingered a rip in the hem of her shirt. “It... it was an accident.

I miscalculated the hurdle in track.” If she recognized my voice, she didn’t let on.

I aimed my glare at the principal. “Track?” That wasn’t a fucking track accident.

“Unfortunately, accidents happen in sports, but I can assure you the school nurse checked her out. She’ll heal in no time and be back at it.” The woman fucking smiled at me.

“I need a moment with Miss Traylor,” I demanded.

The principal’s smile tightened. “I’m sorry, officer, but that’s against school policy and our agreement, even if the student is of legal age.”

Still not looking up, wearing a lavender backpack over both shoulders and a T-shirt that was two sizes too big, the seven-year-old girl who’d grown into a young woman nervously crossed her arms.

Reining it in, wishing she would look up so I could see her eyes, I palmed the envelope with the official Navy insignia that I’d swiped from an office on base before coming here and held it out to her. “Miss Violet Traylor, this is for you. I’ll wait while you open and read the enclosed document, in case you have any questions.” Then I was going to find out who the fuck hit her and destroy them.

Glancing at the principal as if she needed authorization to take the fucking envelope, she waited for Atkins to nod at her.

I lost the reins of control. “You don’t need permission from anyone to accept the letter, Miss Traylor.”

Flinching under my tone, she reached out with a shaking hand and took the envelope.

The principal threw me a warning look. “Would you like to sit down, Violet?”

Crossing her arms again, she clutched the envelope between them and barely spoke loud enough to be heard. “No, thank you.”

She was petite, hesitant, and docile. She was also so fucking submissive, her voice hit me as hard as the sight of her

bruised, swollen cheek, and I was testing her before I could stop myself. "Open the letter," I demanded.

Again, she glanced at the principal, and again, she didn't meet my gaze.

Impatient, hindered by the fact that we had an audience, and more glad by the second that I'd worded the note as I had, I didn't repeat myself. I waited.

She didn't move.

The principal stepped in. "Go ahead, dear. You can open it. I'll be right here if you need anything."

Bullshit. The woman didn't give two fucks about Violet. She wanted me out of her office, and she didn't want to deal with the real reason one of her students was sporting what looked exactly like a punch to the face.

It took all of my restraint not to usher her out of this joke of a school.

With movements too slow to be deliberate, she opened the envelope, unfolded the letter and read it.

Adrenaline pumping, waiting for a sign, I watched her hands.

I watched them because I knew the exact wording in that letter.

Your father wanted you to be taken care of. The following is the number of a bank account in your name. Memorize it. The money is yours and yours alone. If you are under duress or need immediate assistance, tap two fingers.

I'd signed it with my call sign, the bank's name and my cell number.

Folding the letter, she carefully put it back in the envelope. Then she glanced my way. This time, she looked up as high as my chest, but it wasn't enough for me to get a glimpse of her eyes. "Thank you." Immediately dropping her head again, she addressed the principal as her free hand navigated back to the rip in her shirt hem. "Can I return to class now?"

“Of course, dear. Do you have any questions for either of us before you go?”

“No. Thank you.” She turned and scurried out.

I waited until I heard the outer office door close before I turned on the principal. “She didn’t make direct eye contact. Are her irises lavender?”

The woman frowned. “They are. She’s—”

“That’s all I asked. If I find out her injury wasn’t an accident and someone hit her, I will be coming back.” Not waiting for a response, I walked the fuck out.

Then I waited half a block down the street from the school. Three minutes after the final bell, she walked past my parked rental with her head down. Keeping my distance, I got out and followed her home.

For two days, I sat on her house. I followed her to and from school. I watched for anyone going in and out of her house, and I watched to see who she interacted with on school grounds. I watched her, period.

She never fucking looked up, and I never got a glimpse of her eyes.

Her head always down, she didn’t talk to the other kids. No one went in or out of her house except her, and no one interacted with her on school grounds. By the third day, her cheek was looking better, and she didn’t immediately walk home after the final bell. She went to the field behind the school and joined the track team for practice.

I watched her run.

Circling the track by herself, keeping her head down, she didn’t jump one hurdle.

After practice, the kids cleared out and the coach headed toward the main building.

Instead of trailing her home, I followed the coach.

Catching him before he entered the gym, I called out. “Marines?” Two decades on me, I recognized his high and

tight.

The coach turned and sized me, my uniform, my rank and my fruit salad up in half a second flat. “Yes, sir. 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. What can I do for you, Chief Petty Officer?”

I got to the point. “Did you witness Violet Traylor miss a hurdle?”

Crossing his arms, he asked the right question. “Who wants to know?”

I told him the truth. “I do. I served with her father, and her face doesn’t look like an accident. Is this an isolated incident?”

Still sizing me up, he took a moment. “Traylor’s only been on my team this year, so I can’t speak to any history. However, this seems to have been a one-off accident. I didn’t witness it, but when she showed up claiming it’d happened the night before while she was getting in some extra practice after everyone else had cleared out, I sent her to the nurse. The nurse told her to take the week, and I agreed. Other than that, I don’t have much to tell you. She keeps her head down, literally. I don’t know her to socialize with any of the other kids, and there’s never been any boys hanging around her. And before you ask, no, it didn’t look like an accident to me either. But like I said, I didn’t witness it, and there weren’t any incidents prior or after, so I didn’t report it.”

“Has her behavior changed in any way before or since?”

“No.”

I handed him a card with only a number on it. “Will you call me if it does or if there are any more incidents?”

He glanced at the card. “Depends.”

“On?”

His eyes narrowed. “How old are you, son?”

“Old enough to find that question insulting.”

“I’m asking it anyway. You’re not wearing a Trident, and her father was a SEAL. I’m not judging on that front. I know

you Frogmen don't like to advertise, and I'm not asking for specifics. All I'm saying is that you know what the girl looks like. I said there weren't any boys hanging around her, but that doesn't mean every one of 'em I got on my team doesn't look at her every chance they get."

My jaw ticked. "She's getting harassed?"

The Marine snorted. "Not on my watch."

"Keep it that way." I nodded at the card. "Call me if anything happens." I turned to go.

"You got a name, sailor?"

"Not one you need to know."

The memory faded but not the image of her swollen cheek.

Now I was staring at an abused, traumatized, homeless submissive who was five years past her eighteenth birthday, and I wasn't pissed.

I was fucking enraged.

"Get in the car, Violet Hanna Traylor."

She pivoted and ran.

SIX

Delta

Watching her sprint like she did it regularly, I pulled out my cell and dialed.

November answered immediately. “I see.”

“Keep an eye on her. See where she goes.”

“You’re not going after her?”

“No.” I glanced at my watch. “Is Conlon coming in today?” Vance “Victor” Conlon was AES, but he wasn’t a former SEAL like most of us, and he wasn’t altogether sane. Besides a having penchant for participating in fight clubs, enjoying inventive ways to kill someone and amateur hacking, the former Marine was our resident helicopter pilot because no one else wanted to fly helos. He was also unpredictable. So unpredictable that he had patterns. It’d been five days since he’d been in the office, and that was about the limit with him.

I heard November typing. “His SUV’s pulling up to the garage now.”

Before I could tell November to get him on the line and loop him in on the call, Conlon beat me to it.

“He’s calling me,” November stated.

“Conference him in.”

“Copy, hold.... Victor, you’re on with me and Delta.”

Conlon chuckled. “Right. Well, this morning just got more interesting. We’ve got a runner. Do I get to do something

about it, or am I going to watch little miss squatter book it out of here and pretend to let it go?"

My jaw ticked. "Pick her up and bring her to Executive Airport. I'm flying out with Zulu in twenty on Alpha's Falcon. Get her on board before we're wheels up."

Too casual, Conlon asked the question. "She a client?"

November didn't comment, and neither did I.

"*Right*," Conlon drew out sarcastically. "So she's not a client. You and Zulu are taking Alpha's Falcon without Alpha, leaving half the fleet of perfectly good G650s on the apron, and I'm on runaway patrol."

"Alpha was called in on an urgent matter. Nineteen minutes," I warned. "Make it happen."

"Copy that, *boss*." Conlon chuckled again. "This should be fun." The echo of tires coming to an abrupt stop before reversing carried through the garage as Conlon hung up.

"November," I clipped.

"Still here."

"Wipe everything you found on her."

He didn't reply.

Closing the passenger door to the Ranger Rover, I strode to the driver's side. "You have an opinion."

Taking my statement as consent, he gave it. "Are you sure that was the right call?"

"Which part?" I got behind the wheel. "Encouraging Conlon's propensity to hack, having him pick her up, or telling you to wipe everything you found?"

"All of it."

I admitted the truth. "It's better than me going after her."

"System wiped. Who is she?"

Someone I should've kept a better eye on. "Daughter of a SEAL."

November paused. Then he put it together. “Deceased?”

“Yes.”

“You promised to look after her.”

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep,” I clipped, ending the call.

I’d been a SEAL, same as Quentin “Canada” Traylor. Telling Quentin sixteen years ago that I’d look after his daughter if he didn’t make it home wasn’t a promise I could have guaranteed. But I’d never forgotten what he’d said to me before our last mission together.

“Yo, Delta.”

Looking up from double-checking my chute, I tipped my chin. “Canada.”

He shook his head. “Fucking bullshit call sign. You know I hate it.”

“Then you should’ve learned to pronounce Quebec when you’d had the chance.”

“I can say that shit just fine, but it’s no better than Canada. I’m a fucking SEAL, not a mounted bounty horse rider, or whatever the fuck they’re called.” He took the seat next to me.

“They’re JTF2s, and they’re Tier Ones same as us, but you’re missing the point.” We’d all gotten fucked on call signs thanks to the old OIC who couldn’t remember his ass from his elbow. Using the initials of our first or last names, he’d handed out call signs utilizing the NATO Phonetic Alphabet. Being his usual insubordinate self at the time, Traylor had butchered the pronunciation of Quebec and the OIC dubbed him Canada. By the time the Team had gotten a new OIC, the call signs had already stuck.

“Whatever.” Traylor took the picture of his daughter out of his pocket that he carried everywhere. “You good with this op? Because I got a bad fucking feeling.”

I was good with any op, and Traylor always had feelings about ops. Most I ignored. But this time, I gave him my

attention. “What are you thinking?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It just don’t feel right. HAHOing, the target LZ, the extraction point, uncharted terrain.” He looked pointedly at me. “I get all of that’s just another day at the office for us, but I’m telling you, the whole damn mission feels off.”

“You always have a problem when we’re not going after HVTs.” Barrel first was both his default setting and motto. “You’re only happy when we’re tip of the spear.”

“Shit,” he drawled. “Who ain’t? Name one motherfucker here who doesn’t want to be barrel first, kicking ’em doors down on every mission instead of this recon bullshit.”

I couldn’t. “Not mission objective this op.” Recon and intel only. I nodded toward our new Team leader, Adam “Alpha” Trefor. “You want to stand down, talk to Alpha.”

“Ain’t stood down yet, and I ain’t gonna start now. I’m just saying, this don’t feel right. And before you give me shit, I ain’t talking about my aversion to being caged. You know I hate that shit. They didn’t train and arm us for a walk in the park. Fire at us, bomb us—hell, drown us—I don’t care. I’ll come out barrel first every goddamn time, and I’ll hold the line. Just don’t put me in a damn cage of bureaucratic bullshit. I ain’t ever been cut out for that. I’m a Teams guy through and through. You know I got your back, brother. But I gotta be me, and wild and riled ain’t synonymous with sketchy recon shit.” He shook his head, then looked back at the picture of his daughter. “Fuck, did I tell you the shit she said to me last time I called?”

A dozen times. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m telling you again, you cold motherfucker, so listen up.” He punched me in the arm. “She said she was tired of me swimming with seals and I should come home. Told me I wasn’t a mammal, and daddies weren’t supposed to play pretend.” He held the picture up so I could see it. “She’s seven. Can you believe that shit?” Turning the pic back around, he smiled at the image of his daughter. “I’ve explained SEAL a hundred fucking times to her, but she still

thinks I'm a goddamn zookeeper or some shit, swimming with actual fucking seals." He shook his head. "I love that kid. She's special, you know?" His expression sobering as he secured the photo back in his chest rig, he didn't wait for a reply. "Just remember what I told you. Look after her if I don't make it back."

I didn't make promises I couldn't keep. I was on this op same as him. "You've got a wife and son, Traylor." Neither of which he ever spoke about except to mention their existence. Didn't matter. He needed to tell them to look after her.

His jaw clenched. Then he leveled me with a look I'd never seen from him. "Just fucking look after her, Delta. If something happens to me, look after her."

"I'll do my best."

"Promise," he insisted.

"I promise I'll do my best."

Traylor stared at me for a beat. "I don't mean money or college or shit like that."

"I know."

Resigned, he shook his head. "Detached motherfucker. I don't even know why I trust you, but I do." Standing up, he glanced at the rest of our Team on the transport before looking back at me. "Don't fuck up." Not waiting for a response, he called out to our Team leader as he moved toward the front of the plane. "Yo, Alpha! How many motherfuckers do I get to shoot once we're boots on the ground?"

It was the last conversation I'd had with Quentin "Canada" Traylor.

Two hours later, he was dead.

His *bad fucking feeling* had been spot-on.

We'd landed in a Taliban hot zone, gotten pinned down by three belt feds in a triangular formation, and were outgunned and outnumbered. Ignoring Alpha's direct orders to hold the line until air support came, Traylor did what Traylor had always done. He ran headfirst into the firefight.

Taking down two of the fifty-cal shooters as they pumped him full of lead, he'd saved the rest of the Team.

Ninety-six hours later, we were stateside at Arlington, carrying his casket.

Two hours after that, I was squatting in a garden of lavender, staring at a seven-year-old with eyes the same damn color of the flowers as she told me she wanted nothing to do with me.

Pulling out of the garage at AES, I made another call.

Neil Christensen answered on the second ring the same way he always answered. In Danish. "Ja."

Former Jægerkorpset Special Forces, I'd met Christensen downrange when we were both stationed in Afghanistan. Now he was a commercial real estate developer in Miami, specializing in high-rises and oceanfront properties.

"It's Delta. I need a favor."

SEVEN

Hanna

Hearing my real name, I didn't think twice.

I turned and fled.

Running through the garage and up the exit ramp, still clinging to denial, I desperately tried to think who else might know my real name besides the SEAL from my father's funeral, and the man in uniform who'd come to my high school years later. Distracted, I didn't see the big black car until it was too late.

The vehicle jumped the curb, tires screeched, brakes protested, and the SUV slammed to a stop mere inches from me.

I bucked back.

My body curved like a C, my arms uselessly flew out for balance, and I hit the pavement. Landing on my previously injured tailbone, pain spiked and the wind knocked from my lungs.

Stunned immobile, trying to catch my breath, my head resting on my backpack, all I could do was look up.

A dark-haired man in a suit casually got out of the Range Rover that was identical to the ones in the garage I'd just run from.

"Right." Standing over me, staring with hazel eyes, he frowned. "Sorry about that, love, but orders are orders. Help you up?" With a slight British accent, he held out his hand.

Not without effort, I rolled to my side and assessed.

Back and tailbone hurting, breath coming short, left leg tingling—okay. I was okay. I'd suffered worse. So much worse. This was nothing.

I just needed to get up.

Dress shoes, then muscular thighs appeared in my line of vision right before the man squatted next to me. "Okay, love, here's the deal. Any other pretty, homeless-looking woman with lavender eyes I would've simply picked up and put in the SUV by now. No judgment on the homeless situation, by the way. But considering you're Delta's woman, and there are exactly three SEALs I have zero interest in going head-to-head with, I'm refraining from touching you just in case you decide to relay that intel to Delta, and he decides to rearrange my face." He smiled. "Which, for obvious reasons, we can't have." He winked, then dropped the smile as quickly as he'd given it. "So, anything broken?"

Delta.

The same name I'd heard along with five others sixteen years ago. Names that had bled together back then, one indiscernible from the other. Their only distinction being that each one had belonged to a man in a uniform who had pounded on my father's casket.

I'd never known who was who.

I'd told myself I hadn't wanted to, but it was a lie.

I'd desperately wanted to know the name of one SEAL. Same as I'd desperately wanted to look up at a man in uniform who'd come to my school years later, but I hadn't allowed myself to. Instead, I'd taken that memory, along with another one, and buried them deep where I could keep them scared. Those memories I never pulled out. But I did allow myself to remember the men all lined up the day they buried Daddy. I remembered their uniforms. I remembered them saying their names to *her*.

Alpha, Bravo, Zulu, Echo, Delta, Kilo.

I remember wondering why they weren't all in alphabetical order.

Glancing up at the stranger who hadn't been at my father's funeral, I silently repeated them.

Alpha, Bravo, Zulu, Echo, Delta, Kilo.

Now I knew who the grass-green-eyed man who'd come to my garden was.

Delta.

Except my memory had deceived me. His muscles were bigger, and his eyes were more emerald than grass. He was also the tallest man I had ever stood next to.

"Right," the new man stated, quickly scanning the length of me as he dragged me from my thoughts. "Nothing broken. Let's go with that. Up you go." Taking my wrists in both of his hands, he effortlessly stood and pulled me to my feet.

Flinching from the contact, my back sore, my right shoulder smarting, I tried and failed to not show the wince of pain.

The hazel-eyed man immediately let go of me, but his sharp gaze went to my shoulder, and he frowned again. "I thought your backpack landed first." He tipped his chin toward the small bump on my right collarbone. "Is that a new injury?"

Nervously looking past him, I plotted my escape. "I'm fine, sir."

"Sir," he stated.

Testing my left leg and ignoring the new twinge in my knee, I didn't acknowledge him.

"Right." The man scanned the street. Then his attention focused on the entrance to the garage behind me. "I'm not 'sir' to you, pet. You can call me Victor."

I heard the vehicle exiting, but I didn't dare look. Instead, I took the opportunity while he was distracted.

Stepping around him as quickly as possible, ignoring my back and my left leg, cognizant of the daytime traffic and

people milling about, I tried to hustle, but I didn't run.

I made it two paces.

A muscled arm snaked around my waist, my feet left the ground and my backpack pressed against his chest. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, love. Just remember that when you explain to Delta how I got you into the Range Rover." Carrying me to the SUV, he opened the passenger door.

Panic seized me, my muscles tensed and I braced.

The man froze. "All right, pet. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. I'm many things, including appallingly inappropriate. But"—setting me on my feet, he gently turned me to face him—"abusive towards women is not one of them. I jumped the curb to stop your flight. I picked you up to keep you from running. I'm putting you in the SUV because Delta asked me to. However, if you tell me that Delta was responsible for any of those injuries you're so valiantly trying to hide, we'll move on to plan B. Spoiler, plan B doesn't involve me taking you to Delta."

Heart racing, body rigid, I blinked.

"That was a question, love. You need to answer it." He glanced at his watch. "We're in a bit of a rush."

He smelled like something familiar. I thought about fresh rain on hot pavement.

"Right." His hands went to his hips and pushed his suit jacket back, revealing a shoulder holster under his left arm. "For the record, sincere apologies for the fall. That was entirely my fault. I didn't notice in time that you were favoring your left leg. If I had, I wouldn't have cut it quite as close, and you wouldn't have lost your balance." Bending his knees and cocking his head, he made it a point to look into my eyes. "Did I cause any new injuries, pet?"

Uncomfortable, I shook my head.

"Bygones?"

Trapped, I nodded.

“Okay, progress.” He scanned the street again like it was something he did all the time. Then he focused back on me. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather have this conversation in the Range Rover, preferably not while drawing attention by being half parked on the sidewalk. What do you say, love?” He tipped his chin toward the open door. “Fancy a ride to your destination of choice?”

He had a gun. He knew the man named Delta. He was faster, taller, and bigger than me. His muscles strained his suit jacket, and he hid an air of lethality about him under a layer of charm.

I didn’t think for one moment that he would take me wherever I wanted to go.

What choice did I have except to bide my time?

I turned to get into the SUV.

EIGHT

Delta

“Four to six weeks,” Christensen stated.

Fuck. “Other options?”

“Buy out.”

“Floor?” I pulled into Executive Airport.

“Pick one and make an offer.”

Goddamn it. “Do you know the other tenant on my floor?”
This was a bad idea.

“Ja.”

“Can you make the call? Offer thirty-five percent over market value, fifty percent if the transaction is completed within the week and the furniture stays.”

Christensen didn't say shit.

I pulled up to the Falcon. “Problem?”

“Impulsive reactions betray intelligence.”

“Proverb?” Christensen was infamous for using them. That and obscure quotes.

“Paraphrasing.”

I cut the engine. “While you're paraphrasing, I'm not making progress on a real estate investment.”

“An investment would be waiting four to six weeks for a unit I am offering to you below market value. You did not call me for a financial investment. Who is the woman?”

“I didn’t say anything about a woman.”

“You did not have to. Who is she?”

I glanced at the Falcon. “No one you know.” Someone I should’ve known.

“I will make the call.” Christensen hung up.

Grabbing my go bag from the back seat, I got out of the Range Rover as I made another call.

Conlon answered with a warning. “You’re on speaker.”

“Sitrep?”

“On the move.”

“ETA?”

“Three minutes.”

Switching to French because Conlon spoke it, and I was fairly certain she didn’t, I asked how she was. “*Très bien, comment elle va?*”

“*Elle est trop traumatisée pour pouvoir parler,*” Conlon replied.

Good. I didn’t want her talking to him, and I already knew she was traumatized. I switched back to English. “Copy. Meet you on the apron.” Hanging up, I went up the airstairs and glanced toward the cockpit. “Zulu.”

Headphones on, talking to Ground Control, Zane “Zulu” Silas, Alpha’s right-hand man and AES’s most utilized pilot, tipped his chin.

Securing my go bag before returning to the airstairs, I gave Zulu a heads-up. “I need five minutes.”

He flipped up his mic. “For?”

The second he saw her eyes, he would know, but I wasn’t ready to go there yet. “I need to talk to Conlon.”

Zulu glanced out his side window. “Conlon’s coming?”

“Five minutes,” I reiterated, taking the airstairs back to the apron as Conlon pulled up next to my Range Rover.

Aiming for the passenger side, I opened her door.

Startled, her gaze shot to my chest, but she didn't meet my eyes before she quickly looked away.

I glanced at Conlon. "Give us a minute. You can help Zulu with prechecks."

"Right." He switched to French. "*Chauffeur de taxi et serviteur. Mieux vaut être seul que mal accompagné.*" After bitching about being a taxi driver and servant, he tossed in a comment about bad company before getting out of the SUV.

I waited till Conlon was out of earshot. "Victor says you didn't speak on the way here."

"I didn't have anything to say, sir."

"Lose the 'sir.' Are you ready to hear your two choices?"

"Getting in this car wasn't a choice."

"Neither was running from me in the garage."

"Yes, it was." Her head already down, she turned away from me more. "That was my choice."

"It was a reaction," I corrected. "Fear based, adrenaline fueled, and not thought out. It was fight-or-flight instinct, and you let it rule you in a situation where it was unwarranted." I ended the fucking charade. "You know who I am, and I know who you are." Throwing the past at both of us, I tested her. "The young girl I met in a lavender garden sixteen years ago wouldn't have run." She would've told me to fucking leave.

This time, she quietly corrected me. "It was Royal Purple."

I knew what variety it was. "Royal Purple lavender you didn't want to share," I reminded her.

"It was mine."

Yes, it was. "Your father planted it for you."

"It's gone now." Her voice got even quieter. "That life is gone."

Traylor was gone. But her stepmother and stepbrother weren't. "What happened?" I'd already put it together, and I

needed to get ahead of this, but I wanted to hear it in her own words first.

Her arms secured around her backpack, she pulled them in closer. “Nothing.”

Bullshit. “Let’s start with Los Angeles. How’d you get there?” No hits on her up to that point, I wanted to know where she’d been.

Like a pro, she avoided a direct answer. “I never stayed in Los Angeles.”

I tried another question. “Where’s home?” Last I’d checked, the house in Virginia Beach that Traylor had bought still listed his widow, S. Saunders, as the owner.

Shifting in her seat, she tried to hide a wince. “I would like to leave.”

Giving her the illusion of freedom, I opened the line of dialogue. “To go where?” I wasn’t letting her go anywhere without me unless she chose not to get on the Falcon. Then I’d have Conlon take her to my place and watch her until I got back from New York—a trip I could’ve bugged out on but wasn’t. It’d buy me time to do my own recon and find out what the hell had been going on with her.

“I prefer not to say.”

Coming down the airstairs, Conlon headed toward us. “Delta, you’re wheels up.”

Closing my fist and holding it up, I gave him the hand signal to halt. Then I gave her one last chance. “You have two options. Come with me on a short roundtrip flight, or Victor can take you to my place and wait with you until I get back.”

She glanced at the Falcon as the engines came to life. “Is that your plane?”

“No. Make a decision.”

“When will you be back?”

“Six hours.”

“Delta,” Conlon warned.

“Make a decision, or I’ll choose for you.”

Holding her worn backpack, she gingerly slid out of her seat.

I stepped back.

She took off.

Heading in the opposite direction of the Falcon, shouldering her pack, she limped toward the small terminal at a clipped pace.

Conlon looked from me to her. “*Right.*” His hands went to his hips. “After having me kidnap her, you’re letting her walk?”

Choosing to ignore the kidnap comment in favor of the bigger issue, I glanced at him. “Why is she limping?”

Conlon held his hands up. “Wasn’t me, brother. She came like that.”

“She was favoring her left leg. Not walking with a pronounced limp.”

He glanced at her. “Right. Noticed that too. Possibly a little later than I should have.”

“I asked you a question.”

Conlon looked back at me and raised an eyebrow as he fought a smile. “This is new.”

Zulu appeared at the top of the airstairs. “Delta. Wheels up. Let’s go.”

Conlon smirked. “He’s going to need a minute. He’s watching his woman walk away from him.”

I leveled Conlon a silent warning.

He chuckled.

Zulu glanced from Conlon to me to the terminal as she limped inside. “*Christ.* I can’t believe I’m about to say this. Delta, do what you have to do, but make a decision now. I need a second chair.” He headed back to the cockpit.

Conlon grinned. “Must be love if you’re considering me for second on the Falcon.”

Alpha would be pissed. Conlon wasn’t certified on the Falcon or any other jet, not that it stopped him from flying. Conlon did what he wanted, when he wanted.

I tipped my chin at Alpha’s plane. “Go. But toss my bag down before you close the airstairs.”

“Copy that, *boss*.” Conlon headed to the Falcon.

I watched her walk through the terminal, then turned toward the jet as Conlon appeared at the top of the airstairs.

“Word of advice?” Dropping my bag down, he didn’t wait for a response. “Don’t be yourself.”

Ignoring him, I headed to the Range Rover and tossed my bag in the back. I was getting behind the wheel when my cell rang with a call I was expecting.

Turning the engine over, I answered on speaker. “Alpha.”

“What’s going on?”

I reversed out of the parking spot. “Conlon’s second chair. I’m taking a few days.”

“Not what I asked.”

It was exactly what he’d asked. Turning the SUV around, scanning the apron, I didn’t reply.

Alpha exhaled. “All right. I know we’ve had an unspoken understanding since I became Team Leader all those years ago when we both knew it should’ve been you. You also know I’ve never questioned your judgment or gotten involved in your personal life. That said, as your friend, I’m asking what’s going on. This isn’t your usual MO.”

He didn’t know my usual anything. “You were meant to be Team Leader.”

“Only because you turned it down.”

Unaware he knew that fact, I thought of the three people who did, two of whom were now dead. “I never said I turned it

down.”

“No, you didn’t.”

By process of elimination, I made a calculated guess of who would’ve told him. “The Vice Admiral.”

“What about him?”

“He told you I passed on Team Leader.” Vice Admiral Erikson Nilsen had been a surrogate father to Alpha and actual father of one of our fallen Teammates, Billy “Bravo” Erikson, who’d been Alpha’s best friend.

“The Vice Admiral was never unprofessional,” Alpha replied loyally, defending his mentor. “I found the intel myself. Who’s the girl?”

I spotted her exiting the terminal in a new, long-sleeved shirt with her hair tucked under a ball cap. “You don’t want to know.”

“You don’t want to tell me.”

“You could’ve asked November.” I watched her look both directions down the frontage road as if deciding which way to go.

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

She turned north. “Not how you operate.”

“You’re right. I looked at the deleted facial rec files myself.”

Then, same as me, he hadn’t recognized her. “I have to go.” With the direction she’d chosen, she’d be walking for miles in the early morning heat before she got anywhere.

“You know who she is,” Alpha stated.

“So do you.”

She glanced behind her, then abruptly dashed across the street and headed toward the unlandscaped palmetto and scrub pine wooded area overtaking the west side of the road.

“If I did, we wouldn’t be—”

“She’s Traylor’s daughter.” I cut across the apron.

“*Jesus fucking Christ,*” Alpha swore, then he did what he’d always done. He shouldered the blame. “I gave the order for the whole Team to stand down after Canada died. *Goddamn it,* I gave those fucking orders to leave his family alone, and now his daughter’s a homeless DV victim?”

“We both stood down.”

“No, this isn’t on you. It’s on me. Traylor didn’t express his last wishes, so I was following the widow’s directive after the funeral when I shouldn’t have. *Fuck.*”

“Quentin verbally gave me his final wishes.” Repeatedly. “I’m the one who fucked this up.” She disappeared into the woods.

“Delta—”

“I’m handling it.”

Alpha exhaled with the same damn frustration I felt. “All right. Whatever you need, let me know. In the meantime, I’ll set up a bank account for her and get November started on—”

“I said I’m fucking handling it, and this intel stays between us for now. Full stop.”

Alpha paused. Then, “Good copy. What were Traylor’s final wishes?”

“To take care of his daughter.” Ending the call, I drove out of Executive.

NINE

Hanna

Memories assaulted me, and I ran.

I couldn't get on that private plane.

I couldn't go to a SEAL's house.

I couldn't get back in a vehicle with a man who could overpower me.

Except I wasn't actually running because it hurt too much, and I wasn't even walking fast enough to escape, but I still left. It was daylight now. There were people around. If they chased me, they would look suspicious.

I didn't want to scream for help. I never wanted to draw attention to myself, but in this situation, if I had to, I would.

Then I'd deal with the consequences later.

I'd evaded police before. I could do it again.

All I needed to do was keep moving.

Keep moving.

I silently chanted it as I walked into the private airport's terminal and found the bathroom. I kept chanting it as I filled my canteen from the tap, pulled on a long-sleeved T-shirt, wet my hair and tucked it up under a hat.

I was saying it as I headed out of the terminal and into the oppressive ninety-degree heat.

But then I had to add another silent chant.

Don't look back.

Keep moving and don't look back.

He hadn't come after me yet, and neither had the other man.

All I had to do was make it to those woods. Then I could disappear until nightfall or until his plane and those SUVs left.

Keep moving.

Don't look back.

Don't look back.

But the pull was too much.

He was too much.

Right before I crossed the street, I did exactly what I told myself not to do.

I glanced back.

Only briefly, but it was enough.

I saw the two SUVs, the plane, and him. Still standing there.

The ever-present panic that lived in my veins like a rushing tide swelled, and my heart leapt. Hurrying across the street, steeling myself for what would be a horrible day, I rushed into the thicket of mosquito hell. Low brush with sharp-pointed palm fronds, tall, wispy pines, vines everywhere, and thick, tropical greenery that was almost suffocating suddenly surrounded me.

The stench of vegetation rot permeated my nostrils as the shrill of insects filled my head.

In seconds I was covered in no-see-ums and mosquitoes. Buzzing, flying things dove around my exposed flesh, and my feet started to sink into wet, muddy sludge.

Quickly pulling a worn T-shirt out of my backpack to wrap around the back of my neck and lower half of my face, I already knew I'd made a grave mistake.

I wouldn't last here for an hour, let alone until nightfall.

I should've gone with the man with the accent.

I should've lied.

I should've told him his friend was responsible for every single one of my injuries that wouldn't heal.

But as soon as the thought came, it made me sick to my stomach.

I may have buried every single memory of my past, but there were four that I could never forget. Four that replayed when I least wanted them to. Four that both filled my soul and broke me. Haunting images of hope that mocked me no matter how far or how fast I ran.

A grass-green-eyed man with a warm hand swiping my tears was one of those memories.

So was the lie he'd told me.

"They're pretty, like you. And strong. Also like you."

I wasn't strong, and it wasn't the only lie he'd told me.

Pushing away the vegetation, forcing myself to walk deeper into this hell, I thought about his other lie.

Back at the airport, in that garage, he wasn't giving me choices.

He was making me do what he wanted me to do.

That's what men like him did. That's what *he'd* told me, over and over, that men like my father would make me do things. But the rushing tide of panic surged if I so much as thought about *him*, so I pushed the memory down. I was still pushing it down when I heard my name.

My old name.

The name of a person who no longer existed.

"Violet."

I froze.

He spoke again. "Turn around."

All at once, my surroundings came into acute focus, but there was nowhere to turn. Suddenly not knowing which

direction I'd come from or where he was, desperation clawed at me from the inside.

"Turn and walk forty-five degrees to the east," he commanded.

Glancing left to right, then behind me, there were no degrees. There was nothing except dense, rotting vegetation, and suddenly the fear running through my veins, the fear I knew intimately, it was no longer rushing. Thick and strangling, it solidified.

My voice, my breath, the air—it all disappeared.

It disappeared, and I was reduced to this.

Frozen. Stopped. Trapped. For months, I'd kept moving. I'd stayed hidden. I'd stuck to the plan, but now I was going to die in a humid jail of sinking mud and biting insects.

It couldn't end this way. Not yet.

Panicked fear crawled up my throat and escaped.

"Violet. Turn around."

"I..." I choked on tears. "I can't see you." I couldn't die. Not like this. I had to stick to the plan.

"I see you."

Claustrophobia closed in, and I did what I never should've done. "Please come get me." I would keep moving after that. I would stick to the plan then. *Just please, come free me.*

"Walk toward me."

A sob escaped. "I can't." I couldn't.

"Turn toward my voice."

"I ca—"

"*Turn.*"

Flinching, then doing as he said, branches scraped my face. "Wh-where are you?" A chunk of wet hair slithered down my neck. Why wasn't he coming to get me? Why did he lie to me?

“Forty-five degrees to the east. Walk,” he ordered.

“E-east?” There was no east. There was no north, south or west either. There was running and suffocating and moving and bugs and roots and heat and sharp palm fronds, and I forgot about my goal.

“Follow my voice, Violet.”

Sweat dripped down my back. Tears fell down my face. My feet were sinking. “I’m trapped.” I was never free.

“Step to your left.”

Which was my left? I was panicking. “I’m panicking.”

“I know.”

“They’re biting me.” Through my clothes, through my hat, buzzing around my ears, the insects were everywhere.

“Walk toward me.”

Something crawled over my foot. “I can’t breathe.” I was going to die.

“Five paces. Car’s waiting.”

“Pl-please.” My bottom lip quivered. I was tired. *So* tired. My leg hurt. “Come get me.” Everything hurt.

“I’m not going to do that.”

He wasn’t going to do that?

He’s not going to do that.

“He said you would,” I accused.

“He who?”

“Him.” *Him.*

“Violet—”

“Don’t call me that. I’m not her.” Not anymore.

“Hanna.”

I tried to swallow. I choked instead. That name in his voice sounded wrong. I answered anyway. “Wh-what?”

“Come toward me.”

“The man in the uniform, his eyes were grass green, but yours are emerald green.” I couldn’t swallow. “You’re not him.” My heart hurt.

His voice quieted. “My eyes are the same color they’ve always been.”

I was seven years old again. “Are you sure?” My voice was hers.

“Yes.”

Yes. It was him? “It’s you?”

“It is.”

I whispered into the marshy wetland of hell all around me.
“*Delta.*”

“Walk to me, little one.”

Little one.

The memory cut through my heart, and I broke.

TEN

Delta

I lied.

I couldn't see her.

But I heard her.

Every damn sob wracking her chest tested me, but I fucking stood there.

Not going in after her, not touching her, I was protecting her.

I was *fucking* protecting her.

I repeated the lie as I listened to her break down.

My cock hard, my dominance not giving a shit about morality, I ate guilt.

I'd been eating it since I looked down at the striking woman a seven-year-old girl had become.

Not woman.

A young, broken, submissive little one. My fucking kryptonite. And the daughter of a fallen brother.

I was old enough to be her goddamn father.

FUCK.

Reminding myself not to go in after her, knowing what I'd do if I did, I barked out an order. "Walk to me, Hanna. *Now.*" I never should've called her little one. Not back then, not now.

She let out a pained, weak cry. "I-I'm stuck."

Nostrils flaring, ignoring the heat, the SEAL in me warred with the depraved dominant. “You walked in. Walk out, Hanna.”

Hanna.

The name alone was pissing me off. But nothing touched the rage I was harboring for the son of a bitch who’d hurt her. I was going to end him. Except I wasn’t going to merely kill him.

He was going to suffer. Immeasurably.

Already planning, ninety-nine percent sure who’d done this to her, I was about to give her one last order to walk out of the swamp before I allowed myself to go in and get her when my cell vibrated.

Glancing at the screen, I took the call. “Christensen.”

“The tenant on your floor took thirty-nine percent over market value. They are leaving the furniture, minus the kitchen contents. They have until the end of the month to vacate. Transfer thirteen point nine million into my account. I will prepare the contract.”

I did the math. “That’s ten days.” Fuck.

“I was not finished. Additionally, you offered a hundred-thousand-dollar incentive if they vacate before week’s end. They have the number for a moving company. My staging team and cleaning crew are on standby. Once the property is vacated, it will be turned around in four hours. Kitchen restock, new linens and complete cleaning. *Det var så lidt.*” Christensen hung up.

Pulling up one of my bank accounts, I transferred the money plus the extra hundred thousand to his account, then shoved my phone back into my pocket. “Hanna. Let’s go.”

Quiet, pained, her small voice came from a different angle. “My shoe is stuck.”

“Leave it.” I’d buy her new ones.

Another cry of duress came through the brush, but then she sucked in a sharp breath of fear.

Already moving, I was pushing through the tree line as she stumbled out.

Her hands, then her knees hit the ground, and she dry heaved.

I broke every rule I had.

I picked her up.

Ignoring the violent jerk of her small body as I touched her, I carried her to the Range Rover and opened the tailgate. Carefully setting her down inside, I removed her pack, the hat, and the shirt wrapped around her neck.

Then I took full fucking inventory.

Quick and methodical, running my hands over her head, down her neck and arms, over her ribs and legs, I watched her face. Lifting her out of the SUV and setting her on her feet, I turned her away from me. Pressing my thumbs down her nape, palming the length of her spine, cupping her hips, I squatted and dragged my hands down her legs. Noting how every fucking inch of her body tensed with acute fear as I touched her, I removed her one remaining mud-soaked runner and tossed it in the back before I checked her ankles and feet.

Taking in how damn small she was, I turned her around as I stood back up.

Head down, body stiff, barely coming up to my pecs, she focused on the ground.

Gripping her chin, I angled her face up.

She closed her eyes.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Doing as I commanded, she opened her eyes but picked a focal point south of my jaw.

“Eyes on mine,” I amended.

Her violet gaze landed on me.

Same as when I first met her, same as five years ago, same as when she looked up at me in the garage at AES, the urge to

protect her hit me full force. Except now it was accompanied by the depraved need to own and fuck her.

Knowing I had no business touching her intimately but allowing myself to do it anyway, I brushed her hair from her face and gently traced a small scratch on her cheek. Then I listed what I found. “Left knee, right ankle, right clavicle, coccyx and lower lumbar. Anything else I missed?”

She looked through me.

“Pain level?”

Her gaze started to drift.

I firmed up my grip on her chin and repeated myself. “Pain level. Answer.”

Her bottom lip trembled, and she lied. “I’m fine, sir.”

“Do you know what angers me?”

Her lip tremble turned into a full-body tremor in ninety-degree heat right before her whisper betrayed not just her generalized fear but her fear of me. “No, sir.”

Anger spread through the malignant immorality already residing in my head. “You’re neither my submissive nor my subordinate. You do not call me ‘sir.’” The latter I would never agree to and the former, if she were any other woman, she would’ve had to earn. But she wasn’t any other woman, and I wasn’t going there. I was never going to fuck her. “Address me by my name, and it angers me when you lie to me.”

She instantly dropped her gaze.

“What?” I demanded.

She drew in a quick breath.

“Answer,” I warned.

“Delta is a call sign, and you didn’t come get me,” she barely whispered.

“Look at me when you speak to me.”

Violet eyes I would never get used to met mine.

“Try that again.”

Her throat bobbed with a hard swallow, and she partially repeated herself. “Delta is a call sign.”

“Are you asking me a question?”

She openly stared at me like she had sixteen years ago. Then I got a glimpse of her father’s daughter. “No.”

“Good.” Releasing her, I closed the tailgate. “I didn’t come for you because you needed to make the decision to come to me. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

Aiming for the driver’s side, I spared her a glance to remind her that she’d already made her choice. “Are you going to get in the passenger seat on your own, or do you need my help?”

“You’re not helping me.”

Halting midstep, I pivoted. Then I purposely crowded her personal space and lowered my voice. “Am I hurting you, Hanna?”

“Yes.” She looked away. “And I don’t like it when you call me that.”

I went after that last statement like a dog with a bone. “You said not to call you Violet.” Which I was going to selectively ignore under certain circumstances because she needed to be reminded of who she was. “Now you’re saying you don’t like Hanna. Tell me, how do you prefer I address you?” We both knew how, and we both knew she wouldn’t say it out loud.

As predicted, she didn’t reply.

I went back to my previous question. “How am I hurting you?”

Her chin tucked to her chest. “You... just are.”

“Because I remind you of your father?”

“Yes.” Then she quickly amended. “No.”

“Am I touching you?”

She shook her head.

“Did I cause your injuries?”

Like a child, like an untrained sub, she turned her head away even more. “No.”

“Then tell me how I’m hurting you,” I demanded.

The question hung in the thick humidity for ten seconds.

Then lavender eyes met mine, and the girl who was born to a SEAL looked at me. “You stole from me.”

Standing on the frontage road of Executive Airport as the early morning flight traffic ramped up, she stole my fucking sanity. “What did I steal?”

“My ability to choose.”

For half a beat, I stared down every mistake I’d made for the past sixteen years. Then I gave her what she wanted—with a condition. “Tell me who did this to you, then you can make all the choices you want.”

She didn’t hesitate.

She walked to the passenger side of the SUV and gingerly got in.

Cursing under my breath, I got behind the wheel.

ELEVEN

Hanna

He drove for twenty minutes without saying a single word.

I drowned in his addictive scent.

A scent I could never forget.

It had assailed me with memories and longing the moment I'd gotten into his SUV because it was the same scent from five years ago—fresh, clean, dry, amber, outdoors, soap, musk, man, and lavender. All of it together was distinctively him. But it was the hint of the last fragrance that truly took me under, making me want to never surface again.

Or maybe I wanted to drift.

I didn't know.

The sheer panic from the marshy, wooded swamp that had stolen my breath was gone. It'd disappeared the moment he'd put his hands on me. Now a new kind of breathlessness had taken its place, and my heart was still racing far too fast, but in a much different way.

One I didn't understand or want to think about because it was making me lose all the reasons why I didn't get into his car in the first place.

He was making me lose those reasons.

His scent, his quietness, his stillness. The way he was with me, how he was both calm and commanding—he was nothing like I'd been warned about and everything like I had remembered. He was lethal, I did know that. I knew what

SEAL meant now. But he wasn't all frenetic energy, rage and unpredictable violence like—I started to shake.

“Take a breath.”

Low and deep, the sudden timbre of his voice penetrated every frayed nerve, and I inhaled.

“Hold it,” he ordered.

I held it.

I held it until my lungs were on fire and my cheeks bloomed and I didn't think I could last another second.

Then he gave me another order. “Exhale slowly.”

His voice in my head, the pins and needles starting in my fingertips and racing upward, I did exactly what he told me to do because that's what I did.

I did what men told me.

I did it so they wouldn't be mad.

I did it so *he* wouldn't be angry.

The name I never said because that was the past, and I didn't want to go there. But this man wasn't *him*, and this?

This was different.

As I slowly blew out the breath, with every molecule of air my body dispelled, prickling awareness backfilled their position until it was more than his voice penetrating my nerves.

Before I could panic at the new sensation, he was giving me another command. This one deceptively forceful even though he spoke in a quieter, more controlled tone.

“Inhale to the count of five, and hold it.”

Despite everything I had been telling myself for the last couple of months, despite every affirmation reiterating that I'd done the right thing. Despite every reminder—keep moving, stay hidden, stick to the plan, there is no other choice, fear and loneliness are nothing, you have one goal, *one goal*—it all narrowed to a single, different point of focus.

I wasn't a girl who'd run for her life.

I wasn't a woman trying to survive on her own.

I wasn't a shell of a person shamefully feeling every vacancy of abusive attention now that it was gone.

I was this.

Air.

Breath.

Obedience.

With no other thought than to do as he said, I inhaled, I counted to five, and I held it.

I held it until my mind could escape.

I held it until the pain was relief.

I held it until I didn't have to do anything except what I was being told to do in this very moment.

My lungs burned, the car dipped, the brightness of the morning turned dark, the motion stopped, my head spun, and I started to float.

Oh God, I wanted to float.

The deep voice came in a sharp command. "Exhale, *now*."

The air burst from my lungs, pins and needles exploded, and my startled body jumped at the forcefulness of the command. The fear instantaneously came back, and a breathless apology followed. "I'm sorry, sir."

His own inhale almost inaudible past the sound of the quiet engine running and the air conditioning humming, I still heard it.

I heard it the same time I realized my mistake.

Sir.

Tucking my head to my chest, I braced.

I braced for impact.

I braced for pain.

I braced for something worse than forced captivity.

I braced for abandonment.

But I didn't prepare myself for his silence.

Taking on a life of its own, hanging in the fresh, woody amber and soap-scented air that would've been intoxicating if my muddied, swamp-ruined jeans and sweat-slicked body weren't contaminating the interior of his expensive vehicle, his silent storm stretched to every atom inside the quiet cabin.

Then it erupted in a contained burst of dominance.

Turning off the engine, getting out, closing the door with commanding force but not slamming it, his movements as controlled as his voice, he strode toward the rear of the SUV and opened it.

My mind and body betraying me, I didn't take the opportunity.

I didn't even think of it.

Not opening my door, not making a run for it, not sticking to the plan, I didn't move.

Like an addict, I waited.

I wanted his voice again.

I wanted his command.

I wanted—

My door opened, and his mud-stained suit jacket and shirt filled my downcast field of vision.

My stomach dropped, fear rose, and all of a sudden, I was sinking. The excuses poured out. "I didn't mean to ruin your clothes. I'll get them clean." I knew how to do that. "I'm sor—"

His arms slid behind my back and under my legs, stopping me midsentence.

Silent, lifting me out of the vehicle, shouldering the door closed, he strode through an underground parking garage to an elevator and elbowed the call button.

The doors opened, and he stepped on. Leaning his hip against a card reader, the indicator for the top floor lit up, and the doors slid shut.

I didn't question it.

Same as I didn't question my horribly worn backpack hanging from one of his shoulders, marring his perfect suit and wealthy, polished appearance or the fact that for the first time, I had forgotten my backpack altogether.

It was the latter that I should've been the most alarmed about as the elevator climbed.

But I hated heights.

I hated them almost as much as I hated airplanes.

Except just like the first time he'd picked me up, my thoughts were brief and scattering, and I couldn't hold on to the reasons I needed to get out of this and away from him as the elevator stopped and he stepped off.

Carrying me to one of only two doors on the floor, he punched in a code on a keypad without letting go of me, and the door clicked. Shouldering it open, he strode in and kicked it shut behind us. Tossing his keys and phone onto a kitchen island, he was walking down a corridor of an opulent apartment before I garnered the courage and will to speak.

"Please put me down."

"No." Striding into a huge bedroom with an expansive view of the ocean, he walked straight through to the bathroom and into a large shower. Setting me on my feet but not taking his hand off me, he tossed my backpack outside.

Then he turned on the water.

Shocked by the cold, by the fact that he was fully dressed and seemingly unfazed about ruining his suit and shoes, I embarrassedly turned away from him and the icy spray, but his muscled arm snaked around me.

Pulling me to his chest and holding firm, he walked me backward until I was fully under the water and held me there.

Left with no choice if I didn't want to drown or lose my balance, I grasped the sides of his already-drenched suit and pressed my forehead to his hard chest. Holding on to him as if my life depended on it, I stood in his caged captivity until the cold water turned almost scorching, and then I kept standing there.

Staring at his expensive dress shoes that were twice the length of my sock-clad feet, transfixed by the sheer size of him, I watched as the water cascaded down my hair and over my body. I watched as it ran down my muddied clothes and dumped the murky remains onto him.

I was soiling him.

I was making him as dirty as I was. His shoes, his suit, his day—I'd ruined all of it, and he wasn't... retaliating.

He hadn't left me in that swamp. He wasn't yelling at me for ruining his clothes. He wasn't punishing me for running. He wasn't doing... bad things... to me, to my body.

Everything I'd been told—by *her*, by *him*—it had been wrong.

Deep down, I'd known it was. When I permitted myself to slip into the memories of him, I remembered my father and how he was. I remembered him saying he trusted the men he served with. But the seven-year-old little girl who'd lost her daddy had forgotten about that word.

“Tip your head.” His deep voice even lower than before, he gave the command as he took one step back and brought me with him.

Still pressed to his chest, still gripping onto the sides of his suit jacket, I tipped my head back, but I kept my eyes closed as the warmth of the cascading water left us.

I shivered. His arm around my back shifted. Then his hands were in my hair.

A clean, masculine scent that matched him filled the shower, and he began to wash my hair.

He started at the top of my head and moved to the base of my neck as he worked with quick, efficient circles. Over and over, he massaged my scalp, then ran his fingers through my wet tangles.

The pressure, the tug and pull, his huge hands, the sheer size of him and the way he was protectively caging me in with his stance and his strong arms, it felt so good. My body humming in a way that was all at once new and familiar, terrifying and comforting, tingling and soul soothing, I couldn't stop the small sound that escaped.

I also couldn't stop the memory.

My heart closed off to the affectionate gentleness of something I hadn't remembered since I was a child, the words were past my lips before I could pull them back and hide them forever. "My father used to wash my hair."

The Navy SEAL's hands froze as every trained muscle in his body tensed.

A single heartbeat later, he strode out of the shower and out of the bathroom.

TWELVE

Delta

My dick hard, my hands in her hair, my thoughts deviant, I stared at her small body leaning into my grip as she held on to my jacket and moaned.

Then she fucking doused me with reality.

“My father used to wash my hair.”

For half a second, my actions arrested and my stance immobilized before my brain kicked into gear.

Pivoting, I walked the fuck out.

Stripping as I strode to the walk-in closet, I unholstered my M45 from my back waistband, stepped out of my Hermès loafers and dumped my soaked Brioni suit and custom-made dress shirt into the dry cleaning hamper that was handled by my cleaning service.

Grabbing a fresh shirt and dry pair of pants, I quickly dressed and laced up a pair of tactical boots before towel drying my MEUSOC M45 and shoving it into my SOB holster. Two minutes later, I’d grabbed my cell from the kitchen and was in my office, powering up my laptop and logging in to a secure network not affiliated with AES that I only accessed once a year. Five seconds after that, my cell was ringing with a blocked number.

Knowing who it would be, I answered. “Ghost.”

“You’re a couple months early for your annual deposit into a bank account that’s not in your name.”

Former SEAL, Ghost had been pulled from the Teams when we were active duty for an off-the-books Black Ops unit. I'd also been recruited, but I'd declined and recommended Whiskey in my stead. Will "Whiskey" Damien was a powerhouse on the Teams, but same as Ghost, he was better suited for their wetwork ops. Both he and Ghost had a combination of specialized skill sets, the ability to get in and out of any situation undetected, and they each lacked moral compass. Whiskey was now at AES, but Ghost had since retired and gone off the grid, except for when he wasn't.

"Still keeping tabs on me?" Retired or not, Ghost fed off intel and lived for covert ops. He also wasn't dissimilar to Conlon. Neither of them followed any sort of set conventions.

"Still using the network?" Ghost countered.

Only when I had to. But now that I had confirmation he was tracking my usage, I was done. "On occasion."

"For?"

"If you'd waited a minute, you could've looked for yourself."

"If you'd thought this through, you'd know I already saw her."

One hand over the keys, I paused. "Saw who?"

"Is that really the question you want to ask?"

Every conversation with Ghost was a game of chess. "You're the one who called me."

"You're the one avoiding the subject."

I heard the shower turn off, then the bathroom door close. "Do you need something specific, or is this a personal call?" We both knew Ghost didn't engage in the latter.

"Contact Kilo. He has the kind of intel you're looking for. But watch where you step." Ghost hung up.

Logging off the network, I shut down the laptop and grabbed my encrypted cell. Using a VPN and the dark web, I

found enough in five minutes to confirm my suspicions and piece together why Ghost told me to contact Kilo.

But before I called the former breacher from our Team, I dialed another number.

Whiskey answered on the second ring. “Delta.”

“Question. Blonde female, five foot two, light eyes, using the alias Hanna—where did you meet her?”

“I don’t recall anyone by that name or description.” Whiskey also played chess, except his game was more straightforward.

He didn’t recall because doing so would either incriminate him or give intel on his movements. The fact that she was alive meant she either wasn’t one of his targets or he’d chosen not to eliminate her. But neither of those scenarios was his move on the board. The fraction of a second he’d paused before answering my question followed by no denial was his move.

I played mine. “Hypothetically, if you were on assignment and encountered a woman in duress, where would you take her?”

“Nowhere. Did someone show up at AES?”

There it was. “Were you expecting someone to?”

“I always expect the unexpected.” Paraphrasing a SEAL saying, Whiskey purposely threw his next move. “There are a number of AES business cards out there now.”

AES business cards.

Matte black background with a gold logo on one side, plain white on the other with only three lines of text—Alpha Elite Security, the Miami headquarters address, and the main number—we all had them.

Whiskey had handed her one.

“Thanks.” I hung up.

That’s why she’d been in the garage.

Reopening my laptop, this time I logged in to AES servers and ran a search on Whiskey's company Range Rover, going back a few months. November would see it, but I wasn't trying to mask my actions. Unlike Conlon and his penchant for hacking or Alpha and his secrecy that rivaled November's, I never hid any of my activity on AES's servers. As a result, November had not only given me full access, but he also wiped my footprint after each of my searches.

Three minutes later, I didn't have anything concrete.

I had something better.

Whiskey's movements alone weren't telling. In fact, they were the opposite because he was that careful. But there was no such thing as coincidence, and patterns were made in the spaces between habit, intellect and unfiltered synapses.

There was only one location where they could've intersected.

A location that put Ghost's call into perspective.

Shutting down the laptop, I dialed Kilo.

After six rings, I was about to hang up when he answered. "Alpha already texted. I'm on my way in."

"Not why I'm calling."

"I'm listening."

"How much experience do you have with stage pyrotechnics?"

"Enough to know I'm not impressed."

"Do you ever do them?"

"No."

I heard the bathroom door open. "Never?"

"No."

Turning in my chair, I faced my open office door. "Consult?"

"Only on safety. Twice."

“For a concert?”

“Once for a venue, once for a band.”

“How’d they get your name?”

“Which one?”

“The band.”

“From the venue.”

Her steps sounded in the hall. “And the venue?”

“Chain reaction.”

“Was the venue consult for a single event?”

“Yes.”

“For the same band you later consulted for?”

“Yes.”

“Safety issues?”

“Lots.”

Her steps stopped outside my office doorway. “What was the chain reaction?”

“Long or short version?”

“The pertinent version.” I waited for her to look into my office. She didn’t.

“Luna and Associates. Specifically, André Luna. One of his long-time clients, Leo Amherst, is the owner of Trinity Media Group. From what I gathered, Amherst usually only used Luna for personal protection for himself. Then one of Luna’s men got in bed with Amherst’s daughter, and the professional relationship dissolved. Fast forward, and Amherst needed a favor. A specific one related to faulty pyrotechnics at a venue with a band on his label. Amherst was looking for an expert to fix the problem and knew Luna had a former Marine Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician on staff.”

André Luna, a former Force Recon Marine, had a security firm specializing in personal protection based here in Miami. All his men were former Marines, and Luna’s reputation was

on par with Alpha's, except Luna wasn't global like AES. He didn't like to operate outside the States unless he had to, but most of his men knew most of us at AES, and I knew who Kilo was talking about.

"Victor's twin brother, Ronan Conlon." Ronan was the former Marine EOD, and damn good at what he did, but there was a difference between Ronan and Kilo. Ronan diffused bombs. Kilo set them.

"Yes," Kilo replied. "So Amherst had his people call Luna. Luna was done with Amherst, but he's also too professional to tell Amherst to fuck off or walk away from a potential threat to civilians. He gave Amherst's people Alpha's number. Alpha called me. I called Amherst. Amherst is a dick, but I agreed to a one-time consult."

"To avoid civilian casualties."

"Yes. Then after the venue consult, the band's tour manager got my number from Amherst, and I checked their setup at another gig. Also a one-time consult."

Cognizant of her in the hall but needing to ask one more question, I stood and walked to the far end of the room as I phrased my inquiry carefully. "Who else did you meet with besides the manager?"

"Two members of the band, their pyrotechnician and one crew."

"Anyone else?"

"Such as?"

The woman standing outside my office door. A woman he'd met when she was seven years old. One he would've recognized if he'd seen her. "Thanks for the intel."

"You're looking for someone specific. Otherwise you wouldn't have asked if there was anyone else I met with."

I didn't deny it. "True."

"Then ask."

"I already have my answer."

Kilo was silent a beat. “Drummer for the band.”

I glanced toward the door. “What about him?”

“Cagey, off, kept looking at me.”

“More so than anyone else?” Kilo stood out, for many reasons, but that wasn’t why the drummer had been looking at him.

“Different than.”

“Understood. Do you have a way back in?”

“With the band?”

“Yes.”

“Under what pretense?”

Aware that she was listening, I kept it vague. “Any that gain access.”

Kilo picked up where I was going. “To backstage?”

“Yes.”

“I could come up with something.”

Good. “Thanks. I’ll let you know.”

“Copy that.” Kilo hung up.

Disabling the encryption on my cell before pocketing it, I stepped into the hall and glanced at her.

Head down, hair wet, another too-large T-shirt, leggings instead of jeans, she was barefoot, and she smelled like my soap.

None of that surprised me, but her toenails did.

They were painted the exact same color as her eyes.

Now wondering what the hell was in her backpack, I gave her an order. “Follow me.”

THIRTEEN

Hanna

Shock, then fear and punishing embarrassment washed over me, turning the warm spray of the shower into an icy coat of shame.

Watching him go, seeing his clothes plastered to his impossibly muscular frame, the humiliation only intensified.

The same tears that'd come in the marshy hell returned, and I held my face under the water. Rinsing away the shampoo, wishing I'd never said anything, wishing....

No.

I wasn't here for me. I wasn't going down this path. This was a distraction. I needed to stick to the plan. *One goal.*

But as I leaned away from the steady stream that was meant to cleanse, pinpricks of a new kind of anxiety crawled across my skin, and the realization struck me.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't afraid of what a man would do to me.

I was afraid of what he wouldn't.

That thought barreling me off a cliff, I quickly rinsed the shampoo from my hair and peeled off my clothes. Leaving them in a pile in the corner of the shower closest to the exit, aware that the door to the bathroom was wide open, I scrubbed my body with his rich, masculine soap as fast as I could.

Once I was clean, I peered through the steamed-up glass walls. When I was sure he was gone, I turned off the shower,

took a thick towel that smelled like him and fresh laundry off the rack and wrapped it around myself. Tiptoeing across the expanse of tile, I shut the door.

Then I took a moment to just breathe. Through the anxiety, through the parts of my body that were always sore, and through the new emotions I didn't have a name for. Carrying the memory of his hands in my hair and on my body, the new emotions were like an awakening that coursed through my veins with heated awareness as they played in a punishing loop. I knew I needed to push them down, same as I needed to forget about the glimpses I'd caught of his penthouse and everything that had come with those tiny spirals into the dangerous waters of hope. This wasn't a foretaste of a life I would ever have.

I couldn't stay here.

I couldn't afford the what-ifs.

Forcing myself back to the present, I glanced at my worn backpack that he'd dismissively tossed on the floor. Frayed, filthy, the once-lavender color faded to an indiscernible gray, it now had an added layer of shame in the form of splashed swamp mud, and it didn't belong here in this bathroom any more than I did.

Wrapping the huge towel a little tighter as the cool air conditioning chilled me, I squatted and carefully unzipped the main compartment of the only thing I owned.

The contents were disheveled, but everything was there.

Taking out my hairbrush and the only other outfit I had, I glanced at the semipermanent hair dye and the little case holding my colored contact lenses.

Standing back up, I looked in the mirror.

My hair was a shade lighter than when I'd washed it yesterday, but the blonde was still a little darker than my natural color. Leaving the dye in my backpack, I ran the brush through the long strands and stared because I hadn't put my colored contacts in for three days, and I couldn't remember the last time I had done that.

I used to love my eyes.

I'd loved them as much as the Royal Purple garden Daddy had planted for me, and I loved them because he'd loved them.

But I didn't think about Daddy anymore, and now I hated the violet color.

They weren't normal. I wasn't normal.

That's what *he* said.

Daddy had said I was special, but *he* called me a freak.

I knew what I was. I knew what'd caused the unusual color, and I couldn't help it any more than I could help all the other genes I'd been born with. But the years with *him* outnumbered the years with Daddy, and that clouded everything I'd once believed.

I had to try to get back to that place, the good place, except I didn't believe in good anymore, and I didn't know how to get there. I also couldn't think about that now.

I needed to think about how to get away from the green-eyed SEAL who'd found me.

No, who I'd found.

Accidentally.

Ignoring my aching knee, the little bump on my shoulder and my sore tailbone, I put on a simple white bra, a too-large T-shirt, and soft leggings I'd splurged on at a discount chain store. As I pulled the velvety smooth material up my legs that felt like I was wearing a hug, I knew I'd miss the leggings when I had to get rid of them. But that was another one of the things I'd learned.

Never hold on to anything.

Not clothes, not shoes, not hair color, not eye color.

Change everything constantly.

Maybe one day it would be different, but today wasn't that day, and I didn't have a plan for *one day*.

Not yet. But maybe after....

“*Stop it,*” I whispered into the face staring back at me in the mirror. “Stick to the plan,” I quietly told the woman with hollow cheeks and dark circles under her eyes. “One goal.”

I silently repeated it as I zipped my bag. Then I squeezed the water out of my ruined outfit, put the clothes in a small wastebasket, and washed my hands before opening the bathroom door.

His deep, penetrating voice carried into the bedroom from somewhere down the hall. Not paying attention to what he was saying, I took a moment to look at the room as my bare feet sank into the softest, thickest, warm-gray carpeting I’d ever stepped on.

But just as I didn’t belong in the bathroom, I didn’t belong in here.

Especially not in here.

More so than anywhere else in the penthouse he’d carried me through, this room smelled like him. It also looked like him. Muted gray walls, a long, dark wood dresser, matching headboard, and two nightstands. Two white, plush chairs arranged by the tall wall of glass looking out over the ocean matched the white bedding. Blue velvet toss pillows on the chairs matched the accent pillows on the bed that was perfectly made.

I couldn’t imagine him sleeping.

I couldn’t even imagine him making his bed so perfectly.

But more than any of it, more than his intoxicatingly masculine scent that was everywhere and the expensive furnishings and unimaginably high-priced view, the biggest thing that struck me was that this was how a man lived. A very wealthy adult man.

I’d been in countless hotels, a string of barely habitable motels, and the house my father had bought before he passed, but I’d never seen anything as nice as this. And I’d never experienced such an unobstructed view of the ocean.

Not daring to go closer to the window, ashamed that I was afraid of heights, afraid of so many things, for one impossible

moment, I imagined I was a bird.

I could touch the ground and reach for the sky. I could fly off the balcony, soar over the turquoise ocean, and stretch my wings. I could show the world I was free.

I wouldn't have to run.

I wouldn't have to hide.

I could be me.

Except I didn't know who that was, and I didn't have wings.

Forcing myself to look away from the view, I shouldered my backpack and walked out of his bedroom as I followed the sound of his voice.

"What was the chain reaction?" he asked someone before pausing. "The pertinent version."

Drawn to him, his voice, but not wanting to disturb his call or let him know I was eavesdropping, I quieted my steps even more than usual.

"Victor's twin brother, Ronan Conlon," he stated.

Victor? The man who had almost run me over?

"To avoid civilian casualties," he said with an authority that made goose bumps race across my skin and sink into my veins.

His voice got quieter, as if it were further away. "Who else did you meet with besides the manager? Anyone else?" He was quiet a moment. "Thanks for the intel. True. I already have my answer.... What about him?"

Him? Tendrils of anxiety began to spread.

"More so than anyone else? Understood," he stated firmly. "Do you have a way back in?"

A way back in? To what?

"Yes," he continued. "Any that gain access."

Access? Oh God, did he mean...?

“Yes.” He paused. “Thanks. I’ll let you know.” Suddenly he was stepping into the hall as he put his cell phone into the front pocket of a dry pair of pants.

My body my traitor, freezing in place, keeping my head down, not daring to look up, too intimidated to speak, I waited.

As sure as I was standing there, I could feel his eyes on me.

Then he gave me an order. “Follow me.” He turned, and his strong thighs and long strides carried him toward the kitchen.

My lungs filling with relief I shouldn’t be feeling, I did exactly as he instructed.

I followed him.

FOURTEEN

Delta

Opening the fridge, I glanced at the contents. “What do you prefer to eat?”

Her small voice coming from my six struck me like a shot of adrenaline. “I’m fine.”

Closing the door and turning to face her, I crossed my arms as I leaned a hip against the counter.

Immediately dropping her head, she focused on the tile under her feet.

Waiting, studying her, testing her, I didn’t speak. I did the math. The same damn math I’d been doing since I’d laid eyes on her at that fucking high school.

Nineteen years.

I was nineteen fucking years older than her.

I’d been older than the age she was now when I’d first met her hiding in a garden of lavender.

Since then, I couldn’t smell the scent without thinking of her. And fuck me, I was old enough to be her goddamn father, but here I was, thinking every depraved thing I had no business thinking.

As if she were attuned to my deviant thoughts, her head lifted. First to my waist, then to my chest, finally to my gaze.

Goddamn, those eyes.

“Did I ask you how you were?” My tone as rough as my thoughts, I didn’t filter.

Shrinking in on herself, her head dropped.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Slow, like every centimeter was an effort, she lifted her head and met my gaze.

“When I speak to you, when you speak to me, I expect you to look at me.”

Her throat moving with a hard swallow her only response, she didn’t look away.

“Let’s try this again. What do you prefer to eat?”

Another swallow, then she whispered, “I eat anything, sir.”

Keeping my eyes on her, grabbing a glass, I filled it with water from the fridge and held it out. “Drink.” I knew what I was doing. She couldn’t reach the glass from where she was. She’d have to close the distance between us and put herself within what any self-defense instructor would tell her was dangerous proximity.

She should know better than to approach a predator.

She’d known in the garage.

She’d known again at Executive.

But somewhere in that swamp, she’d lost it.

Now I was testing her.

Her gaze darting from me to my hand to the glass and back to me again, she unconsciously licked her dry bottom lip, but she didn’t move.

“Do I need to take the choice away from you?” The question, same as the command, was also purposeful.

She blinked, then her whisper came with a more pronounced rasp. “What is the choice, sir?”

“What’s my name?”

A flash of panic crossed her face before she hid it. “Is that a trick question?”

“No.”

“I-I don’t know.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I...” She hesitated. “I know your call sign.”

I waited.

She gave it to me. “Delta.”

Ignoring the rush of blood to my cock, I asked the more pertinent question. “How did I sign the birthday cards and checks I sent to you every year?”

Her entire face twisted into confusion. “Sir?”

“I’m not ‘sir’ to you, and you heard the question. How did I sign the cards and checks I sent you?”

The confusion morphed into fear as she paled. “You... sent me checks?”

I didn’t need confirmation. I knew it. I’d always known it. The money had never been spent on her, but I’d made excuses. I was active duty. I couldn’t legally take her. My hands were tied. Every mission could be my last.

They were all bullshit.

I’d given Quentin my word that I’d do my best. I hadn’t. I hadn’t come close. Now I was staring at my worst fucking mistake, cursing myself for every goddamn selfish step I’d taken since I’d walked away from that high school and left her there.

It was inexcusable.

And unforgivable.

“Take the glass, Hanna,” I ordered.

Hesitant, frightened, radiating a brand of anxiety that both killed me and fed a need I’d had since I’d first laid eyes on her, she stared at me.

And that was the rub of it.

I'd always had certain predilections, but sixteen years ago in a field of lavender, I'd looked down at a small thing so goddamn fragile, I'd become a different man.

She'd formed me.

And I'd destroyed her.

Fragile, ethereal, timidly moving with the trepidation of an abused woman, she came close enough to reach for the water. Using both hands, taking the glass by the bottom, careful not to make skin-to-skin contact, she took the water and brought it to her lips.

Her eyes on me, she drank.

My cock fully erect, wanting what I would never take, I watched her lips, her throat, her fingers around the glass, the way she swallowed. I watched all of it, and I waited. No indication in my expression, nothing in my body language, I didn't give her what I knew she was searching for, what she needed, what she'd been trained into. I didn't tell her how much to drink.

When half the water was gone, with the glass still to her mouth, she raised an eyebrow.

I didn't fucking move.

Slow, uncertain, she tipped the glass down and away from her full lips. "Thank you."

I repeated my original question. "What do you prefer to eat?"

She licked those full fucking lips, and my dick pulsed. "For which meal?"

I didn't tell her that I didn't ask which meal. I didn't reiterate that I said preference. But I wanted to. *Fuck, I wanted to*—with my hands on her as I taught her exactly how to respond to my questions. "Any."

The color that'd previously drained from her face came back, and she dipped her head. Then she looked back up.

“Steak.”

Nodding once, running to my death, I opened the fucking freezer.

FIFTEEN

Hanna

He cooked me steak.

Except it wasn't just steak.

Baked potatoes were in the oven, green beans were on the stove, and a prepped salad was chilling in the fridge. A full dinner in the middle of the day.

Watching the muscles in his broad shoulders and hard biceps bunch and move under his fitted, short-sleeved shirt, I remained seated at the kitchen island as he'd instructed.

Mesmerized, uncomfortable, nervous, I asked again, "May I help?"

"No."

Still holding my water glass with both hands, the contents long since gone, I shifted on the stool to take some weight off my tailbone. "I can set the—"

"Do you normally have a problem following instructions?" He flipped the steaks on the grill pan, then turned off the burner before facing me. His stare penetrating, his facial expression never changing, never giving anything away, he looked at me as if he could see every thought I'd ever had. "Or is it just when I give you instructions?"

Fighting the overwhelming urge to drop my gaze, my mouth suddenly dry, I didn't look away from him. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

Not knowing he had sent me money every year on my birthday. For not being smart enough to destroy the letter he'd brought to my high school that day. For making him miss his flight, for ruining his suit, for allowing him to rescue me from that swamp and selfishly not stopping him from bringing me to his home.

“For not following instructions.” If I had known he was here in Miami and worked at that building, I never would've gone there.

“Why?”

Lost in thought about the danger I was putting him in, lost in every word he said, how his hands moved, what his fingers touched, the way he smelled like escape and danger and salvation all at once, I was unprepared for the question. I didn't even understand it.

My life before steeped into the very fiber of my being, my body automatically tensed and braced for impact as my voice went too quiet. “You want to know why I'm sorry for not following instructions?”

Not replying, he continued to stare.

Panic started to filter through the false sense of security I'd foolishly let settle around me, as if his expensive penthouse floating in the sky was a safety net from the entire world below it.

Unable to avoid reality anymore, I said what I should have before he brought me here. “I need to leave.” Not that he had offered, and no matter how much I wanted to fantasize about a safe haven hidden away from everyone and everything except him, I couldn't allow myself to so much as think about it. That was worse than the panic.

The panic, I knew.

The fear, I breathed.

But this, him staring at me, his huge muscles stretching the sleeves of his shirt and the thighs of his pants—he wasn't my hero.

He wasn't my anything.

With the last thought twisting my stomach despite the smell of the food, I dropped my gaze from his and slowly put the glass down as I got off the stool. "I'll just—"

"Pick up the glass and come here."

My heart, my pulse, they started to pound so hard that a new kind of ringing started in my ears. "I'm sorry about your suit and the money in that account and that you missed your flight earlier. I'm sorry for... everything." I reached for my backpack that was at my feet.

"Touch that bag and you'll be sitting on my lap as I feed you every bite of this meal."

My hand froze, and heat exploded through every nerve ending of my body. Before I could panic or react or analyze how my body had responded to his threat, let alone think fast enough to grab my backpack and make a run for the door, he was dominantly repeating his order but with more force.

"Pick up the glass and come here," he demanded, enunciating each word.

Straightening, not looking at him, shaking with something that tasted like fear and a shower with a Navy SEAL, I carefully picked up the glass and moved around the island. Three feet away from him, I stopped.

"Closer," he ordered.

Knowing I was crossing a line I may never come back from, one I wasn't sure I wanted to, I took another step.

Two thick fingers grasped my chin.

The heat became fire.

He lifted my head.

I looked into emerald eyes that had turned as dark as a storm.

"I don't give a damn about my suit, the flight or the money I sent before you turned eighteen. If I tell you I'm making you a meal, I'm making you a meal. You don't serve me. You don't

work for me. You don't take care of me. I take care of you. I always should've taken care of you, but I failed in my duty." The muscle on the side of his jaw moved under the shadow of the short dark hair covering the lower half of his face. "That changes right now. Hand me your glass."

My heart stalled out. "Duty?"

"One of my choosing."

Suddenly, it all made sense. Him in the garden at Daddy's funeral, the visit to my high school, the letter, the bank account number, the message he'd put in that letter, today, missing his flight, me being here—*everything*. "My father told you to look out for me." I wanted to stop breathing. "I'm an obligation to you."

"No, you aren't." His tone steel, his expression locked, he repeated his earlier command. "Hand me the glass."

With a seismic tremor shaking my very soul, unsure if I believed him, I did as he asked.

Still holding my chin, taking the glass, keeping his eyes trained on mine, filling it one-handed from the water dispenser on the fridge with trained precision, he then handed it back to me.

When I wrapped my hands around the cool tumbler, his grip shifted.

Releasing my chin to wrap his long fingers around my wrist, he squeezed with just enough pressure to make my heart leave my body and my mind stumble to the edge of a cliff I knew well.

The precipice where everything changed.

Where one step would take me there, throwing me into the abyss where it all shut down and I didn't have to think.

Then, as if he knew exactly what he was doing, he lowered his voice and pushed me over the edge. "Go sit down, little one."

SIXTEEN

Delta

Weak, knowing what I was doing was wrong, I did it anyway.

Grasping her wrist, stimulating a pressure point, I used a dominant tone and command, then followed it with two words I knew she remembered and craved. “Go sit down, little one.”

Dutifully taking her water, she went back to her stool.

Reminding myself that the stool was mine, not hers, same as everything else in this fucking penthouse, I clarified the distinction as I plated the food.

Everything here was mine. Except her.

She never would be, not how I wanted, but I’d meant every word I’d drip-fed her.

I would take care of her. I’d also protect her, serve her, provide for her, nourish her, and shelter her. I’d do all of it. In ten days or less, I’d do it from a distance of a hallway and a strategically camouflaged, proverbial line drawn in the sand.

Until then, I’d suffer.

I deserved to.

Grabbing silverware and napkins, I carried the plates to the island. As I set them down, she got up.

“You need a drink too. I’ll get it.”

“Sit,” I ordered.

Carefully lowering herself back down, she slowly sat like it pained her.

Grabbing condiments for the potatoes and a water for myself, I took the stool next to her and asked my first question as I reached over to cut open her potato. “Is it your back that hurts when you sit?”

She stared at my hands in front of her but didn’t answer.

“Your tailbone,” I deduced. “Butter, sour cream?”

She shifted. Slight, two inches, she moved away from me. “Both are fine.”

I did up her potato and mine, then dug into my steak.

She ate one green bean.

“You said you like steak.”

“I do.” She took a small bite of the potato.

“But?”

Her fork poised over her plate, she froze for a second, then picked up her knife. “Nothing. Thank you very much for... dinner.”

I glanced pointedly at the bright midday sun coming in through the windows.

Not commenting, she cut a green bean in half with her knife and fork but still didn’t touch her steak.

Setting my utensils down, I gripped her chin and brought her eyes to mine. “What’s wrong with the filet?”

Her eyes welled, and she bit her bottom lip.

“Tell me,” I demanded. So help me God, if her mouth was injured too, I was walking out of this penthouse with my M45 in one minute flat.

“My father was the last person to make me a steak.”

Not reacting to the knife she’d just sunk into my chest, I kept my expression locked. “Would you prefer something else?”

“No. Thank you.” Her gaze drifted. “The steak is perfect.”

“If that were true, you’d be eating it.”

“It’s just...” She drifted off.

I couldn’t fucking stop staring at this woman. “What?”

She looked back at me. “I was just remembering the last time I ate a steak.”

I picked up on the key words she didn’t use. “How did you eat it?”

“With brown sugar,” she barely whispered.

Brown sugar. With fucking steak.

Not commenting, releasing her and getting up, I went to my cabinets and searched. No goddamn brown sugar. No regular sugar. Because I wasn’t a fucking baker, and what the hell was I missing? Because there was a story behind this. She hadn’t almost cried because of brown fucking sugar.

“Wait here,” I ordered before walking out of my apartment, crossing the hall and knocking on the door of the other penthouse.

Thirty seconds later, the husband of the couple I’d met only in passing opened the door. When he saw who it was, he smiled. “As a former investment banker, I should tell you that thirty-nine percent over market value isn’t in your best interest, but the wife’s happy to upgrade, so I’m not saying shit.”

“Smart man. Do have any brown sugar?”

For half a second, he looked at me like I was insane. Then he burst out laughing. “You’ve got a spare thirteen-point-nine mil in cash lying around, but you need sugar?”

“Honey, who is it?” his wife called from somewhere inside their place.

“Our neighbor-buyer,” he yelled back over his shoulder before shaking his head at me and dropping his voice to a normal volume. “Who apparently has a sweet tooth. Come on in. I’ll see what the wife’s got.” Stepping back, he pushed the door wide. “But fair warning, I have no clue what’s in the kitchen. Not my domain.”

I purposely glanced at my watch. “I’ll wait here.”

“Gotcha. In a hurry, needs sugar, not the socializing type. Give me a sec.” He wandered off.

A long minute later, he returned with an unopened bag and a grin. “I think this qualifies as the most expensive pound of sugar ever purchased.” He handed it to me.

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you, soon-to-be former neighbor. By the way, nice trick on the hundred-grand incentive, but I feel obligated to tell you that we’re robbing you blind. The wife already had her eye on a new place that’s available now, and your Danish friend is the builder. Pretty sure we’ll be out of your new digs as soon as the wife gets the moving company up here.” He laughed. “Happy wife, happy life, right?”

Tipping my chin, I strode back into my place and glanced at her.

She hadn’t touched anything else on her plate.

I held up the bag. “How do you like it? You want the steak back on the grill pan with the sugar?”

She blinked twice. “You asked your neighbor for brown sugar?”

“Yes.” I turned on the burner under the pan.

“You didn’t need to do that.”

Yes, I fucking did. “How did Quentin prepare it?”

“I... you... you don’t need the pan. Just—just some of the sugar on the side.”

Nodding, I turned off the burner, opened the bag, dumped some into a small dish and handed it to her as I sat back down.

“Thank you.” Her voice caught with emotion, she took the dish how she’d taken the glass from me—with both hands.

“You’re welcome.”

Setting the dish down and picking up her utensils, she began to cut her steak in small bites, and for the next ten

minutes, we ate in silence as she dipped every damn piece of meat in brown sugar.

When she'd finished, I asked. "How did that come about?"

Taking a sip of water before she answered, she clutched her napkin as she pushed her fork through her potato. "The brown sugar and steak?"

"Yes."

"It was my father's idea."

I'd seen Quentin eat steak. Grilled meat had been a sacred institution to him. "Doesn't sound like him."

"No, it wasn't like him. Not exactly." She looked past the kitchen to the windows. "He was home on leave, but he was going back the next day. It was summer, and it was hot, and he was grilling dinner. We were sitting out back, and when he put a steak on my plate, I said I didn't like steak and that I wanted an ice cream cone instead. Without a word, he went into the house and came back with a dish of brown sugar and a twenty-dollar bill. Setting the sugar on my plate and the money next to it, he told me steak dipped in brown sugar was better than ice cream any day of the week. But that if I didn't believe him, I could have the twenty to buy myself a dozen ice cream cones... after I ate the steak."

Quentin had never told me that story, but it was exactly in line with something he would've done. "Did you get the money?"

"I did."

"And now you associate steak with brown sugar."

"Yes."

The knife lodged deeper in my chest. "Noted."

Rising from her stool, she picked up her plate. "Thank you again for dinner. I'll do the dishes."

"No, you won't." Grabbing the plate from her and picking up mine, I quickly dumped everything into the dishwasher.

When I turned, she was still standing at the island, but she was looking out at the view.

Taking in her profile and beauty, I also cataloged how she was favoring her left knee and holding on to the counter.

“Let’s sit on the balcony.” I moved past her to open the sliders, but she didn’t follow.

When I turned back, I saw it in her eyes, and the flight issue suddenly clicked. “You’re afraid of heights.”

Still gripping the counter, not making eye contact, she nodded, but she also looked at the ocean like she was drawn to it.

“All heights or specifically planes and high-rises?” If she said the latter, I was calling Christensen back and selling both penthouses.

“Well... anywhere I feel trapped,” she admitted.

The swamp, the tears. I added it up. “Vehicles?”

She half shrugged with her left shoulder.

I made a silent vow to get her a convertible. “What doesn’t make you feel trapped?”

Her eyes met mine. Then she quickly scanned the living area of the penthouse. “I don’t know.” She looked out at the ocean again. “Not closed-in spaces.”

“Does the open door to the balcony bother you?”

She hesitated, then shook her head. “The breeze is nice.”

The breeze was humid as fuck, but I could work with this. I tipped my chin at the sectional. “You good with the location of the couch?”

Glancing between the open door and the pale leather, she nodded, but it was hesitant and unsure.

I shoved the whole section back a few feet, then strode to her location and stood next to her as I eyed her perspective. Better. “Come. Sit.” Refraining from taking her arm or putting my hand on her, I walked back and took a seat.

A few seconds later, she joined me. On the opposite end of the couch.

Leaning forward, my arms on my legs, hands clasped, I studied her. I had two ways to approach this—direct and indirect. I went with the former. “What were you doing at Miami Symphony when you encountered Whiskey?”

Her gaze cut from the view to me to her lap. After a full minute, she answered. “I had a part-time job there as an intern for a few days.”

She’d needed money. “Doing?”

“Working backstage,” she answered vaguely.

“What happened?”

Her head tucked against her chest in a protective move. “I... moved on.”

“You had a problem,” I corrected. Someone threatened her, hit on her, or hurt her. “Did Whiskey handle it?”

Her voice quieted. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I let it drop because that intel wasn’t my end goal right now. I’d already put together both a theory and timeline of events, but I wanted confirmation on a few details before I took care of this, permanently. “Did you forget the account number I gave you when you turned eighteen?”

The movement was as slight as her, but she shook her head.

“Why didn’t you use the money or call me?”

She looked up at me with eyes the color of her namesake, and for the first time since I’d found her, I saw the seven-year-old she used to be. “Because I couldn’t.”

SEVENTEEN

Hanna

“Did you forget the account number I gave you when you turned eighteen?”

Never. I knew it even now, not that it mattered anymore, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that or that I’d never forgotten a single moment of any of my time with him.

I barely shook my head.

“Why didn’t you use the money or call me?”

I looked up.

With the brilliant late-afternoon sunlight streaming in and the ocean breeze gentling everything in a layer of warmth you could never get from any other kind of heat, his intense green-eyed gaze was even brighter, and false courage washed over me.

I told him only half of the truth. “Because I couldn’t.”

For a single beat of my heart, he stared at me, and I forgot about every other thing in this life and simply soaked in how impossibly handsome he was.

Then he parted his full lips and decimated me. “Did he physically stop you?”

Panic flooded in, and I was pushing off the couch. “I-I have to go.” I turned.

Suddenly he was there, in my path of escape, all six and half feet of him, and his expression was no longer controlled or locked. It was murderous, it was directed at me, and his

hand was grasping my chin and lifting. “Tell me exactly what he did to you.”

His touch gripped my soul as little pinpricks of fire raced across my skin, but it still happened.

My body shut down, my mind went into its corner and every muscle went lax as my eyes closed. But mentally, I braced for impact.

“I am not going to hurt you, Violet.”

His voice, that name, it rang through my head and ricocheted with the echo of a life gone. “W-why are you calling me that?”

“Because it’s your name, you’re panicking, and you need to hear it. Breathe in and look at me.”

My body my traitor, my mind a fighter, I inhaled at his dominant command, but I didn’t look at him. I begged. “Stop it.”

“Open your eyes.”

“I want to leave.”

“No. Take another breath and look at me.”

Filling my lungs, unable to stop myself, I opened my eyes. “You don’t understand.” Now I really had to get away from him. “Please, let me go.” I never should’ve come here.

“Why did you lie to me five years ago?”

“I...” I stopped myself. I couldn’t lie again. Not with him this close to me, with those knowing eyes of his watching me, with his dominant grip—*no*. I wasn’t going there. Burying every thought of him, I gave him the palatable answer. “I fell.” It wasn’t completely untrue. I was pushed, but I still lost my footing and fell. “It was an accident.” That’s what I’d told myself back then. Just another day, just another stumble. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because we both know it wasn’t a track hurdle accident.”

I didn’t want to do this. “What do you want from me?” The time for him to play hero was long gone. It was gone

before I'd ever met him.

"The truth."

"I already told you it was an accident."

"Is that what you call Steven hitting you? An accident?"

A single name, spoken out loud, and I fell from the scaffolding of lies I'd built for myself.

I didn't say that name anymore.

I was here and now. I had one goal. I wasn't my past. I wasn't that eighteen-year-old girl who'd had more than her innocence destroyed. Those memories were shoved into a trunk, and I'd thrown away the key. "He goes by another name." My vicious stepbrother was dead to me. The malicious, violent, evil monster that was born in his place was another brand of hell, but it was a hell I had chosen.

"Styx, then," he stated with cruel callousness. "Tell me exactly what he did to you."

The whispered denial of what was happening slipped past my thoughts. "No."

"Would you prefer I ask him myself? With you present?"

The threat wrapped around my neck like a noose, and everything I had been working toward hung me.

I was no longer the child whose father had told her to be strong every time he left for deployment. I was no longer the daughter of a decorated Navy SEAL who lost his life defending others. I wasn't even a woman who had purposely walked away from seventeen years of torment to save herself. I had never been that brave.

I was her.

The terrified, manipulated, parentless, abused little girl hiding in her field of lavender who had turned into the terrible, selfish woman whose hand had to be forced.

Carrying a worn backpack that wasn't for me, living a life on the run, watching every step just to do what I should've

done all along. And now, after everything, a Navy SEAL who had sworn to protect was going to take it all away?

He thought he was going to force me to tell him everything that had happened?

After sixteen years of an empty promise, he was going to put me in a room with *him* and destroy all of it?

My whispered *no* grew.

It grew into a field of no's.

It grew so big, it surrounded me in choking anger. "What right do you think you have?"

"What right did your stepbrother have when he hit you?"

The blow struck with the impact of a derailed train full of shame and anger, but I mentally dodged it. "You know nothing." He'd left. They'd *all* left.

"A nasal fracture that's been surgically realigned, medial collateral ligament damage to your left knee, defensive wound scars from a knife on the backs of your hands and forearms, unhealed fractured right clavicle, a bruised or broken coccyx, and a nondisplaced right ankle fracture, also unhealed. Those are just the injuries I found with a cursory scan. Would you like to tell me again that I know nothing?"

"Yes, because that's what happens when you work physically demanding jobs."

"Such as?"

In the heat of anger, I let the detail slip in the form of a lie. "Stage crew."

"For his band."

Already having dug myself into a hole, I said nothing.

"Do you know what causes MCL damage to a knee?" He didn't wait or need me to answer because he wasn't asking. He was setting his own stage. "A direct blow to the outside of the knee." His nostrils flared with an inhale, then his voice became lethally quiet. "Do you play sports, Hanna?"

I held on to the only thing I could. “I’m Hanna now?”

“You’re Violet Hanna Traylor, you’re a victim of domestic violence, and thirteen weeks ago, you left your abuser’s concert tour.” Releasing his grip on my chin, he stepped back a foot and drilled his intent with both a biting command and ruthless stare. “Undress.”

Shock stole my indignation. “What?”

“Show me the rest of your body, or I take you to the nearest ER for a thorough exam, including photo documentation. Your choice—me or the hospital.”

Sheer panic slammed into my shock. “You can’t force me.”

His stare unwavering, he said nothing.

He didn’t have to.

We both knew he could overpower me in a heartbeat. He could also use his voice and his dominance and say the right words, and I would do exactly as he instructed because no matter how hard I tried, I was that woman.

I had been conditioned to be her.

But in that moment, the Navy SEAL didn’t use his dominant voice to give me a command. And the truly broken part of me, not the bones or scars or injuries you could see, but the shattered fragments you couldn’t—the silent, damaged girl living adrift inside me—she crushed in on herself with a pain that was greater than any broken bone.

Hurting me worse than when he’d come to my high school, he stripped me with his cold gaze as sure as if he were taking off my clothes himself.

No health insurance, knowing firsthand what would happen if I went to a hospital, I didn’t have a choice.

But I did still have my voice.

Careful of my collarbone, I slid my arm out of my T-shirt and did what I swore I would never do. I succumbed to hate.

“Do you think forcing me to do this makes you any better than him?”

His response was as swift as his command. “No.”

EIGHTEEN

Delta

Wincing as she pulled her arm free from her oversized T-shirt, she dished out another bite of the seven-year-old girl who'd been her father's daughter. "Do you think forcing me to do this makes you any better than him?"

"No." I was worse.

Much fucking worse.

Staring at her hard nipples through her thin cotton bra, I had to force myself to take my eyes off her breasts.

Then I walked a slow circle around her.

Clinically scanning every inch of the rest of her exposed chest, shoulders, arms and back, I gave another order once I was in front of her again. "Take your pants off."

"No."

I could've used my dominance in a tempered tone and given her the order followed by a term of endearment. But I didn't. This wasn't sexual, and she wasn't my sub.

Expression stern, I raised an eyebrow.

She added an explanation. "I don't have any underwear on."

"I know." The fitted material wrapped around her ass like a second skin didn't escape my notice.

"Then you know why I can't take my leggings off."

Can't, not won't. "Wait." I strode to my bathroom, grabbed a towel, went back to the living room, and handed it to her. "Pants off."

She glanced at the towel, then at me. Her expression suddenly harboring a new, different nuance of fear, she didn't put force behind her words. She pleaded. "You can't make me do this."

I could. "You were given a choice."

"Why are you doing this?"

"To assess what kind of medical treatment you need." To know exactly how much pain I was going to inflict on fucking Saunders.

"I'm fine."

"If you were fine, you wouldn't be living out of a backpack, disguising your appearance, using fake IDs, and have injuries consistent with someone habitually beating the shit out of you."

Her face didn't pale. It flushed. "I chose my life."

"No twenty-three-year-old chooses this. Pants off. Put the towel around your waist."

"No."

I strode toward the kitchen where she'd dumped her backpack by her stool and grabbed it. Walking back, I put it on the coffee table in front of her. "Do you have underwear in here?"

The flush from earlier returned, and she reached for her T-shirt.

I grabbed it. "Simple question, Violet."

Shock covered her features before she ducked her head and crossed her arms over her breasts. "I already told you I don't like to be called that."

"So you've said. You prefer Hanna. Why?"

"May I please have my shirt back?"

“Are you cold?”

She glanced at the open sliders. “No.”

“Then no. Underwear?”

Her gaze cut to the backpack. “I only have the clothes I have on.”

My anger at Saunders magnified, but I kept my tone in check. “We’ll remedy that tomorrow.” I was going to buy her a whole fucking wardrobe. “Why do you prefer Hanna?”

“I don’t need you to get me clothes.”

“I’m going to anyway. The name?”

She looked out at the ocean again. “I’m not going to stay here.”

“No, you’re not.”

Her eyes immediately met mine.

“In a few days, you’re moving into your own penthouse across the hall. Until then, you’re staying in my guest room. Why Hanna?”

Her eyes went wide, her lips parted and shut, then she looked away. “I can’t afford that, and you can’t do this.”

“You’re not paying for anything, and it’s already done.”

Shaking her head, she shifted her weight off her right foot. “You don’t understand.” She glanced toward the door. “I can’t stay here. Or across the hall.”

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Reluctant and frightened, her gaze met mine.

I made her a promise. “Saunders will never touch you again.”

She drew in a sharp breath at the mention of his name. “You don’t understand.”

I understood perfectly. “I won’t let him get close enough to hurt you. You’re safe with me. Always.”

“It’s not.... That’s not....” Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. “It’s not just him.”

“I know.” There were at least a dozen people who’d been complicit in that fuck’s abuse toward her, myself included.

Those eyes killing me, she stared at me with a lifetime of mistrust. “No, you don’t. Not all of it.”

I’d already put it together, but I wanted to hear her excuse. I wanted to hear why the fuck a Navy SEAL’s daughter thought so little of herself that she was protecting a piece of shit like Saunders. “Then tell me.”

Her eyes welled. “I can’t.”

“Do you trust me?”

She hesitated, then shook her head.

“Good. You shouldn’t.” I’d fucking failed her. “But know this. I will protect you, shelter you, and respect you. From this moment forward, those are my covenants. Your trust, I’ll earn.”

Two tears slid down her face. “This isn’t about trust.”

No, it wasn’t. It was about protection, power and control. She had none. I gave it to her. “Say the word and Saunders will be dead before sundown.”

Panic instantly flooded her expression, and she was shaking her head. “Y-you can’t do that.”

My anger compounding by the fucking minute, I cursed myself for every year I’d left this beautiful, vulnerable creature to her own defenses. “Give me one good reason.” Retribution wouldn’t do a damn thing to erase my negligence, but I wanted to break every fucking bone in Saunders’s body before I put a 45 ACP through his skull.

Her voice went quiet as fuck. “Because... you don’t.... I can’t....” She sucked in a breath, and her expression turned surprisingly resolute. “My father said a SEAL’s honor is his word.”

Analyzing every word she said, I knew exactly where she was going with this. “It is.”

“Is yours?”

“Yes.” Conditionally.

She stared at me a beat. “Then I’ll tell you if you make me a promise.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m not giving you a promise that I won’t kill or hurt Saunders.”

Her expression fell, and she dropped her gaze to my hand. “May I please have my shirt back?”

“Are you choosing the hospital?”

“I don’t need a hospital.” She held her hand out. “I’m done talking.”

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. “I won’t kill Saunders.” Not within the next hour.

Her arm fell to her side, and she looked back up at me. “You didn’t say hurt.”

“I also didn’t say promise or never. Take the win, little one.”

Giving me a reaction at the nickname like I knew she would, her throat moved with a hard swallow. Then her voice turned submissive soft. “Please. I need your word.”

“You have what you have.”

“You won’t kill him?”

I didn’t repeat myself. I held her gaze.

Watching me like I was watching her, she slowly nodded. “Okay. But...” She looked toward the view for a few seconds, then brought her gaze back to mine. “Just know that I—I chose this.” Holding the towel in front of her, averting her gaze, she quickly pushed her leggings down one-handed.

Then she turned and fucking decimated me.

Lash marks.

Dozens of them. Across her ass and the backs of her thighs.

Not new but not old, the remnants of the sadistic welts eclipsed every instance of anger I'd ever had by a thousand-fold right before the thought of every sub I'd ever fucked into tears reared up and hit me with bile.

Saunders was going to pay.

Fuck was he going to pay.

Grabbing my cell from my pocket, I quickly took pictures, then tossed her shirt over her shoulder.

“Put your clothes back on.” Barking out the order with misplaced rage, swiping to my contacts, I was dialing before I walked out of the room.

NINETEEN

Hanna

Striding down the hallway with his cell phone to his ear, he left his anger behind like a feral, breathing animal that surrounded me in shame.

Circling with every slight gust of the ocean breeze, his quiet, controlled fury and his voice carried from down the hall.

He made three calls.

I sat on my scars on the softest couch to ever touch my body.

He raised his voice.

I waited for panic to bury me.

But it didn't come.

My breath came and went.

The waves touched the shore and left.

I didn't run.

I stared at the ocean, at my mistakes, at a mountain of regret. But most of all, at my own selfishness because now I wasn't thinking about how scared I was.

I was thinking *what if*.

What if I gave it all to him?

I will protect and shelter you.

Say the word and he'll be dead before sundown.

You're safe with me. Always.

But I didn't need to be safe. I needed to be sure.

Really, really sure.

Except if I knew nothing else, I knew there were never any guarantees in life, and I couldn't risk not being one hundred percent sure if I decided to tell Delta everything. I'd already shown him too much, but a part of me—a weak, exhausted part—wasn't sorry. If nothing else, he'd talked me out of my own foolish mistake of trying to escape in that swamp, and he'd fed me.

I glanced at my backpack.

I was clean and fed, and the sun was starting its lazy afternoon descent toward the horizon.

It was time.

Shoulder my few belongings, slip on the secondhand ballet flats I'd gotten when I'd bought the now-ruined outfit in his bathroom, and just leave.

Stick to the plan.

I'd already been here too long. I'd been in Miami too long. I was risking too much, but I didn't have a choice. I had to make it another week. But that week couldn't be here, in this penthouse. I knew that. And right now, I did have a choice. Grab my backpack and go.

Keep moving.

One goal.

Stick to the plan.

The SEAL in the other room wasn't the plan. A few days with him would be a lifetime, and a condo across the hall was a fantasy. I couldn't afford any of it.

I had to go.

Looking out at the ocean one more time, I told myself I could be the tide. I could come back. But for now, I had to leave.

I had to leave.

Inhaling, I stood.

He strode out of the hallway.

His phone still to his ear, his harsh gaze on me, he went to the front door and opened it.

A blond man with sun-kissed skin, a wide smile and a black bag sauntered in. He slapped Delta on the shoulder, and the muscles in his arms strained the sleeves of his T-shirt. “What up, Ridge? Ya miss me?” His gaze crossed the room to me, and he stopped cold in his tracks. “*Hole-lee shit.*” His eyes went wide. “Hot damn, Elizabeth Taylor. I gotta admit, I was not expectin’ this.” Dumping his bag on the island, walking right at me, he got in my personal space and bent his knees to peer at my eyes. “Oculocutaneous albinism or ocular albinism?” The scent of coconuts and ocean suddenly surrounded me. “Your hair’s blonde not white, so I’m guessin’ OA.” He glanced over his shoulder at Delta. “Yo, Ridge, can I touch her?”

Ridge?

Delta held the phone away from his ear. “She speaks for herself, she’s not a fucking spectacle, and no. Hanna, Talon Talerco. He’s former SARC. Talerco, act like it.”

The blond man looked back at me and grinned. “Just call me Talon, darlin’, and apologies.” He held his hands up as if in surrender. “No offense meant, promise. Ridge didn’t give me a heads-up, and you just threw me a curveball is all. But we’re all good.” His expression turned serious. “Mind if I...?” He motioned with his hand. “Tip your head toward the window.”

Suddenly wanting to run, I didn’t look toward the ocean. I looked at a Navy SEAL.

His gaze, measured and intent, was locked on mine. “Calling you back,” he clipped into his phone before hanging up and barking at his friend. “Stand down.”

“Nothin’ doin’, nothin’ doin’,” Talon replied absently as he continued to stare at my eyes. “Honest-to-God purple. Can’t say I’ve seen that in person before, Elizabeth Taylor.”

“Hanna,” Delta corrected.

Talon frowned. “You sure ’bout that, Ridge? Cuz I feel like I’m lookin’ at the same thing as you.” He glanced at Delta. “And that somethin’ sure looks a helluva lot like a grown-up version of Canada Traylor’s little girl.”

The question was out as soon as I heard Daddy’s call sign. “You knew my father?”

The blond man that smelled like the beach and looked like a surfer straightened to his full height as his demeanor instantly changed from civilian to military. Giving me his undivided attention, a grave seriousness hardened the angles of his features, and he lost his Southern accent. “I had the honor of serving with Petty Officer Second Class Quentin Traylor. Fearless, tenacious and selfless up to his last breath. He was a true hero.” A hint of emotion flashed in his eyes before he quickly masked it. “The only thing he loved more than his country was his daughter.” His voice quieted, and his accent came back. “He proudly showed your picture to everyone he served with, darlin’.”

His last breath.

The words echoed, the wound opened, and I couldn’t stop it.

Grief came.

TWENTY

Delta

He fucking made her cry.

Tears falling down her face in silent anguish, looking right through Talerco, she stood there lost and vulnerable.

“Move *now*,” I ordered Talerco as I went for her without a single thought about the consequences.

Talerco stepped back, and I grabbed her.

Pulling her to my chest and wrapping my arms around her, I glared at Talerco over her head.

Reading every ounce of my anger, he didn't back down. “She had a right to know.”

“You're not here to upset her.”

Talerco tipped his chin at her shoulder. “You're crushing a broken right collarbone.”

Her arms at her sides, her tears soaking my shirt, she hadn't flinched when I grabbed her, and the reason why hit me harder than her tears.

She was used to being hurt. *Fucking used to it.*

My rage growing, already regretting that fucking promise, I eased my grip on her. Lowering my left arm to her back, cupping her nape with my right hand, I focused up and downloaded to Talerco. “Medial collateral ligament damage to her left knee, nondisplaced right ankle fracture, fractured right clavicle, bruised or broken coccyx, lower lumbar ecchymosis that doesn't look like it's healing, and a surgically realigned

nasal fracture.” I left off the lash welts and knife scars. “Check all of it.”

“Copy that.” All business, Talerco grabbed his med kit from the island and dropped it onto the coffee table. “You want to hold her?”

What the fuck did he think? Was she still crying? Were her tears still soaking my shirt? “Yes.”

Talon waited a beat. Then his hands went to his hips.

“What?” I demanded.

“Can’t examine her with your arm in the way.”

Fuck. I lifted her shirt a few inches, and she hitched in a sharp breath.

I dropped my voice for her ears only. “You’re okay, little one.” Glancing at Talerco, I gave him a warning. “Lower lumbar. Be careful.”

“Roger that,” he answered absently, already leaning down to look at her back as he put his hands on her waist and pressed his thumbs against the worst of the bruising.

She flinched hard.

I fucking snapped. “*Watch it.*”

“Nothin’ doin’, Ridge, nothin’ doin’. Lift her shirt more.” Frowning, he pressed higher up her back as I gave him another few inches of access. “How old are these bruises, darlin’?”

Her small hands gripped my waist as she pressed herself into me to get away from Talerco. “I-I-I’m fine.”

“I know you are, darlin’, but that’s not what I asked.” Talerco pushed the material up past her bra, and I hit my limit.

“Enough.” Pulling her shirt down, I glared at him before gripping her chin and tilting her face up. “How old are the bruises?”

Red rimmed with grief, her eyes looking even more violet, she pleaded with me in a rasped whisper. “Please don’t.”

Time stopped.

I knew the speed of thought.

I knew reactionary actions took one hundred and fifty milliseconds.

I knew processing sensory information into conscious experience took fractions of a second, the average human had over six thousand thoughts a day, and I thought out every goddamn thing ten steps ahead. Action and reaction. Law of averages. Predictable behaviors. Patterns, strategies, emotions, deception, subterfuge, combat, AES clientele—all of it had predictability and precedent, and that's what I did.

I configured shit into patterns and calculated outcomes.

I'd been doing it since I was five fucking years old and witnessed my father take a hand to my mother. He yelled, she spit, he backhanded her, she begged for forgiveness. I wanted to knife him. She wanted to kiss his feet. None of it had made sense until it did. The pattern repeated itself, and an obsession was born.

Logic pushed out emotion. I honed a skill that occupied every fucking one of those six thousand daily thoughts, and I made a career of it. I didn't need a goddamn shrink to analyze my drive to become a SEAL, the satisfaction behind every one of my kill shots, or an indissoluble code of honor I swore to protect. Every act traced back to a childhood I couldn't control.

Now, I was control.

But looking down at her, that control fucking snapped, and a singular thought embedded in my depraved mind that I'd experienced exactly three times in my life overtook everything.

Mine.

She was mine.

Sixteen years ago, five years ago, today—she was mine. She'd been fucking mine, and in that moment, I was ruthless enough to not give a damn that possession was not nine-tenths of the law, or that ownership was subordinate to free will. She was in my arms. She was holding on to me, and she was hurt.

I was about to open my fucking mouth and destroy over three and a half decades of control and take her down with me when Talerco spoke up. “We’re almost done, darlin’. Ridge, turn her around.”

Aware of every one of her accelerated heartbeats, my thumb stroking her rapid pulse, I took those one hundred and fifty milliseconds to react.

“Copy.” Turning her in my arms, shoving down the act of possession but not the emotion of it, I picked her up. Then I sank to the couch and grasped her right calf while cradling her in my arms. “Nondisplaced ankle fracture.”

Talerco threw me a look before taking her foot and manipulating her ankle to check range of motion. “Just let me or Dr. Ridge here know if I’m hurtin’ you, darlin’.”

Her small voice cut through the tension of my glare. “You’re a doctor?”

Talerco smirked. “He’s a doctor of predictability, darlin’.” He released her ankle, took her other foot and started to push up the material of her legging. “Don’t let him tell ya otherwise.”

I pulled her leg back. “What are you doing? I already told you, medi—”

Cutting me off, he repeated what I’d told him verbatim. “Medial collateral ligament damage to her left knee. Got it. But I need to see that knee, Ridge.”

Waking up to a new level of possessiveness, I murmured to her as I pulled the fucking material up myself. “Almost done.”

Curled into me, she didn’t protest or comment.

Talerco silently examined her knee, then moved to her clavicle without pushing her shirt aside or making any more asinine comments. Lastly, taking her chin, he tilted her head to the side and slid a practiced touch over the ridge of her nose. When he was finished, he sat back on the coffee table and took in the scars on her forearms before he met my gaze. “She needs X-rays.”

She and I both said no at the same time.

Talerco inhaled. “Ridge—”

“No hospitals.” Out of my fucking mind with her on my lap, this time I was the one to protest. She needed medical care. I knew it. Talerco knew it.

“Okay.” Talerco nodded at me like I was the one who needed kid fucking gloves. “We’ll use a walk-in clinic. I’ll call ahead. Good?”

She shrank into me even more, and I took five hundred milliseconds.

Half a second.

Half a second too long to make the right call. “Agreed.”

Talerco took out his cell.

So damn quiet, her voice barely above a whisper, she decimated me all over again. “Please don’t make me do this. I know what happens at these places. They will look at me and call the police, and then bad things will happen.”

“No one is calling the authorities, and nothing will happen to you.” I wouldn’t fucking allow it. “I’ll be with you the entire time.” Holding her close, I reached for her backpack on the coffee table. “Do you have another pair of shoes?”

She didn’t speak. She nodded.

Without permission, I unzipped the threadbare backpack that must’ve been the one she’d had five years ago. Quickly taking inventory of the contents, maintaining my locked expression, I grabbed a pair of heavily scuffed, worn flats that resembled something a ballet dancer would’ve thrown out. Slipping them onto her feet, noting they were two sizes too big, I mentally added another nail to Saunders’s coffin.

Talerco hung up. “All set. Let’s roll.” He grabbed his med kit.

“In and out,” I warned.

“In and out,” Talerco confirmed.

I stood with her in my arms.

She stiffened. "My backpack."

"I got it, darlin'." Grabbing it and surreptitiously glancing inside as he zipped it closed, Talerco shouldered the filthy thing and headed to the door to hold it open.

As I passed him, he threw me a look that said he'd seen the same damn thing I had.

Wallet, small bag of toiletries and cash.

Stacks of bundled hundred-dollar bills poorly concealed in plastic bags.

I'd counted over a hundred grand.

TWENTY-ONE

Hanna

They'd both looked in my backpack.

I couldn't stop them, but neither had said anything.

Delta, or Ridge as Talon called him, carried me to the elevator and to his car. Then, in what was a coordinated move that was so seamless it was as if they had practiced it a thousand times before, Talon opened the rear driver's side door. Delta carefully set me in the back seat and momentarily shifted aside. Talon placed my backpack at my feet, and Delta moved back in, grabbing the seat belt.

Lost in his clean, dry amber and sandalwood scent that carried the hint of lavender, drowning in his protectiveness, reeling with what was happening—it wasn't until he reached across me to secure my seat belt that the true danger of being seen where there would be lots of security cameras sank in.

I tried again. "I don't need X-rays. I'm fine. Please."

Delta said nothing, but his friend did.

Already in the front passenger seat, he glanced at Delta before giving me a smile that was so casual, I didn't trust it. "Just precautionary, darlin'. It'll be over before ya know it."

I'd had broken bones before.

I'd had a lot of injuries. Some much worse than others, but I didn't like to think about them, let alone draw attention to them, and these ones weren't new. There wasn't anything to be done about them. I knew that. But I didn't say it.

I couldn't.

Because I had been weak again.

I hadn't left when Delta had walked out of his living room. I hadn't run. I hadn't even attempted to ask that man Victor to take me somewhere else.

I'd let this situation get this far.

Now I was in the car with two dominant military men who had both looked into my backpack, and I knew the reality of my current options. I had none except to bide my time.

No choice, I nodded at Talon.

Then I tried not to chide myself about my weaknesses that had gotten me to this very moment because I didn't want to regret today. I didn't want to regret knowing what it felt like to be in Delta's arms, even if it was under the circumstances that had brought me to this point. I wanted to remember his protectiveness, how quickly he had come to me when I had given him a single glance and a silent plea. I wanted to remember the fierceness in his eyes and that instant that he wrapped me up in his strength like I mattered. Once I was gone, that was what I wanted to think about, not his broken promises.

So I let it go, but I also reminded myself of the plan.

Keep moving. Survive.

I knew what I was carrying. I felt the weight of it every day, but I was choosing the risk, and it was exactly what kept me moving.

One goal. One more week.

After that, I could think about the next step.

Talon scanned the garage, then the street as we pulled into late-afternoon traffic before asking Delta a question in the same too-casual tone. "You still havin' an affair with that 45?"

Affair?

"Yes."

“Keepin’ her close?”

“Always.”

My overly full stomach churned at the very thought of him with another woman.

Talon used the rearview mirror on his side to look behind us. “Leave it to you. A 9mm kills the body, but a 45 ACP?” He chuckled without humor. “That shit kills the soul.”

“The Lord’s caliber,” Delta stated.

9mm, caliber—they weren’t talking about a woman. I exhaled a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“SEALs.” Talon smirked as he shook his head. “Y’all are crazy motherfuckers.”

Delta didn’t comment. He glanced at the center rearview mirror, and his gaze met mine.

Heat flushed my cheeks, and I looked away.

“Take your next left,” Talon instructed. “We’re goin’ to that urgent care on forty-first.”

“Copy.”

“You watchin’ your six for strays?”

“No.”

“Not sweatin’ it?”

“No.”

“Keepin’ it cryptic as usual.” Talon pointed at a strip mall. “Right there. Pull in and park and give me a sec.” He took out his cell phone and dialed. “Debbie, darlin’, it’s Talon Talerco. Yes, ma’am, we’re here. You ready for me?” He glanced across the parking lot, then chuckled. “I’ll be sure to tell my women that.” His tone sobered. “Yep, comin’ in now. Thanks, darlin’. Owe ya one.” He hung up and tipped his chin at Delta. “We’re a go.”

TWENTY-TWO

Delta

Turning the engine off, I gave her an order as I checked my cell. “Wait until I come get you.” Not seeing a text from November yet, I got out and shut my door.

Holding the line on the other side of the SUV, Talerco scanned the parking lot. “You sure we shouldn’t be watchin’ her six?”

“Yes.” Saunders wouldn’t come after her somewhere public, and unless I got confirmation to the contrary on a few details I’d asked November to look into, I was ninety-nine percent sure no one else was after her. Seeing the money had made me reassess, but I kept going back to the same conclusion I’d had when I first saw it.

“Why? Because you got Hacker Boy back at the AES Starprise Elite Ship doin’ his thing and tailin’ our asses?” Talerco glanced around the parking lot. “He hackin’ us right now?”

“Not how it works, and yes, I have him looking into a few things.” November had been the second call I’d made after Talerco.

Talerco gave me a pointed look. “A woman abused like that, carryin’ what she’s got? There’s a story behind it, and trust me, brother, it’s somethin’ a hell of a lot more than *a few things*.”

“I’m aware.” Given the duration and extent of her injuries, buying her silence wouldn’t have come cheap.

Talerco cocked his head. “You sure ’bout that? Ain’t judging, just askin’.”

I leveled him with a look.

He held a hand up in mock defeat. “I hear ya, Ridge, loud ’n clear, but how long have we known each other?”

“Since your first deployment to Afghanistan when you went greenside.” Navy trained as a Special Amphibious Reconnaissance Corpsman in combat trauma care, Talerco had been assigned to a Marine Force RECON unit that we’d crossed paths with.

With an ironic half smile, he shook his head. “That was rhetorical, but I shoulda known you of all people would remember the exact details.”

I did. “July twenty-seventh, outside the wire in the canals between the opium and corn fields of Trek Nawa, Helmand province.”

“*Christ,*” Talerco muttered, his gaze drifting for a second. “That was some shit.” He looked back at me with the weight of war that we all knew too well. “You remember Christensen on that deployment? Bringin’ me all those kids? That crazy fuckin’ Jaeger Corps motherfucker. He walked across those fields through the fog of war like he was invincible. Hell, turned out he was. First time I ever met him, and he didn’t say more ’an five fuckin’ words to me that entire mission.”

I’d never forget that deployment, but Christensen’s story wasn’t mine to tell, and the Team’s mission on that op was classified. “Sounds like Christensen,” I answered vaguely.

Talerco snorted. “Sounds like you. Which is the point I was tryin’ to make. I know you see shit seven ways from Sunday. You can put together a road map that leads straight into the minds of the darkest terrorist motherfuckers out there when no one else even sees a footpath, let alone an MO. Hell, the shit you predicted downrange, I wouldn’t be surprised if you could mind warp a sniper round before it hit you. But this situation you got here?” He tipped his chin toward the rear passenger seat. “This ain’t analytics or war.”

It was exactly that. Combined with emotions and trauma. “Your point?”

“I’m just sayin’, she’s got the fear of habitual abuse, the scars to prove it, and unhealed injuries. Trust me, the fuckin’ bastards that do this shit don’t give up their prey easily, and the victims don’t always put down the needle of abuse.”

Already seeing through him and his ineffectively disguised warning, I called him on it. “Speaking from experience?”

“This ain’t about me.”

“That was rhetorical.”

“Christ. And here I thought Christensen and your hacker boy, November, were cold motherfuckers.” He shook his head. “Look, just fuckin’ tell me. She in danger?”

No, but Saunders sure as hell was. “Not anymore.”

“Because you’re steppin’ in or because you got a plan?”

“Both.”

He studied me a beat. “All right. Respect. Just let me know if you need an extra trigger.”

“I won’t.” And I didn’t deserve his respect or anyone else’s. If I’d kept my promise to Quentin, none of this would’ve happened to her.

Talerco chuckled. “Okay, lone gun, copy that. I’ll get the door. You get Miss Elizabeth Taylor and carry her in like the Prince Charmin’ you ain’t.”

Not commenting on his apt description, I opened her door.

She glanced nervously toward the clinic. “What was he saying?”

“Nothing important.” Noting how she’d followed my order to wait, I undid her seat belt but refrained from praising her so I didn’t send her the wrong fucking message with more goddamn mixed signals.

Dangerously close to losing control around her, justifying my actions with more bullshit I kept feeding myself, I reached

to pick her up, and she stiffened as my arms slid under her.

“Please don’t carry me.”

I paused. “Why?”

“I-I can walk.” She glanced again at the clinic.

“I am aware.” I pulled her toward me, and for the first time, she truly protested.

“*No.*” Half demand, half plea, it was the sharpest and only reprimand I’d ever heard from her.

Stilling, but not pulling back, I gave her my full attention.

She looked in my eyes and immediately started apologizing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell.”

“You didn’t. You clearly and succinctly stated your preference. I heard you. I stopped. Now I’m listening.”

Her cheeks flushed. “I... I just meant, please don’t carry me in. I can walk. I prefer to walk.” She emphasized prefer.

“I prefer to carry you.”

Waiting at the door to the clinic, Talerco called out. “Yo, Ridge. Problem?”

I ignored him. “Your back and leg are injured, your shoes are too big, I walk faster, and carrying you both gives me pleasure and sends a message to the clinic staff that there’s a sense of urgency to our visit.”

She blinked.

I upped the ante. “You can duck your head and turn your face toward my chest to avoid any security cameras, which I know you prefer to do.”

She drew in a breath and dropped her gaze. “Do I have to speak to anyone?”

“Only me.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled slowly and handed me a piece of trust as she reached for her backpack. “Okay.”

I demanded a second piece. “Backpack stays.”

Alarm coated her expression. “I can’t leave it.”

“I’ll lock the SUV. Both Talerco and I are armed. No one will break into a vehicle parked right in front. Worst-case scenario, if something does happen, which it won’t, I’ll replace the cash.”

The battle of fear played out across her face. Then my violet-eyed beauty did what she always did to me. Taking me by surprise, she didn’t focus on the money. “You’re carrying a gun.”

It wasn’t a question, but I reiterated fact. “Always.”

“Where is it?”

“Small of back holster.”

She glanced at my untucked shirt, then at her backpack.

I didn’t give her any more time to think. “Ready?”

She hesitated, but then she gave me that second piece of trust and nodded.

I picked her up.

Then I did exactly what I told myself I wouldn’t do. I gave her mixed signals. “I got you, little one.”

TWENTY-THREE

Hanna

He kept his promise.

Following Talon, Delta carried me into the clinic where a woman behind the counter promptly took us to a darkened room with an exam table that had X-ray equipment over it.

Then she started asking questions.

Setting me down on the cold metal, Delta deflected the woman's inquiries while Talon started issuing her orders like he was in charge.

Hating clinics, hospitals and doctors, desperately trying to shut it all out, I squeezed my eyes shut and stopped listening. Telling myself I was safe, that my unattended backpack left in the car would be okay, I was trying and failing to fight the panic when a large, warm hand wrapped around mine.

I flinched.

Strong fingers tightened, and minty breath touched my ear before his familiar, deep voice. "Breathe, little one, I'm right here. Talon's going to move your ankle first, then your knee, back and shoulder. Listen to my voice. Follow my instruction. This will be over in five minutes. If you need a break, tell me, and I'll clear the room." His voice left my ear. "Talerco."

"On it."

Cooler hands touched my ankle and turned my leg. "Debbie, darlin', take the first X-ray."

The woman's voice came from a slight distance. "Please have your friend step back."

"No," Delta stated with absolute authority, my hand still in his. "Take the image."

"But—"

"Now," he ordered.

The woman took the first X-ray.

Then the rest went the same way.

Talon moved me around. I kept my eyes closed. Delta held my hand, and less than five minutes later, just as he promised, he was gently picking me back up.

"All done, little one." His voice and protectiveness were both comforting and overwhelming as he held me against his chest, but it was his term of endearment that made me shiver. Fractionally raising his voice, he pulled me in closer. "Talerco, get copies of all of those. We'll be in the SUV."

"Roger that."

He carried me out of the clinic, and I didn't breathe in deep until I felt the warm, humid air and hot sunlight on my skin.

Without comment or letting go of me, he opened the rear passenger door and set me back in the same seat. As he reached over me with the seat belt, something came over me.

I placed my hand on his arm. "Thank you."

Stark green eyes met mine, and for two heartbeats, he stared. Then he broke me a little more. "You don't owe me thanks."

He started to pull back.

I squeezed his arm.

Exhaling, he stilled and met my gaze again, raising an eyebrow.

Despite the heat in the car from the South Florida temperatures, a shiver raced across my skin at the sound of his

exhale and the way his impossibly huge body became immobile at my touch.

Emboldened, wanting to understand, I asked for clarification. “Why would you say that?”

His answer was as immediate as it was shocking. “I’ve neither earned nor deserve your gratitude.”

The front passenger door opened. “Got ’em.” Talon slid his tall frame into the front passenger seat and glanced back. His gaze quickly taking in my hand on Delta’s arm and his friend’s stillness, he frowned. “Ridge, we good?”

“Yes.” He stared at me for a moment too long. Then he withdrew, closed my door and got behind the wheel. Starting the engine, he turned up the air conditioning and backed out of the parking spot before he addressed Talon. “Results?”

Talon glanced back at me and winked. “Good news, cautionary news, and better news. Which do you want first, darlin’?”

With unrelenting dominance, Delta immediately spoke up. “I asked the question.”

Talon chuckled, then smiled at me. “You want me to take him, darlin’? Knock him down a notch or two? Teach him a woman’s got her own voice? Trust me—” His hand went to his chest, and he winked. “—I’m happy to oblige. Marine versus SEAL. Wanna take the odds, darlin’? I’m a sure bet.” His smile turned into a grin.

“You’re Navy,” Delta clipped.

“Semantics,” Talon answered, still grinning.

“Results,” Delta reminded him.

Talon’s demeanor immediately switched to the same seriousness that Delta always carried as he rattled off some medical terms I didn’t understand.

Turning toward the window, I tuned out.

I didn’t need any X-rays to tell me what was wrong with my body.

I'd been bruised and broken enough times to know when I was in serious trouble or just needed to let time heal as best it could. The physical injuries I had now fortunately fell in the latter category.

“You hear me, darlin’?”

I glanced toward the front. “I’m sorry?”

Talon was smiling, but I noticed that it was a practiced smile. “I was sayin’, the good news is, you don’t need any castin’. But when we get back to Ridge’s, I’m gonna tape that collarbone, knee and ankle. Give ya a little support. Sound good?”

No. “Thank you,” I murmured, turning back toward the window because I knew it didn’t matter what I wanted.

Talon may smile and pretend to be casual, but make no mistake, he was as dominant and unrelenting as Delta.

Reminding myself I had to bide my time and do what they wanted for just a little longer, then I could escape, I watched the warm hues of a late South Florida afternoon darken as it chased twilight.

But as I leaned my head back, I knew I was only lying to myself.

I didn’t want to bide my time.

I didn’t want to find a secondhand store and get a new long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans and sneakers. I didn’t want to find a dark, concealed corner on the streets where I could squat until sunrise. I didn’t want to watch the sun rise with bleary exhaustion or waste any more money on a filthy motel that took cash.

I wanted to crawl into a big bed in a penthouse perched above the ocean and drown in masculine-scented sheets.

I wanted to feel his arms around me.

I wanted to hear his voice turn dark and deep as he said *little one*.

I wanted to stay.

For once in my life, I wanted to stay.

TWENTY-FOUR

Delta

Leaving her in the living room with Talerco, I headed to my office.

My first call was to November.

He answered immediately. “GPS tracking is still enabled on your vehicle, which I advise against. Tracked your movements to the walk-in, captured the security cam footage, then wiped it from their system. I kept a backup if you want it. She okay?”

“She will be. Sitrep on the other fronts I asked you to look into?”

“In short, no tail. I double-checked all the hits we had on her and backtracked from there. If someone was following her movements, they were good. No hits either on any other hackers attempting to access the same intel we did. Do you want me to dig deeper?”

“No. Thanks. The venue?”

“No safety violations, accidents or reported injuries within the time frame you specified.” November paused. “Also no hits on facial rec for her during that same time period.”

I hadn’t asked him to run down that latter piece of intel, and I didn’t comment on it. “Sending more images to you shortly.”

“Copy. I’ll add them to the file, and work on the rest of what you asked for. Call if anything else comes up.”

“Thanks.”

Without comment, November hung up.

I did a quick search online, then called a Jeep dealership and bought a vehicle they had on the lot, a white Wrangler four-door High Altitude that she could drive with the top and doors off. I made arrangements for it to be delivered tomorrow.

Then I called Christensen again.

“Ja.”

“I need your wife.”

“Tread carefully,” he warned, his tone saying it all.

“I need an assist for clothes shopping for a woman.”

“Ariella is not AES’s personal shopper.”

I heard his wife in the background. “Wait, what? Shopping? Who’s calling?”

“Understood.”

“You do not,” Christensen clipped.

Goddamn it. “May I speak with her?”

“No.”

His wife piped up again. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Viking, give me the phone.”

Christensen switched to Danish and spoke too rapidly for me to pick up more than a warning to her about her worth and who she belonged to.

She laughed, then came on the line. “Hi. Who’s this?”

“Delta.”

“Ah, the green-eyed SEAL. I remember. What’s going on?”

“I need a shopping assist. New wardrobe for a female.”

“A female,” she repeated teasingly. “Has anyone ever told you that your disposition sounds eerily similar to my

husband's? Minus the hot accent, of course. You better watch out, Delta. Whoever this woman is, she's going to fall head over heels for you."

"She's my niece."

"Oh." Her tone instantly sobered. "I'm sorry. That was inappropriate of me. Okay, so, your niece. How can I help?"

"Half a dozen outfits. Size small. Comfortable, soft fabrics, functional. Few pairs of shoes." I gave her a shoe size that was two sizes smaller than the ballet flats.

"Functional," she repeated like I was insane.

"Yes."

"Okay, no offense, Delta, but no woman wants functional clothes."

A lavender-eyed orphan did. "Preferably, I'd like the clothes by tomorrow morning. Doable?"

Her smile came through the line. "Oh, when it comes to shopping, I could make that happen in an hour." Her tone shifted. "But I think you're missing the point. Why don't we meet up and you bring her? I could be ready in twenty minutes."

Christensen spoke in Danish in the background.

"Ignore him. When is good for you? Now? Tomorrow? Where do you want to meet?"

"Tomorrow morning. Location is where I need your assist."

"Oh, right, of course. What's your niece's style? What does she really like to wear?"

Christensen spoke again in Danish, this time with more insistence.

"Um, Viking is telling me she's not your niece? He told me to tell you that. Whatever, not my business. We can meet at Bal Harbour Shops. Wait, how old is she?"

"Twenty-three."

“Perfect. We’ll start at Neiman Marcus and go from there. Sound good?” She held the phone away. “No. I’m going. You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.” She laughed and returned to our conversation. “He’s coming. I don’t think he trusts you. Take that as a compliment. See you tomorrow morning. Eleven a.m.?”

Christ. “Confirmed. Oh eleven hundred.” I started to hang up.

“Wait, Viking wants a word. Bye, Delta. Can’t wait to meet your *friend*,” she hazed.

Christensen came back on the line. “Do not lie to my wife.”

“I didn’t.” Surrogate uncle was the line I kept fucking feeding myself.

“If the female was your niece, you would have led with that.”

“I served with her father.”

“That does not make her a blood relation.”

Christensen was literal when it served him, philosophical when he was either insulting or teaching you a lesson, and incomparably lethal on the battlefield. What he wasn’t was a conversationalist. “Make your point.” He knew exactly how the bonds of brotherhood formed in the military.

“Have you purchased the female a vehicle yet?”

I added up the snippets of Christensen’s tenets he’d dropped throughout the conversation and put it together. I was about to be schooled—philosophically. “Say whatever you have to say.”

“Answer the question.”

“It’s being delivered tomorrow.”

“Penthouse, vehicle, clothes.”

Here we go. “And?”

“The hungriest wolf runs the furthest.”

There it was.

Accurate, succinct and poignant. I didn't chase women. But I sure as fuck was running straight into the fire for a lavender-eyed beauty.

I didn't bother to disagree with Christensen. "See you tomorrow."

"I will courier the sales paperwork to your penthouse. The owners lined up movers for tomorrow morning. You may take possession late afternoon. Is the property going in your name or hers?"

"Mine, but bury it under one of my LLCs and make her the sole beneficiary. Violet Hanna Traylor." I rattled off her social security number that I knew by heart from when I'd gotten it through the military DEERS system so I could open a bank account in her name.

Christensen paused. Then he took me off guard. "Quentin Traylor's daughter."

"You knew him?" I should've drawn the potential connection. Christensen had served well over a dozen tours in the sandbox.

"Yes," was all Christensen commented on the subject. "Tomorrow morning. Do not be late. You have my wife's time for one hour." He hung up.

Pocketing my cell, I headed out of my office but then stopped short at the end of the hall when I heard the question she asked Talerco.

"Why did you call him Ridge?"

"Delta didn't tell you his name, darlin'?"

"I'm sure he has his reasons."

"You can count on it, but I guarantee it ain't for the reasons you're thinkin'." Talerco chuckled.

I strode into the living room.

He kept fucking talking. "But I'm happy to oblige that itch of curiosity ya got and save your pretty little head the

suspense. His name's—”

“Demetrius Ridge Demos,” I stated.

TWENTY-FIVE

Hanna

After carrying me from the car, all the way up to his penthouse and gently setting me on his couch, the very one he'd pushed further away from the balcony, Delta had disappeared into his office with his cell phone.

Talon was sitting on the coffee table opposite me, doing exactly as he said he would.

With practiced efficiency and clinical detachment, he'd taken my shirt off only on my right side and taped my collarbone and around my shoulder, then carefully threaded my arm back through the sleeve.

Now he was pulling my legging back down over my newly wrapped knee and giving me instructions as if he were as experienced and comfortable in dealing with my kind of knee injury as he was in combat emergencies. "Just remember you want to tape for support, not restriction, darlin'. Keep it firm but not tight."

Delta's voice carried down the hall, and I couldn't not ask. "Why did you call him Ridge?"

With his hands on my ankle, the blond medic looked up at me. His eyes were green, but the shade paled in comparison to another set of green eyes that haunted me. "Delta didn't tell you his name, darlin'?"

Embarrassment washed over me, and I grew more uncomfortable with each passing minute. But I didn't want to acknowledge the shame any more than I did the hurt of not knowing his real name. If I did, that would make every surreal

thing that had happened since he'd stood over me in the parking garage feel real. And if it felt any more real, I would only fall deeper into this fantasy that a Navy SEAL who had broken his word was my savior, and I could justify staying one night.

Except I knew myself, and I wouldn't want only one night.

I also knew I didn't have a savior.

He didn't even trust me with his real name.

But all I kept thinking about was how he'd brought me into his home and said he was giving me a place to live next door.

Turning away from the Marine medic's knowing stare, I made an excuse for Delta. "I'm sure he has his reasons."

"You can count on it, but I guarantee it ain't for the reasons you're thinkin'." His short laugh was both easy and teasing. "But I'm happy to oblige that itch of curiosity ya got and save your pretty little head the suspense. His name's—"

"Demetrius Ridge Demos," the man himself answered.

Not having heard him come back into the living room, I turned to look up.

Taken off guard all over again by how strikingly, unapproachably handsome he was, my suddenly dry, scratchy throat struggled to swallow as every nerve in my body came alive at the sound of his voice saying his own name.

Demetrius Ridge Demos.

Talon chuckled. "Aaand just like that, Miss Elizabeth Taylor meets her knight in rusty armor." Still smiling, he shook his head as he glanced at his friend. "You need to up your game, SEAL."

"I don't play games, and she has a name. Use it."

"Now where would be the fun in that? You got your super brain powers to predict the shit you do, and I got my God-given talents. Not the least of which includes nicknamin'." Talon glanced at me and winked. "And part-time medic for

pretty little ladies too, of course.” He glanced back down at what he was doing. “Besides, what would be the fun in life without a little nicknamin’ and hazin’?”

“Talerco,” Ridge, Demetrius, Delta—I wasn’t sure what to call him now—retorted in warning.

“What? Am I wrong?” Talon glanced at me with mischief in his eyes. “Come on, darlin’, you know I’m right. Tell him Miss Elizabeth Taylor is perfect.”

I didn’t. “You call him Ridge.”

Talon grinned. “Always gotta have a few exceptions to every rule. Otherwise I couldn’t be accused of bein’ a rule breaker. And some names are just so fittin’, I can’t mess with ’em.” His tone turned suspiciously casual. “Take your Greek man Ridge here, for example. Most decorated Tier One operator you’re ever gonna meet who ain’t dead, not that he’d ever tell ya. But there he stands—silently breathin’ down my neck, mind you—puttin’ the stoic in stoicism, holdin’ the line on his long, narrow hilltop, bein’ your last line of defense before you go over that cliff. I can’t even bring myself to call him Everest. He’s just Ridge. Tip of the spear, top of the mountain, touchin’ the sky us mere mortals can’t reach. Tell me that ain’t some poetic bullshit too sacred to fuck with, and I’ll hang up my nicknamin’ hat.”

Staring at the man he had just described perfectly, I couldn’t.

“See?” Talon asked knowingly. “I knew you were feelin’ me.”

I didn’t know what I was feeling as I stared at an emerald-eyed decorated SEAL. “You’re Greek?”

“I’m a US citizen.”

Talon smirked. “Now.”

His gaze on mine, ignoring everything Talon had said about him, which only made him that much more stoic, he asked his friend about me. “Her ankle?”

“Taped for a little support, same as her knee. No runnin’ for a few weeks, and they should heal up. Any discomfort, ease off and ice ’em. Give her anti-inflammatories when she needs ’em. Any increasin’ pain, call me or take her in. I showed her how to wrap both, and I’m leavin’ enough kinesiology tape to get you through for a few days.” Pulling out a few unopened packages of the tape he’d already used on me, Talon set them on the coffee table.

“What does she need to do for her ribs and coccyx?”

“Nothin’ that makes her uncomfortable. Fractures are healed, but she might be sore for a couple more weeks.”

Still holding me hostage in his intense stare, he kept up with the questions for Talon. “Her clavicle?”

“Mind it. It’s not as pretty as her yet, but it’s healin’. I taped it for now, but you know the drill. Redo the tape for her every day for ’bout a week. I’d say immobilize it in a sling, but that ship’s sailed. It’s not a new break, and I’m bettin’ she’d fight us on wearin’ one.”

Already upset at Delta—Ridge—seeing me all taped up, the last thing I wanted to do was wear a sling, let alone draw more attention to myself. “I don’t need a sling.”

“See? Called it.” Talon zipped up his bag and shouldered it as he stood. “You ain’t the only one here who can predict shit, Ridge.”

He ignored Talon’s comment. “Can she participate in physical activity?”

Instant heat flushed my entire face, and Talon laughed hard. “*Damn*, Ridge, didn’t think your reticent ass had it in you to come right out and ask.” He laughed again as he shook his head. “Yeah, she can *participate* in the horizontal tango. Just don’t go slammin’ it home on every—”

“Training,” Delta clipped with a lethal edge.

“Sure,” Talon teased as he made air quotes. “*Trainin’*.”

“Physical chess,” Delta stated as if in explanation.

Talon's expression and tone immediately flipped. "You said you didn't need to watch her six, and now you wanna run her through self-defense drills? In her condition? *What the fuck?*"

"Yes or no?" Delta demanded.

Talon's hands went to his hips. "You gonna wait if I say no?"

Delta didn't reply.

Talon swore, then glanced at me. "You know any self-defense moves, darlin'?"

I looked between the two men.

"There's no wrong answer here, darlin'," Talon added.

I still didn't reply.

"Got it." Talon looked back at Delta. "I'm only gonna say this once, so listen real careful, SEAL. You add one goddamn bruise to that woman's roadmap of abuse, you're answerin' to me, and I don't play fuckin' chess like you."

"I won't."

Talon stared at him a second, then swore again. "*Shit*. Who you callin' in? And don't bullshit me. I know damn well you don't waste words and everythin' you do say has two fuckin' meanin's."

Delta didn't say anything.

"Christ." Talon shook his head as he blew out a breath. "Okay, here's the deal." He glanced at me. "This goes for you too, darlin'." He looked back at Delta. "No maneuvers. Simulation, techniques, verbal trainin', walk her through it slow and easy. *Show* an' tell, emphasis on show. *If* she's not hurtin', mock drills. Coupla weeks, if she's feelin' up to it, then you can run her through some actual trainin'. Understood?"

"Yes," Delta replied. "Copies of the imaging?"

"Already sent." Talon looked at me. "Don't do anythin' that hurts, and no tryin' to be a rock star. Mind your body's

warnin's. You hear me?"

"Yes. Thank you." Except I didn't know how I felt about any of this.

"Nothin' doin', darlin'." Talon tipped his chin. Then his expression became uncharacteristically serious, and his accent disappeared. "If you ever need someone to talk to, call me. If you're not comfortable talking to a man, I have a friend well versed in trauma. It's her specialty."

Shame, almost as deep as when I'd shoved my leggings down in front of Ridge, struck me hard, and I crossed my arms in vain, attempting to hide some of the scars. "I'm fine."

"You will be." Talon winked, then his accent and a reserved smile came back. "Been an honor, Miss Elizabeth Taylor. Although, I gotta say, your eyes are much—"

"Out," Delta ordered.

"And that's my cue. Besides, my women are waitin' and the ocean's callin'. Later, lovebirds. No *Karate Kid*, in or out of the bedroom." He walked out of the penthouse.

TWENTY-SIX

Hanna

Delta—Ridge—he watched Talon leave. Then his inscrutable gaze focused back on me, but he didn't say anything.

So I did. "I don't know self-defense." And I wasn't sure I could take having him teach me, but a part of me wanted to learn.

"I know."

While I was confessing, I added in one more. "I don't know what to call you."

For a single heartbeat, I saw it. The same flash of darkness in his eyes that I saw when I'd taken off my shirt.

Before I could take a breath, but not before an intoxicating awareness raced across my skin and shoved my heart right off the balcony, he masked it, and his impenetrable expression was back in place. "What do you prefer?"

For him to look at me like that again, because I was already addicted. "I don't know."

He said nothing.

Which meant I had to say something.

I tasted his first name on my tongue, but I knew even before I said it out loud that it wasn't right. "You don't seem like a Demetrius to me."

He studied me a moment. "I haven't been called that since I was a child."

“I can’t imagine you as a child.”

“I can you.”

Embarrassment flared. “That’s because you met me as one.” I sucked in a breath of courage but dropped my head. “And you still see me as a child.”

“Look at me, Violet.”

I knew why he used my first name sometimes and not others. I understood it now, but I didn’t like it. “I’m tired.”

“I’m sure you are. You still need to look at me.”

I raised my head.

His stare was piercing. “I do not see you as a child.”

I dared to ask. “What do you see me as?”

His chest rose and fell, but he didn’t answer, and the shame of before didn’t come close to this.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that. I know what I am.” And what I wasn’t, which was definitely not a woman who someone like Delta Ridge Demos would look twice at, let alone.... I couldn’t even think it. I didn’t even know the first thing about this man except that he wasn’t a mere man. He was a SEAL, he was rich, he was solid muscle, and he was intimidating in every way imaginable. His arms wrapping around me earlier had also been the only place I had felt safe since I was a little girl. But I was burying that thought.

“What is it that you think you are?”

His body didn’t move, his expression didn’t change, and his voice didn’t alter in volume, but something dark was behind his question, and suddenly I was afraid to tell him anything.

“Nothing.”

“Is that your answer or an avoidance of the question?”

Even the way he spoke was intimidating. “Did you go to college?”

“No. Answer the question.”

“You sound like you did. You’re smart.” I’d never met anyone as smart as him. I’d never even met anyone who sounded like him or spoke the way he did. I didn’t even have the words to describe how he was, which only made me feel more inadequate.

“Intelligence isn’t always measured in degrees, and astute observation can outweigh education. Do you wish to go to college?”

“No.” I didn’t know. “I never liked school.” I was always made fun of.

“What do you like?”

You. Except I didn’t say that. Instead, I shrugged my good shoulder.

“You said you worked stage crew. I’m assuming that was for Saunders’s band. What did you do on tour?”

I’d already made the mistake of letting the detail slip, so I didn’t bother denying it. “What did the tour manager say I did, or what did I really do?”

“The first.”

I brushed an invisible piece of lint off my leg. “Wardrobe.”

“The latter.”

“Sometimes I mended clothes for the band, but mostly I did laundry.” A lot of laundry.

He didn’t say anything.

“I know what you’re thinking.” I wasn’t ashamed. It was honest work, and it was more than my stepmother had ever done, but saying it out loud to him didn’t feel good.

“I’m certain you don’t.”

Unsure how to act around him when he wasn’t giving instructions or orders, I was suddenly so overwhelmed and exhausted that excuses for my existence started to haphazardly pour out like I needed to justify myself. “I never had many clothes growing up, and now I only keep two outfits at a time with me. It’s lighter to travel with, and I’m less likely to get

noticed if I'm not always wearing the same thing. I buy most everything used. It's affordable, and I don't usually get attached, except I like the softness of these leggings, so I've kept them longer than usual. I know you saw in my backpack and are purposely not asking about it yet. You're probably wondering how someone who wears clothes that are not her size managed to work in wardrobe, but it somehow made sense." Realizing not only that I was rambling with no order to what I was saying but also how much I'd said, I stopped talking.

He sat with the silence.

I grew uncomfortable all over again. It felt like I was continually trying to put on a confining outfit that I didn't fit into, because I never did this. I didn't talk to people. I was never allowed to talk to the band. I'd never had conversations with anyone outside some teachers, *his* tour manager, and *him*. But those were never real conversations. And I'd never had a cell phone or a computer in my life, let alone social media or internet access. I wouldn't even know what to do with all of that if I had.

Out of my element my entire life, but even more so now, I piled onto the heap of things I shouldn't say. "I'm sure the women you date don't shop at secondhand stores and get stuck in swamps and tell you about how they live out of a backpack. I'm sorry. I know you have better things to do than... this." I needed to leave. Telling myself to stick to the plan, I moved to stand. "I should—"

"I don't date."

Already halfway off the couch, my heart stopped, then started again as I slowly rose to my feet.

"Sit back down," he quietly ordered.

Suddenly the metaphorical outfit fit.

I sat.

He continued. "No wife, no girlfriend."

My heart soared out of the open slider door and took flight off the balcony.

“Multiple sexual relationships, but none currently.”

I plummeted to hard-packed sand and every bone broke. Cruelly, it wasn't enough to make me disappear.

As if he knew life wasn't done tormenting me yet, he tallied up my insecurities and crushed me with them. “You wear larger clothes to hide your injuries and your body and make it more difficult for someone to describe or identify you. You chose the worn ballet shoes because the leather was soft. You have the same backpack from when I saw you last, which I'm assuming predates high school and was a gift from your father. Working in wardrobe made sense because menial tasks occupy the mind and tire the body. By your own admission, clothes were a scarce commodity growing up, but you've also had a difficult relationship with them since I've known you. You were uncomfortable in the dress you wore at your father's funeral, and you tried several times to kick your shoes off. When I saw you at your high school, you repeatedly tugged at a tear in the hem of your shirt. Clothes are a necessity, but they can equally be a hindrance. They can identify a person as easily as they can hide someone. They can confine, restrict or make you uncomfortable. Or they can provide a sense of power, worth and pride. Clothes are an expression. You choose to hide. What you wear is an illustration of your circumstances. I do not pass judgment on you for that.”

No defenses left, I turned my head.

He grasped my chin. “You asked what I see you as. I've just given you sufficient information to answer that question, but I didn't directly answer you. Would you still like to know?”

Me and my broken bones lay silent on the beach.

“I need a verbal response, Hanna.”

Hanna.

I used to think addiction had many flavors.

But it only had one.

Hanna the adult, not Violet the little girl, gave him his response. “Yes.”

He supplied the hit. “I see you as a beautiful young woman who’s a survivor.” His thumb slowly stroked the length of my jaw in a sensual caress as darkness flared in his eyes.

My bones, they stitched together.

Then he dropped his hand, shut down his expression and took my drug away. “What’s the money for, Violet?”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Delta

So damn expressive, even when she was trying not to be, I perversely got off on watching the heat of desire that was coloring her cheeks flame to sudden embarrassment as she shifted from submissive to defensive.

“I didn’t steal it.”

“I didn’t insinuate you did, nor ask where it came from.”

She blinked. “You’re not going to question where I got it?”

“No.” Someone had bought her silence. Most likely the tour manager.

Her shoulders fell along with her gaze. “You want to know why I’m carrying it around.”

“You’re afraid to put it in a bank.” Rightfully so. A deposit that large would be reported to the IRS.

She nodded.

“It’s too dangerous for you to keep walking around with it.”

“I know.”

She didn’t. “How many people are aware that you have it?”

“I... I don’t know. One for certain.”

That meant at least two, three if you added fucking Saunders. “I’ll arrange for an offshore account for you to put it in.”

Her gaze immediately cut to mine. “You can’t do that. I need the money. I need—” Cutting herself off, she swallowed hard, then quickly looked away.

It wasn’t a unique pattern.

I’d been putting it together since before I saw what she was carrying around.

People were never driven by rare or uncommon emotions or desires. The human condition covered them all, but three factors statistically stood out. Power, money, love. The trifecta of human motivations.

She was too subservient to want power. She had cash but didn’t seem to care about money. She’d hated that fuck Saunders since she was seven, and no way had that turned around since then, because she flinched every time I so much as mentioned him. That left love. I wished to God it was herself that she loved, but nothing about this situation said self-care, let alone self-love.

Deductive reasoning drilled it down to one option.

Someone else.

She loved them, was protecting them or needed the hundred grand for them.

I was going to find out who the fuck it was and what the hell was going on, but not right now.

“You’ve had a long day.” Recognizing how tired she was from the dark circles under her eyes alone, I stood and held out my hand. “Come. I’m feeding you dinner, then you’re going to bed.” I could’ve used my dominance. Coerced, forced or frightened her into telling me. I also could’ve called November, but I did none of it.

Wary, she looked up at me. “You’re Greek?”

Her nonlinear thought process addictive and bracing, I answered in both in a calculated move to establish trust and because I wanted to. “I was born there.”

“But you came to the United States?”

“By way of a few other countries first.” Greece, Russia, Italy, back to Greece, France, then back to Greece again. A fucked-up, mapped-out geographical five-point star of dysfunction.

She stared at me like she was suddenly realizing she knew nothing about me.

I elaborated somewhat. “We moved every time my father lost a job, his temper or interest in his current employment.” I’d learned to ‘adapt and overcome’ long before I knew it was one of the fundamental principles of SEAL training.

“We?” she asked.

“My father, mother and myself.”

“Where are your parents now?”

“Dead.” She and I had that in common.

Her eyes welled. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a while ago. Come.”

She hesitantly took my hand.

I pulled her to her feet. Then, before she could react or protest, I picked her up.

Remorseless in my thoughts of wanting to protect her, shelter her, carry her and feed her, it was only when I thought about the way her face flushed every time I lowered my voice that I knew how truly depraved I was.

Or when I admitted that I wasn’t only holding her close to purposely gain her trust.

I didn’t actually need anything from her, trust or otherwise, to piece together what was going on.

But that was the line I fed myself as I walked into the kitchen and set her on the counter where she would be near me while I cooked. The move was selfish and borderline inappropriate, but so was everything else I’d done since I’d first picked her up and felt that rush.

Except it was nothing compared to her putting her hand on me for the second time.

Wrapping her small fingers around my forearm as I pulled back, she had the power in her touch to stop me dead in my tracks.

Which was exactly what I did.

Focusing on her, I waited.

Her violet eyes met mine with compassion. "I'm sorry for the loss of your parents."

Grasping the countertop on either side of her to stop myself from putting my hands on her, I leaned in and gave her another piece of me. "While I appreciate the sentiment, my father was nothing like yours. He wasn't a good man, and my parents had a turbulent relationship that left no room for anything or anyone else. I wasn't close to either of them. Once I was old enough to support myself, I left."

She dropped her hand. "When was that?"

Taking note of the loss of her touch, I didn't retreat, but I should have. "Fifteen."

She drew in a surprised breath. "You were young."

"Was I? Were you young at fifteen?" Not giving her a chance to dwell on her reality, I gave her an abbreviated version of mine. "I got a job on a fishing boat. The owners were American. I worked hard. They sponsored me for immigration. I became a US citizen, then enlisted in the Navy."

"You're—that's incredible. But it must have been difficult."

It was privileged compared to her life. I pushed off the counter and changed the subject. "Dinner." I opened the fridge. "What do you prefer?"

TWENTY-EIGHT

Hanna

“What do you prefer?” He gave me the same question as the last time I was in his kitchen, but this time I was in too many broken pieces to play this losing match I never had a chance at.

My heart hurting for new reasons I’d never imagined before a Navy SEAL stoically stated the bare details of his broken past in emotionless facts, I focused on the only thing I could control in that moment.

His question, my answer.

What do you prefer?

I drew in a deep breath. “I prefer to be called Hanna.” And little one.

“I know.” He reached into the fridge. “Omelet?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’re eating. Then I’m giving you anti-inflammatories.”

It slipped out before I could catch it. “Yes, sir.”

One hand on the fridge door, the other holding a carton of eggs, he looked at me. “Is that what you prefer to call me?”

My heart didn’t jump up and flee. It danced. In tiny little steps all over my chest that were more punishing than any physical blow I’d ever received. “Please do not ask me that.”

Setting the eggs down and closing the fridge door, he leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. “Why? Do

you think I'm not aware that you're a submissive?"

"I'm not...." My mouth suddenly dry, the patterning over my chest turned into thunderous stomping. "I don't.... I've never talked...." I looked away, and my voice cracked before I managed a whisper. "That's wrong."

"Pick your head up, make direct eye contact, and tell me why you think it's wrong."

His dominant command and tone of voice made me look up without thought, but humiliation welled as I did exactly what he told me to do. "Because that word, it's not strong. It's weak." Wishing I had vanished in that swamp, wanting to trade this shame crawling around inside me, my voice took flight like my body wanted to. "I'm weak." Not even a whisper, the admission still spread across his spotless kitchen and tarnished the space between us.

The side of his jaw flexed, and his own voice became rough. "The strongest thing you can do is give a worthy man your submission." His eyes stormed with lethal anger. "Saunders was neither worthy nor a man. What you experienced was abuse and nonconsensual total power exchange. Not submission."

Tears fell. "I'm ashamed." I reached up to swipe at my face.

His hand shot out and gripped my wrist. "Don't." He gently swept his thumb across my cheek. "You did nothing wrong. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You don't know that."

His voice dropped to a deep, hypnotic pull. "What do you think I am, little one?"

Heat flushed through my entire body. I knew what he was asking, but I couldn't say it. "A Navy SEAL."

All of the magnetic authority came back in his tone and timbre. "I'm dominant, experienced and protective. Reiterating what I said before so you hear me. You did *nothing* wrong."

I'd done so much, I couldn't ever make up for it. But I was trying now. I just couldn't tell him that, so I pulled my wrist out of his grasp and said nothing.

He called me on my silence. "Give me one example of something you did wrong."

My mouth opened, and a thousand thoughts came, followed by a thousand more regrets, but all at once, I couldn't bring myself to tell him any of them were wrong. I'd made my choices. I stuck by them. But I couldn't tell him about any of it.

After a lifetime of not communicating, I struggled for a response. I wanted to diffuse the anger in his eyes. I wanted to say the right things to please him, but navigating a conversation with him was like trying to speak a foreign language you never learned.

Treading lightly, I shied around the truth. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to respond."

"There is no *supposed to*. You were never culpable. But so you're clear, you speak your mind with me. Always. Tell me the truth, whether you think I want to hear it or not. From this moment forward, keep it honest between us."

He didn't ask me for confirmation, but after a lifetime of being forced to acknowledge everything my stepmother and stepbrother had said, it felt wrong not to affirm. "Okay." It also didn't feel good not to ask if there was reciprocation. He'd said to be honest, so I was. "Does the same go for you too?"

He didn't hesitate. "Yes."

I nodded, but then I dropped my head, both out of habit and because looking at him for too long hurt. Seeing his attention focused on me hurt.

"Bring your gaze back to mine and tell me why you always look away from me."

"I prefer not to."

"That wasn't a request."

The thundering of my heart turned into a fluttering dance, and my stomach joined in as awareness raced across my arms. “Looking at you is difficult.”

“Eyes on me.”

I did as he asked.

“Why is it difficult?”

“Because.”

He waited.

I stepped into the silence he left me and secured the noose around myself. “I have... feelings.”

“You’re submissive. You subconsciously respond to my dominance. It’s a natural reaction.”

“No.” I climbed onto the proverbial stool of no takebacks. “It’s more than that.”

He crossed his arms again. “I’m old enough to be your father.”

“I don’t know your age, but I don’t think of you as my father. Or my uncle.” My feet teetered on the edge of a demise that was my own making. “I never have.”

“I’m forty-two.”

My feet slipped, the stool fell and the noose tightened around my throat.

But it wasn’t from his age.

It was from the painful realization that I’d desperately blocked from earlier of how much life there was between us.

Life where he had been with other women.

Multiple sexual relationships.

My throat constricting, jealousy burning, the nod of my head felt more like a broken neck bobbing as I pushed myself off the counter.

But not even the dismount from my indignity went untouched by him.

Grabbing me around the waist before I touched the floor, he gently set me down like only a trained SEAL could as his fresh laundry and dry wooded scent swirled with that hint of lavender that surrounded me in yearning.

Briefly closing my eyes, memorizing the feel of his huge hands spanning my waist and back, wondering again at how my body never hurt when he touched me, wondering how many other women he had touched like this, I forced myself to shake the crushing thoughts away. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. May I please go to bed now?”

“No.” He dropped his hands from my waist, but he didn’t step back. “Which part bothered you just now, my age or my experience?”

I pulled my lips between my teeth and bit.

Reaching out, he roughly dragged his thumb down my chin to make me stop. “Answer me, little one.”

How did I explain that Styx beat me whenever he felt like it, but that he’d only taken me once and then called me a whore for five long years? How did I tell this man that I let someone so vile touch me at all? How did I explain that I never had a choice without risking everything?

I couldn’t.

I wouldn’t.

But he was looking at me like he had in my Royal Purple garden, like he had at my high school, and like he had in that garage, and I was so tired of not saying it that I broke.

“It’s not your age. It’s mine. I’m not a woman, at least not like you deserve, and I realize you have a lot of experience. I see it in everything you do. Your authority, your control, your strength, your commands, the way you live and speak and how you are. I don’t just see it. I feel it.” Every time he looked at me, I felt it to my very soul. And when he touched me? I wanted to cry at the injustice of this world. “You are just much... *much* more than me, more than I could ever be, that I... I...” Dirty and disgraced by everything I’d ever let Styx do to me, I pushed the last part out. “I know I could never be

enough for you.” My desecration complete, my voice caught on my last destructive whisper. “But that’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

For one punishing beat of my heart, he didn’t react.

Then he pushed off the counter, took a pan out of a drawer, and placed it on the stovetop.

Without a word, he made us omelets.

TWENTY-NINE

Delta

Her admission echoing in my head fed the addiction, and my sick mind went there.

I could fuck her, right here, right now.

Strip her bare, make her small cunt wet for me. Make her say my name as she came on my mouth, my hands, my cock. Lay her out on my kitchen counter and debase her pale skin with my release as I stared at those fucking eyes.

Then I'd carry her to my room and rub cream into every goddamn one of those lash marks, re-tape her clavicle, knee and ankle, and put her to bed, sated and safe with my seed in and on her.

I thought about all of it—for two seconds.

Then I turned my back on her and made fucking food.

By the time I was plating the omelets, my cock was straining against its unwanted confinement, and my will was slipping.

Unwarranted, I barked an order at her instead of the steady command she deserved. "Sit down."

Taking the seat she'd used before, her head went down again.

Fuck.

"What do you prefer to drink?" I slid a plate in front of her. "I have water, orange juice, coffee and beer." I also had

tsipouro, but I wasn't about to offer her the ninety-proof Greek alcohol.

"Water is fine, thank you." Her voice small, her hands in her lap, she didn't look up.

Goddamn it. "Do you drink?"

Already still, her shoulders stiffened. "Alcohol?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Because of your stepmother?" The woman had put back a dozen vodka tonics at the funeral and was still standing when we'd left. It was clear it was habitual.

"I don't know."

She lied. She knew.

Grabbing her a glass of water, I set it in front of her, but she still hadn't touched her food. "Problem?"

"I'm sorry?"

"With the omelet?"

Her gaze cut from her lap to her plate. "I was waiting for you."

I took the kick in the chest I deserved. "Don't wait. Eat while it's hot. Do you mind if I have a beer?"

She frowned. Then she stumbled through both the question and giving it an honest answer. "I... I'm not sure why you would ask that?"

"Because you grew up with an alcoholic stepmother, you don't drink, and you spent nine months on tour with a rock band. I'm not irresponsible with alcohol, but I will respect you if it makes you uncomfortable for me to have a drink in your presence."

Her throat moved with a swallow. "Thank you." She picked up her fork. "Please have whatever you prefer." Mimicking my language, not giving definitive consent or saying she wasn't okay with it, she lied again.

Grabbing a glass of water instead of a beer, I sat down and ate my fucking omelet.

She picked at hers.

I lasted through two more minutes of conversational silence after finishing my food while she continued to pretend to eat before I took her fork out of her hand and set it down. “Do you want to know how I signed my letters and cards I sent to you over the years?”

That caught her attention.

She looked up. “You wrote me letters?”

“Yes. Eleven of them.” Sent on her half birthday. “Eleven birthday cards as well.” Every one of those sent with a check. “The first letter I sent a month after your father’s funeral. The last birthday card I sent on your eighteenth birthday.”

“Eleven,” she repeated in a rasped whisper.

My life was analytics, control and veracity. I kept my three-foot world as organized as my mind and preferred statistics and patterns over people and emotions. The latter I’d spent a lifetime avoiding, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t discern emotions as proficiently as I could predict human behavior.

I could.

Which was how I knew the expression she was trying to hide wasn’t shock, surprise or anger. It was sorrow.

Instead of resenting her alcoholic stepmother and abusive stepbrother for taking what had been rightfully hers, a sentiment most any other person would’ve had, she was simply, innocently sad.

I knew what she was going to ask before the hard swallow of suppressed emotion hit her slender throat.

“What did the letters say?”

“I asked how school was, if you were still being bullied, if your lavender garden was okay, and if you needed anything. Then I left my cell number.”

“I didn’t have a phone or know how to use one.”

“There was a house phone in the kitchen. I assumed, if the need arose, you’d find a way to contact me. That was my mistake.” So was not beating the fuck out of her teenage stepbrother the second he’d manhandled her at the funeral.

“You didn’t make a mistake.”

“I left you with your stepbrother and stepmother. Twice.” Unconscionable, inexcusable, and unforgivable.

She opened her mouth like she was going to say something, then quickly closed it and bit her bottom lip.

Grasping her chin, I applied pressure with my thumb until she released the abused flesh. “Don’t inflict injury on yourself.” If anyone was going to bite those full lips, it was going to be me.

“I wasn’t—”

“You were.” I stood and grabbed the plates. “Dessert?” I didn’t have shit for dessert in the penthouse, but if she wanted something, I’d make it happen.

“No, thank you. I’m full.”

“You left half your omelet untouched.”

“I’m just tired. It’s... been a long day.”

“Understood. Wait there.” I got up, refilled her water glass, grabbed a couple of Advil from the cabinet, then held my hand out to her. “Take these.”

Her fingers brushing my palm as she took the pills was enough to make my cock pulse.

Watching her give me an additional piece of trust as she followed my instructions was another kick to the chest.

“Good. Give me a minute.” I dumped all the dishes into the dishwasher and set it to run, then wiped down the counters before glancing at her. “Follow me.”

Walking into my bedroom, I passed the bathroom, noted her clothes in the trash, and grabbed a T-shirt from my closet.

When I turned, she was hovering in the doorway.

Resisting every instinct and urge I had to pick her up and never put her back down, I led her down the hall to the guest room and held the T-shirt out to her. “Give me your clothes.”

Color flushed her cheeks. “Sir?”

“Ridge,” I corrected. “Or Delta.” Not that either made my cock any less hard than when she called me sir.

“But not your first name.” She glanced at the shirt I was offering. “I’m fine with what I have on.”

“Not a request.” Purposely ignoring her first comment, I gave her an explanation for the latter. “I’m washing your clothes tonight.”

The color vanished from her cheeks. “You don’t need to do my laundry. I can do it myself.” She glanced up and down the hall. “If you’ll just tell me where your washer is?”

“Again, not a request. Also not a negotiation. Step into the bathroom, change into the shirt, then hand me your clothes and get into bed.”

She didn’t move. She blinked.

“Do you need me to do it for you?”

Pivoting, she hustled toward the en suite.

“Forget something?”

Halting midstep, she turned back around. Then she came toward me with a much slower stride than when she was running away.

Taking in her gait, I glanced pointedly at her knee and ankle. “The tape’s helping.”

“Yes, sir,” she quietly replied, hesitantly pulling the shirt from my hand, then exhaling and turning once the material was in her possession.

The one thing I’d been purposely avoiding analyzing, calculating, processing, let alone thinking about since she’d

she first looked up at me in the garage struck me head-on. “Did Saunders take your clothes from you?”

Her shoulders dropped, and she paused. “I don’t like to talk about him.”

“I don’t like to see you injured.”

She didn’t say shit.

I repeated myself. “Did Saunders take your clothes?”

“Why would you ask that?”

Adrenaline spiked. My muscles tensed. “Because of your mistrust when you took the shirt from my hand. Did you expect me to hurt you or withhold it?” Rapid-fire, I cataloged, considered, scrutinized, then dismissed every other possible reason.

She cycled through three breaths before she spoke. “You say I always have a choice, but I don’t. You ask very private questions, and if I don’t answer them, you ask them another way because you expect answers.” She looked over her shoulder at me. “How would you feel if I asked you about the women you’ve slept with?”

THIRTY

Delta

I fucking froze.

I knew it was a high probability. I knew she'd been treated like a slave by a fuck who'd impersonated a master. I knew every submissive sign staring at me with every single action and reaction of her body language, speech and expressions. I knew Saunders was a narcissistic sociopath, and statistically, the likelihood of him doing a hell of a lot more than beating her was off-the-charts high.

I fucking knew that.

But I never expected her, subconsciously or otherwise, to admit he'd fucked her.

“Did Saunders have sex with you?” He was dead.

Recoiling as if I'd hit her, her shoulders curled in protectively, and she immediately went on the defensive. “I-I never said that. I wasn't saying that. I wasn't—”

“Stop.” He'd fucked her. *He'd goddamn fucked her.* An entire new entity of rage hit, and it took every ounce of my control not to immediately walk out of the penthouse with my M45.

She started to tremble. Her voice became a rasped whisper. “I'm sorry.”

“Your stepbrother fucked and beat you, and you're apologizing?”

“D-d-don’t. Don’t say that ever again. I didn’t—you don’t understand. I didn’t say those words. You did.”

“Turn around, Violet.” If she said she’d loved him, I was going to dismember the son of a bitch.

“No.”

“*Turn around.*”

Head down, terrified, she turned.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

She didn’t move.

I gave her one warning. “We’re having this conversation, and we’re having it now. The only question is whether we’re having it with my hands on you so that you look at me. Pick your head up, or I’ll do it for you.”

Her gaze met mine.

“Did Saunders have sex with you?”

No response.

“Did Saunders sexually assault you?”

No response.

“Are you a virgin?”

No response.

“Was he having sex with you during the tour?”

She hesitated, then shook her head.

“Verbal response,” I ordered.

“No.”

I fucking asked. “Do you love him?”

She recoiled again. “*No.*”

“Then why are you protecting him?”

No response.

“When was the last time he touched you sexually?”

She started to look away.

“Eyes on me,” I barked.

Her gaze came back.

“Should I ask him instead?”

Her face went ashen, and she finally opened her mouth, but it wasn't to explain. “Please, stop this. Please don't make me say any more.” Tears fell. Her voice became hoarse with despair. “Don't make me tell you things that you'll hate me for.” She begged, “*Please*. Don't make me dirty.”

It wasn't a knife that sank into my chest. It was a goddamn ax. “You, Violet Hanna Traylor, are not dirty.” Fucking Saunders was. “Nothing you say to me will change my opinion of you.”

She cried how she suffered. Quietly. “That's not true.”

It was the truest goddamn thing I'd ever said. “Yes, it is.” Past redemption for letting this happen to her, my word worth fuck all, I gave it to her anyway. “On that, you have my honor.”

Dropping her chin to her chest, she turned her head, and the lost child I'd met in the garden came out. “I don't want your honor.”

Being the daughter of a fallen SEAL, she wouldn't. She'd want me to not leave her. But I couldn't promise that. “Understood. But you have it anyway.” Using every fiber of control I'd honed for decades, I tempered my tone and lowered my voice. “Tell me what he did to you, Violet.”

Arms crossed, shutting down, her hushed refusal barely carried. “No.”

“Little one.” It wasn't a term of endearment. It was a demand.

She stood there.

Then she picked her head up, looked me in the eye, and decimated me. “On my eighteenth birthday, he pushed me. I fell, my head hit the dresser, and I blacked out. When I woke up, he had... finished. Then he called me a whore and never did... *that* to me again.”

Called me a whore.

Never did that to me again.

The conscious mind solved problems at one hundred and fifty miles per hour.

The subconscious worked at a hundred thousand miles per hour.

Faster than I could think the thought, the intent and imminent action I'd take to end Saunders embedded in my mind as I compartmentalized every fucking ounce of rage and processed ten steps past all of my other plans in a fraction of a second.

I was going to inflict unimaginable pain on Saunders.

Creatively.

Then I was going to kill him.

But first I was going to give her back some of the power I'd stripped from her.

"Ask," I ordered.

"Wh-what?"

"Ask your question about my past."

Her head was shaking before she spoke the refusal. "No."

I'd taken a piece of her. She deserved one in return. "*Ask,*" I demanded.

She flinched. Then she did what no other woman had ever done. What she'd always done to me. She fucking took me by surprise.

"Have you carried other women?"

Bypassing the obvious question of how many women I'd had sex with, one I'd predicted, expected and had a palatable answer for, she instead did the unexpected. She asked a much worse question. One that would hurt her. One that I wouldn't lie to her about.

Fuck. "Yes."

“The ones you...?”

Knowing my answer was about to change everything, I memorized every inch of her face and the innocent hope she still carried beneath all the fear and pain. Then I told her. “Yes.”

Drawing her arms in closer, subconsciously trying to protect herself from the reality in front of her that was staring her down with the hardened resolve of a SEAL, she once again didn't do the expected.

She didn't retreat.

She didn't back down.

She aimed. “Do you enjoy carrying the women you sleep with?”

I took the hit. But I turned her present tense into what it was. The past. “I didn't sleep with them, I fucked them. And yes, I took pleasure from it.” Or used to think so. Because that was who a violet-eyed eighteen-year-old had turned me into. A degenerate dominant who liked to mercilessly fuck small, innocent blonde women. Preferably to tears. Then tend to them and send them on their way. Except now I'd had her in my arms. I'd tasted her vulnerability and innocence. I saw the purity she still had despite everything, and I knew I'd only been lying to myself. There was no substitute for this woman. There never had been.

There never would be.

I tipped my chin toward the en suite. “Change into my shirt.”

She turned and fled.

THIRTY-ONE

Hanna

I'd barely gotten the door closed before I burst into tears.

Clapping a hand over my mouth, turning the water on, I doubled over from a level of pain that I never knew existed until Demetrius Ridge Demos said those awful words.

Not even every unspeakable, cruel, horrible thing my stepbrother had done to me touched this.

Dropping to my knees, folding into myself, I wanted to waste away into oblivion and cease to exist from even thinking about a world where an emerald-eyed SEAL was with other women. But worse, was the image he'd put in my head of him carrying them. That made me want to hate.

I wanted to hate him.

I wanted anger.

I wanted it to claw out my heart and consume every thought because I couldn't breathe through the pain of this.

I didn't want to.

I'd survived every single thing Styx had done to me. I'd kept every self-destroying emotion away. I'd never let hate or resentment or anger in. I'd kept going. I'd done what I'd had to. I'd told an enraged, six-and-a-half-foot SEAL my most shameful, horrific secret. I'd endured *all* of it.

But this?

I couldn't do this.

I didn't know how to. I didn't know how to add it to this awful life, not this brand of hurt he was disguising as honesty, protection and shelter.

Because this was none of those things.

He was not protection and shelter.

I never should've stayed. I never should've let it get this far. I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't stay in this place where the very last hope, the only hope I'd ever held on to for myself, was so mercilessly and coldly thrown away. Especially after everything I had said to him. Things I never allowed myself to think about for more than a fleeting moment in my weakest moments, let alone say out loud. But I had, and now I couldn't take it back, and I couldn't stay here.

I needed to remember why I was doing this.

I needed to stick to the plan.

One goal.

I needed to get my backpack and—

The bathroom door opened.

It was instinct. Like an animal, I scrambled back.

“*Stop,*” he ordered callously.

I stopped. Stopped trusting, stopped listening, stopped obeying.

And started panicking.

Pushing myself back into a corner.

Curling up small.

Threading hands over my head.

Tucking arms in.

Bracing for impact.

Wedging between a wall and a toilet.

“Violet Hanna Traylor, STOP.”

I stopped breathing.

Then a deeply dominant, quietly measured voice was suddenly speaking another language. Stringing together meaningless words, it wasn't melodic or beautiful.

It was masculine.

Authoritative and absolute.

Sounding like the giving of commands, the words connected together like a web.

And suddenly, I was listening to the darkest of poetry that transcended language as large, firm hands grasped my arms and pulled.

My body slid on tile.

More quietly spoken masculine poetry came.

Strong arms wrapped around me.

My body was lifted off the floor. My cheek landed against a hard chest, and the scent of lavender and amber surrounded me.

The tears didn't just come.

A wrenching sob echoed off marble floors and walls as the pain came rushing back in a flood of unbearable hurt.

"Put me down." Don't carry me. Don't carry me like you carried them. Don't carry me don't carry me don't carry me.

"No." More dark poetry poured from his serpentine lips as the soft material I was still clutching was taken from my hands. Then my shirt was unceremoniously yanked off before another was pushed down over my head.

My feet touched the floor, my arms were fed through sleeves, and my leggings were pulled off in three swift but careful movements that avoided my knee and ankle.

Picking me back up, he strode into the darkened bedroom that smelled nothing like him. Yanking the bedding back one-handed, lowering us down to the king-sized mattress, his huge frame shifted under me.

Then we were in bed. Together.

His hard, muscular body cocooned mine, and his fingers began to push through my hair. Massaging across my head, sifting through the long strands over and over as if he were brushing my hair, his hands caressed as he cradled me in his lap.

The dark poetry kept coming.

But then it switched back to English.

“Speak to me, little one.”

Still weeping, I shook my head.

“Speak,” he demanded, his tone brooking no argument.

“Y-you hurt me.”

“I’ve failed you. Many times. But I will never physically harm you.”

“You hurt my heart.”

His hand in my hair stilled, his muscles tensed, then he exhaled, and his caresses resumed. “That was never my intent.”

“You carried other women,” I accused in barely more than a whisper.

His heart beat, his chest rose and fell, his hand caressed. Time moved, but hope stopped.

He spoke his truth. “That’s who I am, little one.”

Unrelenting tears fell anew, washing me in despair as my hoarse voice broke. “*You took pleasure from it.*”

Long, thick fingers gripped a handful of my hair. “Let this go.” He pulled, and my head tipped back. Storming green eyes looked down at me. “None of them were you. No one will *ever* be you.”

Breaking down into jagged little pieces in front of him, I couldn’t let it go. “This hurts.”

A war waged in his impossible expression, and his grip tightened. “*Eísai í psychí mou.*”

I didn't understand him or his web of Greek. "What does that mean?"

"This." His lips touched mine.

It was instantaneous.

Fire erupted, my hands reached for his hair, my mouth opened, and all of a sudden, I understood.

I was the baby bird, he was my alcohol, and I wanted to drown in this.

My first kiss.

His hot tongue, dominant and possessive, swept across my bottom lip, then sank inside my mouth, and I was swept out to his sea.

My body arched, my moan carried off his penthouse balcony, and reality shattered the mockery of the fantasy I'd had.

He kissed like the earth was burning and the sky was storming.

He kissed how he stared at me.

He devoured me, body and soul.

Then, as quickly as he'd claimed me, irrevocably taking every last piece I'd left shattered in front of him, he pulled away and cruelly gave it all back. "That can never happen again."

My defenseless heart crushed into nothing.

"Don't look at me like that." His English switched back to the dark trappings of his Greek. But this time, instead of poetry, it sounded like a web of lies.

The last of my hope fell down my cheeks.

Grasping my face, leaving my tears, he heartlessly, mercifully issued me a command. "Stop. You're done crying now." His fingers threaded into my hair and gripped. "Breathe in."

I took a breath.

“Hold it.”

I held it.

“Exhale.”

I let it out.

“You are safe. You are who I am holding. Live in this moment.” He lowered us further into the pillows. “Nothing has changed between you and I. Close your eyes and sleep.”

I wept his ugly truth. “There is no you and I.”

“You’re right. We’re us. We have been since a SEAL sat in a garden with a lavender-eyed Gold Star child.” He wrapped his arms around me. “Listen to my breathing. Drift, sleep, let it go.” His voice became a rough whisper. “Let it go, little one.”

His heart beat in my ear.

Mine had stopped.

His arms held me tight.

Mine were weak.

But I listened to his steady, even breathing, and my exhausted body followed suit.

Warm, protected and sheltered in lies, I fell asleep.

An hour later, I woke alone.

THIRTY-TWO

Delta

I broke her, kissed her, and held her till she cried herself to sleep.

Then I extracted myself, grabbed her clothes, and walked out with a hard cock and a shit conscience.

No self-control left, I didn't go far.

Taking up position in the hall outside her door, telling myself the alternative to leaving would've been worse, I watched her sleep.

Beautiful, vulnerable, broken, she was my own personal succubus, but I couldn't deny that the past kept blurring with the present.

I was right to not take her all those years ago.

I never could've been what she needed. I'd had a shit excuse for a father, and I wasn't ready to be one myself. I was a SEAL. The Team was my duty. My service was my priority. I was still learning how to be a man, but none of that negated my negligence of duty to her. I was responsible for the battered creature lying in my guest bed.

As if we were fucking connected and she had a direct line to my guilt-stricken thoughts, she stirred.

Then she woke.

Rapidly sitting up, her gaze cutting to the position I'd vacated, she pulled the sheet to her chin with both hands.

Dominance and adrenaline surged, my cock followed, but I held position.

Looking lost as hell, her breathing accelerated, she stared at the empty half of the bed for a long moment. Then she inhaled deep, and slowly, carefully, with more grace than someone with her injuries should have, lowered herself back down. Not taking her gaze off the pillow next to her, she stared as the first tear fell.

My chest taking one hit after another, I fucking stood motionless.

Fourteen silent tears followed the first, and I counted every damn one before she swiped at her face with the sheet still clutched in her hands and rolled over. Her back to me, she curled in on herself.

Twenty-eight insufferable minutes later, her breathing evened out.

Retreating to the laundry room at the other end of the penthouse, I threw her clothes and the damn shoes into the washer, but I couldn't get her tears or the kiss out of my head.

That fucking kiss.

Innocent and so damn soft, she'd been hesitant at first. Then she'd opened herself up to me, and my obsession had grown by magnitudes.

So did my possessiveness.

I wanted to fuck her, and I wanted to kill Saunders.

The latter I had no issue with. The former had me bracing my hands on the counter in my laundry room, hanging my head, and hating myself.

I was distracted.

Too damn distracted to put this whole fucking thing together.

Now that I'd had a taste of her, all I wanted was more. I wasn't seeing connections, patterns or drawing conclusions. I

was fighting a fucking hard-on and telling myself not to go back in that room.

Dragging out my cell, I checked the security feeds for my building, then made a call.

November answered on the first ring. “I got the X-ray images you forwarded from Talerco along with your cell phone pictures. Everything’s printed, and I’m putting together the generic documents you requested. Everything will be ready by oh seven hundred tomorrow.”

“Copy. Besides the obvious, why does a sub protect an abuser?” Because after her reaction to my past, I was questioning every damn thing. The connective line I’d drawn earlier no longer fit. Those weren’t the tears of a woman who loved and was protecting someone else. She also wasn’t protecting me. She knew I was SEAL. She knew my capabilities. That left that son of bitch Saunders.

November was silent a beat. “Trying to find reason behind every emotion is futile.”

I’d spent my entire fucking life finding and analyzing those reasons. “No, it’s not.”

“You want to tell me who she really is?”

“Not yet.” Territorial, possessive and selfish, I didn’t want to tell a fucking soul about her, including Alpha.

But I wasn’t so far gone that I’d ignore the fact that nothing in life was guaranteed, and anything could happen at any time. If I was dead, Alpha would follow up and protect her.

For now, I was banking time until I figured this out. The fact that she had zero hits in the system under her real name wasn’t nothing. The direct line was obvious. Saunders had been hiding her real identity to keep her as his own personal punching bag while he was on the road. Except his tour was over, she’d escaped, and she was still using the aliases he could track. Pattern wise, it didn’t make sense unless it was deliberate. In which case, if she was sending Saunders on a snipe hunt, the extended time in Miami was atypical.

“Copy.” November didn’t push the identity issue, but he did ask the question I didn’t want to ask myself. “Does she want to go back to her abuser?”

“No.” I didn’t know, but no way in hell was I going to let that happen. “She’s protecting him though. Or someone else.” It was the only direct line I could draw because I was too fucking close to this.

“Purpose and context?”

“Unclear.” I was reasonably certain she didn’t have a kid. The pattern didn’t fit. Habitual abusers like Saunders wouldn’t release their clutches long enough for someone else to get their hands on her, and aliases or not, his record label would know who she was.

The amount of money they had riding on Saunders, the label would also draw the line at allowing him to take a direct hit to his reputation by impregnating his stepsister. The press would have a field day, sales would tank, and I wasn’t going any further down this fucking thread or I’d already be on the road, mission intent.

But I had done my due diligence and run a search on birth certificates going back a decade using her name and all known aliases. No hits. Adding that to the un-fucking-conscionable, deplorable act that despicable piece of shit had committed against her, I was calling it on his virgin-whore complex and ruling out the possibility that she’d had a kid.

November tossed out an offer. “Run it down.”

“Can’t. I won’t break her trust with what she confided.”

“Generalize.”

“Her abuser’s on borrowed time.”

“Given. But you clearly know who it is, and I’ve never known you to be irresolute.”

“I’m not.” The only reason that fuck wasn’t dead yet was because I’d given her my word. Purposely vague and not caged in by a timeline, but I’d still given it.

“Expand.”

I knew November would safekeep any intel I ran past him, but I wasn't crossing that line unless her life depended on it and I absolutely had to. I gave him as much as I could. "She doesn't want to stay."

"With you specifically, or at the property you just purchased?"

"You talked to Christensen?"

"No. I monitor any large bank transfers for all AES employees."

Jesus. "Alpha put you up to that?"

"Years at Cyber Command taught me to be diligent."

Christ. "I don't know if I should thank you or work harder at concealing my online transactions."

"The latter. Stolen funds can quickly get lost."

Which brought me back to the money in her backpack.

The other uncommon denominator in all of this.

I'd already analyzed it a hundred times, and instinct, the facts that I did have, and what I knew of her—none of it pointed to theft. This wasn't about where the cash had come from. It was about the why, and I wanted to know what the hell she needed it for. But while I had November on the line, he could check a detail for me faster than I could. "You in front of a computer right now?"

"Yes."

"Do me a favor and run facial rec on her again, but focus on plastic surgery centers or medical facilities in and around Miami, about two months ago."

I heard him start typing. "Checking now."

"Copy." The washer ended its cycle, and I pulled out her clothes and tossed them into the dryer, then glanced at the shoes. "Can you put ballet shoes in the dryer?"

"Regular or pointe?"

"What?"

“Hard or soft toe area? Leather, silk or canvas?”

“Do I want to know how you know so much about this?”

“Classified.”

I drew the straight line of connections. Russian intelligence. Russian ballet troupes. International performances. Countless attendees. Innumerable opportunities for intel trades. His assignment in the Air Force. “Cyber Command, the gift that keeps on giving.” I glanced at the shoes. “Pink leather, soft toe area.” I could put together November’s single cryptic comment in one second, but I couldn’t fucking figure out why a five-foot-two lavender-eyed blonde was being cagey. I ate more guilt over kissing her, carrying her, tending to her and losing all goddamn objective.

“Not recommended.” November paused. “Okay, found a possibility. Southwest Miami, in-and-out surgery center. Eight weeks ago. Could be her. Black-and-white footage, light-haired female, head down, walked in at oh eight hundred, was escorted out at seventeen hundred and put into a vehicle. Texting the two images now.”

“Cab?” Fuck it. I threw the shoes in the dryer with the clothes. They were too big for her anyway.

“No, ride share.”

My cell pinged with a new text, and I glanced at the image. The backpack. “That’s her. Track the ride share and hack the medical records for the facility.”

“Already on it.”

I stared at the images. “Also check local hotels within a ten-mile radius for that date, using the names on the IDs we found earlier.”

“Don’t have to. Found it. The ride share dropped her at one of the hotels by the airport. She checked in using an alias that was a combination of two of the IDs and paid cash upfront for ten days. There were daily room charges to a restaurant on-site, then on day seven, security cams caught her walking out and crossing the parking lot on foot. She never returned.”

“And the medical facility?”

“Jane Smith. Nasal fracture repair.”

At least I had confirmation of why she was off the grid in Miami when she first showed up here. But it still didn't explain why she'd stayed afterwards or taken a job as an intern unless she didn't want to spend the cash she had. “Copy. Can you print the two images you texted and add them to the pile?”

“To your folder or mine?”

“Both.”

“Done. Anything else?”

“Not tonight. I'll be in touch. You know what to do if anything goes south.”

“Bring in Alpha.”

“Affirmative.”

November didn't reply or end the call.

“What?”

“You've disabled the encryption on your cell.”

“Is that a question?” I pulled her still-damp clothes and shoes out of the dryer.

“Statement. Watch your six.”

“Not my plan.” The disabling of the encryption was purposeful, and I didn't want to spend any more time looking in the rearview at my own damn mistakes on this.

November quoted a SEAL motto. “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.”

“That's why you have the backup folder.” And my M45 was at the ready. “You know what to do with it if needed.” Ending the call, I grabbed her shit, made my way back to the guest room, and paused in the doorway.

Before I breached, I took her in for a beat, and the singular emotion hit.

Mine.

Fuck.

My steps silent from years of practice, I draped her clothes over a chair and set her shoes on the dresser. Then I had to use every ounce of self-control I possessed to retreat, but I paused again in the doorway.

Staring at her small frame in a fetal position, I wanted to pick her the fuck up, carry her to my bed, and spend the next decade erasing every damn thing that asshole Saunders had done to her.

But she deserved better than a depraved SEAL who'd broken his word.

She deserved to be safe, and I had a job to do.

One way or another, I was ending this, which was why my cell was currently on and pinging my location to anyone who bothered to look—because Talerco had been dead-on about one thing.

Abusers didn't like to give up their victims.

Eleven years of birthday cards and checks, Saunders had my name and number. That fuck was going to do the predictable and find me. Then he was going to come for her.

I was already waiting.

THIRTY-THREE

Delta

Her half scream, half cry carried down the hall, and I was out of bed and moving.

Leaving my M45 on the nightstand, scanning the dark hall out of habit, three seconds later, I was holding position at the threshold of the guest room.

Writhing like she was in pain, the sheets twisted around her, her hair tangled in a mess, she cried out again.

I stepped into the room.

Her small body recoiled as if in agony.

I weighed my options.

Waking her meant touching her. Touching her meant comforting her. Comforting her while I was only in boxers and she was naked under my T-shirt was crossing a line. One I thoroughly, perversely wanted to fucking cross. Reminding myself that she was injured and deserved better, I stepped back.

But I wasn't a saint.

Not retreating to my own damn bedroom, I leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, crossed my arms and waited.

Watched and waited.

Because my fucking willpower was only so strong when it came to her.

Ten minutes.

That was the limit I gave myself.

Six hundred seconds.

If she settled back in, I'd retreat. If she didn't, I was giving myself permission. One night. My bed. Her body tucked against mine.

She violently thrashed, and my resolve cracked.

"Violet."

No response.

"*Hanna.*"

Her head jerked, she cried out again, and fear choked her voice with a strangled plea. "Stop!"

I picked her up.

Her body instantly stiffened, her eyes opened, and she looked right through me.

"You're okay. You're safe." Holding her close to my chest so she could feel my heartbeat, exceedingly aware of the material of my T-shirt riding up her thighs, I carried her out of the guest bedroom. "I got you."

She blinked rapidly, then sucked in a sharp breath and looked at me with complete fear.

"Shh, little one, I'm not going to hurt you." Without thought, I slipped into Greek. "*You're safe. I have you. Do not fear me.*"

"W-what happened?"

I switched back to English. "You had a nightmare. You're safe now."

Confusion bled into her fear, and her gaze darted past my shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"My room."

"I—"

"Shh." Her sleep-rough voice with its sexy rasp was killing me. "You're going to sleep with me the rest of the night, little

one.”

Past all rationale, I took her to my bed.

Gently laying her down, I issued her an order but kept my tone measured. “Stay.” I slid my arms out from under her and turned.

“Where are you going?”

I looked back.

Christós.

Even in the dark with only the moonlight falling on her, I could see her eyes. I also saw the remnants of her nightmare still holding her hostage. “Getting you water.”

“I don’t need any right now.”

“Your voice is raw. You didn’t touch your water bottle today. You’re dehydrated, *mátia levántas*. I’m getting you water.” I walked out before I picked her up and took her with me.

Less than half a minute later, I was back.

With her knees pulled to her chest, she’d sat up and was looking at the ocean. When she heard me, her gaze cut to mine.

Unscrewing the cap, I held out the water. “Drink.”

Looking so damn small in my bed, she took the bottle, but not before her gaze had dropped to my abs, then quickly came back to my eyes. “What did you call me?”

“Lavender eyes.” Holding position, not joining her, I gave her every opportunity to look at me like I was at her.

“In Greek?”

“Yes. Drink.”

Drinking only a quarter of the bottle, she quickly glanced down my chest one more time, then handed it back.

I capped the water, set it on the nightstand, and reached for her.

She stiffened.

Sliding my arms under her and picking her up, I got into bed and settled us both as I tucked her back against my chest.

I didn't explain that she'd been on my side or that I was positioning my body between hers and the door or that I'd use any excuse to pick her the fuck up because holding her felt right.

I wordlessly adjusted my arm so she could use me as her pillow, and she instinctively nestled into me.

“Comfortable?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good.” I pulled the comforter over us and wrapped an arm around her waist. “Go to sleep, little one.”

She didn't sleep.

She lay perfectly still for two minutes. Then, with the touch of an angel, her fingers traced the veins on the back of my hand. “Do you think in Greek?”

“No.” Occasionally. But not for years and not with any frequency until I looked down and saw lavender eyes for the second time in my life.

“Do you speak it often?”

I saw it all play out.

She was going to ask if I spoke to or called other women terms of endearment in Greek. I was going to tell her the truth. She'd leave her jealousy and emotions unsaid. I'd see them anyway. Then I'd kiss her, fuck her, ruin her, and hurt her more than she'd already been hurt.

I saw every fucking step of this train wreck of a trajectory, and I had the power to stop it.

But I wasn't going to.

I was going to do something much worse.

I was going to let it happen.

“No, I don’t speak it often. I’ve never called another woman a term of endearment in Greek, and yes, I’ve called other women *little one*.” I threaded my hand with hers. “But you were the first.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Hanna

Wearing nothing except fitted boxers, his body an unbelievable landscape of rippling muscles, he cocooned me in his strength as his natural musk and intoxicating scent swirled in my head.

Then his breath feathered across my neck before a new, deeper version of his voice touched my soul.

“No, I don’t speak it often. I’ve never called another woman a term of endearment in Greek, and yes, I’ve called other women *little one*.” He laced his hand with mine. “But you were the first.”

My world, my breath, they suspended.

I’ve called other women little one.

Until that very moment, I hadn’t known it was physically possible to feel your heart callously being torn in two. Like a fragile piece of paper, slowly, excruciatingly being ripped down the center into two irreparable pieces.

Love and loss.

Sorrow and joy.

Pain and pleasure.

Past and present.

All of it became a living nightmare. Except I already spent my days in fear and my nights in terror. So why this felt so much different, I didn’t know.

Twenty-four hours ago, I hadn't known a grass-green-eyed, dark-haired guardian angel SEAL was in Miami. My plan had never included him. I didn't spend my time in daydreams or frivolity or idleness.

It was only during those in-between moments, when I was hovering on the edge of sleep and at my most vulnerable, that I would stupidly, foolishly remember the very first time a man in a uniform had said those two words to me. That was when I would allow myself to imagine a moment just like this.

Me. Him. Us.

Life.

A soft breeze in a field of lavender. Warmth in my heart. An impossible touch. A heated stare. A lost girl and a strong warrior together, their hands woven as one, exactly how they were now.

I had thought about it.

I had fantasized about it.

I had imagined so many times how it would feel to be in his arms, that I had romanticized every single thing about him until he became the emotional embodiment of four little letters strung together.

I just never knew that hope was the most fragile emotion a person could have.

With my heart hurting, my body exhausted, his strong chest at my back, and his arm as my pillow, I said nothing because no words could put those ripped, fragile pieces of torn hope back together.

Still clasping my hand, he swept his thumb across the inside of my wrist. "Accelerated pulse. Your body tense. Your voice silent. I hear your thoughts, little one. Speak," he dominantly ordered.

Jealousy and something much too close to anger came out. "Don't call me that."

"You are and will always be my little one."

“I’m not a child anymore,” I protested.

“You’re missing the intent behind the meaning of the endearment.”

“If it’s an endearment, then it shouldn’t hurt.” My voice small, I sounded exactly how I felt, like a wounded little girl.

“Don’t assign importance to the wrong perspective.”

I fought tears. “I’m not doing anything except hurting.”

“Your body or your ego?”

Both. “Neither.” It was my heart. It kept betraying me.

“I’ll never lie to you, Violet.”

“Please stop calling me that.” Even though my father had given me my name, hearing it now, especially from him, it sent me into a spiral of crushing memories from a life I couldn’t ever get back. But I wasn’t going to slice open my wounds anymore tonight and tell the warrior at my back why it hurt to hear a name and his honesty as much as it hurt to bleed.

“Stop withholding intel from me.”

Tired, defeated, I slipped. “There are some things I can’t tell you.” Or anyone.

“You mean you won’t.”

Defensiveness and insolence crept in. “Same as you won’t tell me things. You ask selective questions. You demand answers. You want to know about every little bruise or scar on my body, but you don’t tell me about yours. I saw the scar across your stomach.”

When he’d come back into the bedroom and stood at the bed, watching me while I drank water, I saw every inch of the scar that cut across his entire stomach on a slight diagonal. Raised, a quarter inch thick, it looked like he had been cut in half and put back together.

It’d taken everything I had not to fall apart at the very thought of how he’d gotten it.

“Shrapnel wound from an RPG hitting our DPV, and your bruises are not *little*.”

Shrapnel wound. Oh God. “What is an RPG and a DPV?” I didn’t want to know. The image of how he had gotten so horribly hurt was already growing, but I couldn’t not ask.

“Rocket-propelled grenade. Desert Patrol Vehicle.”

Oh my God, no. *No, no, no*. “You were hit by a grenade?”

“No. Shrapnel from the DPV after it was struck.”

Tears welled, and my voice almost deserted me. “Were you in the vehicle?”

“Yes.”

I had to take two breaths. “Do you remember it?” None of my injuries even compared to what he had been through.

“Yes.”

My heart pounding, my chest hurting, it felt like I was losing my father all over again, but fresher and newer and a different kind of pain. “Did it hurt?” Please, God, if you exist, let shock have saved him from that kind of pain.

Using the arm he had around my waist, picking up my hand in his, he pressed my fingers to my chest. “Do you feel your heart racing?” Not waiting for a reply, he moved my hand to my wet cheek. “Do you feel these tears?” He pulled my hand behind me and used my fingers to trace over his scar. “Are you thinking about the burning metal that penetrated my abdomen?”

I cried. “Please, stop.”

Keeping my hand in his, he wrapped his arm back around my waist. Then he cut open every wound between us and filleted our differences.

“I went into battle as a trained SEAL with the force of an entire nation behind me, my brothers beside me and every advantage that proper equipment can buy. You went to war unarmed, unprotected and untrained—*as a child*.” His inhale was full of barely controlled anger. “There is no physical

atrocious, realized or imagined, that someone could commit to my body that would come close to the rage I feel at seeing your injuries. Do not ever minimize what that son of bitch did to you again. Not to me.” He unlaced his hands from mine and withdrew his arm from around my waist. “Remember that the next time you ask me not to kill Saunders.” Lifting my head, he withdrew his arm and replaced it with a pillow. “Because there will be a next time, Violet. I guarantee it.”

The bed shifted, and his heat left my back.

THIRTY-FIVE

Delta

Feeling like fucking shit, I rolled to my back as she moved to the edge of the goddamn bed, and retreated into a fetal position.

Once again, she'd taken me off guard and derailed the fucking script.

I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever be able to be objective with this woman—child. Woman-child. *Fuck*. Little one.

My goddamn little one, no matter how pissed she was with me right now.

I'd had a point to make, one she'd needed to hear.

One she was still thinking about.

Her breathing fast, her shoulders tense, she wasn't going to sleep anytime soon, so I fucking asked. "Why are you carrying around a hundred grand in a backpack when you have an account in your name that has five times that amount?"

She quickly swiped at her face. "What are you talking about?"

Gamó, I wanted to hold her again. "The bank account I set up for you when you turned eighteen." That was the whole fucking point of my excursion to her high school. See her, make sure she was breathing, give her money, put a Band-Aid on the sucking chest wound of guilt I was carrying, then leave her to her life.

“I... that account is gone.”

“No, it’s not.” I’d checked it twice since she’d walked back into my three-foot world.

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?” Before she could feed me a half-truth or avoid the question altogether, I made a preemptive strike. “Tell me exactly why you think it’s gone.”

“Because he took the letter.”

“When?”

“That night.”

“I was watching the house. No one came or went for three days except you.”

She hesitated.

“The truth,” I reminded her.

“He got in moods. Like his mother.”

Sociopathic and an alcoholic. “Benders.” Every new piece of intel she downloaded, I fucking hated myself more.

“I’m sorry?”

“Alcoholic binges.”

“Yes.”

“What did he do to you?”

“He was... he was trying to write his songs because the record label was pressuring him, and he was late in get—”

“I didn’t ask for a fucking excuse. I asked what he did to you, specifically, when he found the letter. Every detail,” I demanded, because I needed to know every goddamn thing he’d done to her.

“Please—”

“NOW.”

She flinched. Then she info dumped.

“I went home, and he was in the kitchen. When I passed him to get to my room, he grabbed me and said I stank. He said I smelled like lavender and cologne. He hated lavender, but he hated it more if any boys ever talked to me, and he said the only way I would come home smelling like a man is if I had been with one. Then he got mad.”

Iisoús Christós. My fucking cologne got her in trouble?

The same cologne I'd worn for sixteen goddamn years because it reminded me of her.

“Violet.” Fuck. FUCK. “I'm sorry.”

Ignoring my apology, rightfully so, she kept talking. “He searched my backpack and found the letter. I knew better than to fight with him. I hadn't in years. But that day, when I saw the letter you'd given me in his hands, I didn't think. I grabbed for it. The next thing I knew, I was on the kitchen floor, pinned down with his knee on my back as I clutched the letter. It wasn't about the money. I didn't.... I don't.... It was the only thing I had with your handwriting, and that was important. To me. So I held on, but he pulled out his switchblade.” Her voice dropped. “That was the first time he cut me.” She absently traced a scar on the back of her right hand.

I was fucking ignorant enough to think I'd already died inside.

First my cologne, then my letter.

But she wasn't done killing me. “It was also the first time he'd threatened to kill someone if I didn't do as he said.”

The connection. *The goddamn connection.* The one I'd overlooked because I was thinking of it from my perspective. *Fuck.* “Saunders threatened to kill me if you used the money.”

She didn't confirm it, but she didn't deny it either. “He took the letter and messed with his cell phone. Then he told me he'd logged into the account and taken the money. He said it was his because he financially supported me. He told me if I tried to call you that he would do something very bad.” She looked over her shoulder at me. “To you.”

Pure fucking rage mixed with indignation. “He was manipulating you. To be very clear, you did not then, nor do you ever need to protect me. If Saunders had come at me, if he tries to now, he’ll be dead before he processes the thought to draw a weapon. Do not think for one second he has a chance in hell against me or that I’ll let him get anywhere near you.”

Avoiding my last declaration, she looked back out at the dark ocean. “I wasn’t thinking of it that way. I was young and small. Styx was tall and fast with his hands and much stronger than me. If he didn’t have his sticks in his hands or wasn’t playing his drums, he was playing with his knives.”

Her arms.

My nostrils flared. “The scars on your arms.”

She didn’t say anything.

She didn’t have to. We both knew what her scars were from, but I said it anyway so she’d hear the anger in my tone and start to process the fact that Saunders was on borrowed fucking time. “He cut you.”

She pulled her arms in closer. “He cuts himself too.”

Didn’t fucking care. By the time I was done with him, he was going to wish he’d stabbed himself. Repeatedly. But for now, I was done having that fuck’s name on her lips while she was in my bed. “What Saunders does to himself isn’t my concern. What he did to you, what he continues to do to you, that is my concern. I respect and recognize the courage and trust you’ve given me by sharing what you have. It goes unsaid, but your confidences are safe with me.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” I didn’t fucking deserve it.

The abuse she’d suffered because of my actions was unconscionable. I didn’t blame her for not trusting me or for not wanting to stay. I fucking got it now. I was still going to do my damndest to convince her to do both, but destroyed trust took time and actions.

The penthouse, bank account and vehicle being delivered tomorrow were a start. I wasn't going to force more on her now. Not after what she'd been through. I'd still handle Saunders and backdoor my way into whatever else she was hiding, because I didn't believe for a second this was the only source of her reticence. But for tonight, I was pivoting.

Her small voice decimating me, she gave me absolution I wasn't worthy of. "I'm thanking you anyway."

"Acknowledged. When you're ready to share more, I'm here." But I would never make her a promise again not to kill Saunders or any other fuck that harmed her. "Last thing you need to know before you get some rest is that the bank account I set up for you is exactly as I stated in that letter—yours and yours alone. While my name is on the account so I have access to make deposits, Saunders's name isn't. He did not and cannot ever touch that account. To access the funds, you need to go into the bank and use a government-issued ID in your name to either make a withdrawal or set up a login and passcode for online access."

"I've never had an ID in my real name. I don't even have a birth certificate or social security card. Styx took all of that long before I turned eighteen. His band was becoming famous, and he said I couldn't have anything in my name. He said the press would get a hold of it and find out that I was his stepsister, then they'd follow me. I know now that his reasons were lies, but I didn't back then. And I didn't know you had set up the bank account like that or that it was even possible. I've never had my own account."

"We'll remedy that tomorrow. Until we get you proper ID, I'll set you up with my online access to your account. You can start depositing your cash in increments of ten thousand to avoid taxes, or I'll get you an offshore account if you prefer. You can decide in the morning."

No amount of money would undo what had been done to her. And frankly, in that moment, I didn't give a fuck about why she had the cash or what else she was hiding.

I just wanted to hold her.

I wanted my lavender-eyed beauty in my arms, and I wanted to listen to her fall asleep.

“You need to rest.” Pulling her back into my arms, fucking thankful she didn’t startle or fight me, I settled her against my chest and kissed her soft hair. “Sleep, little one.”

THIRTY-SIX

Hanna

He kissed the top of my head. “Sleep, little one.”

The heat of his body and the powerful strength in his hold was making my heart race and every inch of my skin tingle with fluttering desire laced with nervous energy.

Sleep had never been my friend, and my thoughts were a mess.

I wanted him to kiss me again. I wanted to stay. I needed to leave. I wanted this life. I couldn’t afford to want this life. I needed to be brave.

But I couldn’t pretend the past didn’t hurt me.

Because it did.

His past and his honesty hurt.

Same as he would always see scars when he looked at my arms, I would always think of other women when I looked at his.

I didn’t know how it had come down to this when I never should’ve wound up here, but it had.

He inhaled deeply and let it out slow. “Speak your doubts, little one. I can hear you thinking again.”

Startled but not surprised, I apologized both as a matter of habit and for keeping him awake. “I’m sorry. I’ve kept you up.”

“It’s not my sleep I’m concerned about. Doubts?”

I tried to avoid his directness by deflecting. “Why would you assume I was thinking about doubt?”

“I’ve told you I fucked other women, carried them, called them your name and taken pleasure from all of it. Then I kissed you like my life depended on it, told you it wouldn’t happen again, held you until you cried yourself to sleep and left you alone in my guestroom. Now you’re in my bed after having a nightmare because I have no self-control. If you aren’t having doubts about bunking down with me, then I’ve lost all ability to deductively reason.”

“I...” That’s how he thought of his kiss? “What is a new word for hurt?” One where no tears came because everything inside was too broken to cry?

“Decimate.”

I was decimated. “Is that what you do? Deductive reasoning?” Is that how he could seemingly read my thoughts?

“I observe.”

“You do more than that.”

“Observe and decimate.”

“That sounds more accurate.”

“You’re speaking more freely with me now. It wasn’t without benefit.”

“So you planned this?”

He didn’t reply.

I wasn’t only hurt. I was foolish. “I think I need a new word for decimate.”

“Why are you afraid to confide in me?”

He was right. There was freedom in decimation. I would never be enough for this man, but I asked the question anyway. “Why did you say you would never kiss me again?”

“Because I won’t stop there.”

The fuse he had lit when his lips had touched mine turned into a wildfire. “What if I don’t want you to stop?”

“You’re injured, vulnerable, young enough to be my daughter and lying to me. I’m not going to fuck you, Violet.”

I was wrong. Tears welled, and I didn’t need another word for hurt. “Is that all you do with women?” I couldn’t say the word he’d used out loud. My heart couldn’t take it.

“Women? Yes. You? No.”

Hurt piled on top of hurt. “Are all Navy SEALs this... callous?” And cruel?

“I’m honest. I’m also not active duty anymore.”

“My father said he would never stop being a SEAL.”

“Sounds like something Quentin would have said.”

I dared to ask. “Do you think about him?”

“Often.”

A little of the hurt lifted. “Thank you.”

“Your father was an honorable man, an exceptional warrior, and he wanted what was best for his daughter.” A Navy SEAL gently rolled me to my back and cupped my face. “I’m not what’s best for you.”

It was late enough, I was exhausted and decimated enough, and he was right. His honesty had broken down my defenses. I spoke without holding back. “That’s your doubt.” Not mine.

“That’s reality.”

“That’s why I can’t confide in you.”

A green-eyed warrior looked down at me, and for one fraction of a second, I saw the crack in his armor.

“I saw that,” I whispered.

“I let you see it, *matákia mu*.”

I didn’t ask the question I desperately wanted to know the answer to. I asked the one I was afraid of. “Why?”

His thumb swept across my cheek, he leaned in, and his voice dropped to dominant seduction. “Who are you protecting?”

Every wall I had let drop, every emotion I had left unguarded, every reason why this was a bad idea that I had neglected, it all struck me with the force of my utter selfishness.

Retreating to who I needed to be, the plan I needed to stick to, and the one goal I never should have let out of my mind for even a second, I did the only thing I could.

I turned away from him. “Good night, sir.”

For a single heartbeat, he didn’t move.

Then he took away my choice and the distance I tried to put back between us.

Pulling me into his strength, fitting my body against his hard wall of muscle, he slid one arm under my head and wrapped the other around me.

“Good night, little one.” His lips touched my hair.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Delta

I didn't sleep for shit, and it was my own damn fault.

Weak, I'd pushed too hard.

Then I'd pulled her in close and tortured myself with a fucking hard-on for the rest of the night. I didn't want her having another nightmare, and I sure as hell didn't like her retreating on me.

But now I was paying for it.

Close to dawn, she'd finally fallen asleep—clinging to me.

Her arm across my abs, hair splayed on my bicep, head on my chest, my T-shirt riding up her thighs, she was still clinging to me.

The sun had risen over an hour ago.

My cell had been vibrating with notifications, we had a full day, and I wanted to fuck her.

But I didn't want to wake her.

The fact that she was sleeping through the bright early morning sun, my cell and the constant ding of the elevator for the past forty-five minutes as a moving crew came and went next door meant she needed her rest.

That she was peacefully sleeping on me while getting that rest was a fucking gift.

One I wanted to remember.

Refraining from stroking her soft skin, keeping SEAL still, I continued to do what I'd been doing all night.

I watched her.

Eighteen minutes later, she stirred.

I pressed my lips to her hair. "Wake for me, little one." I needed to hear her voice.

Her inhale was deep and slow. Then she opened her eyes.

"*Mátia levántas.*" *Fuck*, those lavender eyes. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she rasped back, staring at me.

My cock surged, my control went to hell, and I fed her my selfishness. "You're beautiful."

Color flushed her cheeks, and she immediately looked away. "No, I'm not."

Refraining from touching her, I put force behind my command. "Look at me."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to."

Her gaze came back to mine.

"Before I tell you why you're never going to say that again, tell me why you think you're not beautiful."

"I know what I look like."

"As do I. Answer the question."

"Will you answer one of mine?"

"Yes." Maybe.

"You're wealthy."

"Is that a question or a statement?" She hadn't asked what I did, where I was going yesterday, or who the plane had belonged to. The motive had been clear. The less she knew, the more she could remain detached.

"Do you work for the same company as the other man?"

Now she was asking. “If you mean Whiskey, then yes. Victor too. We’re all at Alpha Elite Security.”

“Is that how you have so much money?”

“In part.” I summarized. “I had purchased equity in the commercial fishing boat I worked on before I enlisted. When the owners wanted to retire, the captain and I bought them out. Then we expanded the business. He ran operations. I fed my Navy salary into growing the fleet. After I left the Teams, I sold him my share of the business.” For a substantial profit.

“What’s the other part?”

I kept it vague. “Contract work is lucrative.”

“At Alpha Elite Security?”

“Yes.” And other assignments she would never know about.

“What do you do?”

“Similar to what I did on the Teams.” I wouldn’t mislead her as to who I was, but we were done talking about me. “Tell me why you think you’re not beautiful.”

She looked away again.

This time, I did touch her. Fisting a hand in her hair, I turned her head. “Eyes on me. Answer the question.”

She gave me her lavender gaze. But then she licked her lips.

I loosened my grip, dropped the wall from my expression and narrowed my eyes to let her know I wasn’t gripping her hair sexually. I wanted answers.

Exactly as I expected, she focused up and downloaded, giving me reasons I’d predicted.

“I don’t look normal. Everyone stares at me. I know what I am, and what I have. It’s a mutation. It’s not beautiful or even pretty. It’s just....” She tried to turn her head, but I still had my grip on her.

I purposely tightened my fist.

She finished the thought. “It’s just not normal. I’m not normal, and I have scars, and that can’t be beautiful.”

Knowing what she would say, knowing it would enrage and decimate me, I’d prepped for it. Both for the hit to my chest and my counter of the truth, but when she said it, I still had to fucking inhale twice before I answered. “You’re right, you do stand out. More so when you don’t dye your hair, wear contacts and hide your arms.”

She tried to pull away.

“I’m not finished,” I warned.

She stilled.

I gave her the truth. “No matter what color you use to hide your hair, what contacts you put in or how much you cover up, you’re physically stunning. But inside, *mátia levántas*, you are pure of heart, resilient, determined and guileless. And when you show your true self—the small, ethereal girl in the Royal Purple garden with lavender eyes who dug her heels in and called a SEAL a liar, the striking young woman who, despite everything she’s been through, is still strong enough to show her submissive desires—that’s beauty.” I let my tone go unchecked. “You are beautiful, Violet Hanna Traylor.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

Hanna

I lay on his bare chest.

I stared into his eyes.

I swam in the deep end of his musky morning scent. And I drowned in his voice as I heard his provocative words.

But I didn't understand him.

Not last night and not now.

How could he have held me like a precious gift one moment, then assaulted me with his cruelty the next? Why had he pushed me away last night with his brutal honesty only to pull me back against his body and lock me in his arms?

I wanted to hear the words he was saying now. I wanted to understand them. But all I could grasp at was opposites.

How did he not see?

He was the flame. I was the guilt and shame.

Every one of his muscles forged in fire, all of his dominant confidence burning bright, he was the beauty.

He'd built himself this life with towering views of the ocean, a closet full of suits, contract work and women in his arms.

And I was... this. A homeless orphan who was only here for this moment. Selfishly staying as he fisted my hair, stared down at me with sun shining across his face, and called me beautiful.

That wasn't strong or resilient or determined or guileless.

It was weak.

“Speak your mind, little one.”

I couldn't. “I can't.” Undressed in my thoughts, I couldn't give him the honesty he wanted or dark poetry in another language or a less broken version of myself. I wasn't staying. I wasn't taking his money. I didn't want that account. I couldn't take anything from him except this moment.

He was right. This was reality.

His hand slid to the side of my face. “You mean you won't.” His thumb stroked across my cheek.

I said nothing.

His fingers massaged under my hair. “How are you feeling, physically?”

My ankle, knee and shoulder were taped, my heart was in pieces, and I couldn't stop staring at a Greek god who'd decimated me. “Fine.”

“How did you sleep?”

“Fine.” I wasn't hiding at a children's playground awaiting sunrise or squatting in a parking garage trying to steal a half-hour nap, but it was more than that. It was him. He'd robbed me of choice, pulled me into his arms, and he'd done exactly what he had said he'd do. He'd sheltered me. I'd slept more peacefully than I ever had.

“Better,” he stated after studying me for a moment.

“I'm sorry?”

“That last answer was the truth. Your previous one wasn't.”

How did he do that? Instead of asking, I tried to veer the conversation away from me. “How did you sleep?”

“I didn't.”

The guilt and shame that had momentarily suspended came back, and I looked out at the sparkling ocean view. “I'm

sorry.”

“I’m not.”

I looked back at him.

“You didn’t keep me awake. I chose not to sleep, *mátia levántas*.”

“Why?” I shouldn’t have asked.

“If I told you, this conversation would end here.”

“Okay.” I didn’t want to talk anyway. This cocoon couldn’t last forever. I knew what I needed to do.

“That wasn’t an invitation for agreement. But I am glad to hear and see you’re still speaking more freely and behaving less frightened with me this morning.”

“I...” I didn’t know what I was supposed to say to that.
“I’m not.”

“Because you lied about how you feel?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Your body’s not sore?”

“This is the most comfortable bed I’ve ever been in.”

It was slight, but the sun was bright and I saw it. His nostrils flared. “Where have you been sleeping?”

I wasn’t. “At night?”

He saw through me, like he always did, and amended his question. “Where have you been staying at night?”

“It varies.” And if I told him, I would never be able to go back to any of my hiding places. “Please don’t ask me where.” I was too tired to find new places. Not now. Not when I was this close.

He didn’t have to ask. He listed a string of guesses, every one correct. “Parks, beaches, garages, cheap motels?”

I said nothing.

“If I add service alleys, behind commercial buildings, and student campuses and your expression gives you away, fair

warning, I'm going to be angry.”

“You get angry?”

“Service alleys, commercial buildings, student campuses?”

I kept my expression exactly the same.

“*Gamó*,” he muttered before inhaling deeply. “Yes, I get angry. I'm angry right now.”

“I'm sorr—”

“Do *not* apologize. Not to me. Not ever. You did nothing wrong. This anger is directed at myself and Saunders.”

The piles of hurt grew, and all I could do was tell him what my father had always told me. “Hate is the devil, and—”

“Anger is its spawn,” he finished for me.

I whispered the last part. “Don't get mad, get even.”

“Quentin taught you well.”

Maybe he had, but he'd left me, and at the end of the day, that's what I remembered most. “My father also said living well is the best revenge.” Not wanting to think about Daddy or myself anymore, I glanced at a Navy SEAL's huge bedroom. “You must've needed a lot of revenge.”

“*Iisoús Christós*,” he murmured before the muscles that had tensed when he'd told me not to apologize relaxed again, and his gaze focused intently on mine. “Maybe I did.” His thumb stroked across my cheek, and his voice turned quiet. “Maybe you do too.”

The chill went through my entire body.

His fingers caressed the back of my neck as his voice dropped even lower. “Don't ask me not to end him.”

The warmth of his touch turned to ice and spread through my veins. “I'm leaving now.” My heart had left last night, and my soul just followed.

His hand stilled. Then he spoke with complete dominance. “You're going to do something for me, little one.”

Little one.

Two words.

That's all it took.

The ice turned into a flame.

Hurt turned into hope.

I closed my eyes and foolishly asked. "What?"

His palm covered my throat as thick, long fingers splayed, and he grasped the sides of my neck. "Twenty-four hours."

Fire exploded low in my belly, then shot through every single nerve.

Twenty-four hours.

I couldn't afford more time with him.

I needed to leave. I needed to stick to the plan. I needed to remember why I was doing what I was doing... but for a moment, I didn't want to.

I wanted this.

I wanted whatever he was offering.

I wanted to be selfish.

But I wanted something more than all of that.

Nothing left to lose, I opened my eyes and looked up into the emerald gaze of a Greek god of decimation. "Do I get to ask something in return?"

THIRTY-NINE

Delta

She opened her eyes and gave me that lavender gaze. “Do I get to ask something in return?”

Attuned to every damn thing about her, her body so fucking close, her scent killing me, I felt her throat move with a swallow as her pulse drummed under my fingers.

I made a calculated, volatile choice. “Yes.”

I knew what she was going to ask.

I waited for it.

I anticipated her asking because I knew what my answer would be. My muscles relaxed, my breaths even, my heart rate measured, I was ready.

My excuse was chambered.

Then her lips parted, and she fucking went off script. Again.

“What is the real reason why you said you’ll never kiss me again? You’re a SEAL. I’m sure you can stop... if you wanted to.”

Her sexy rasp, more pronounced in the morning, made me want to both fuck her and get her water. “Not the point.” Thrown, pissed I didn’t anticipate her asking why instead of asking for the act itself, wanting her more than I wanted to kill Saunders, I changed my parameters. “Your twenty-four hours start after we shower and have breakfast.”

Ignoring my statement, she didn't drop her quest. "I was in your bed last night. You let me sleep. You said you didn't, but you didn't do anything..."—her face flushed—"you know, to me."

"Don't go down this path." I was hanging by a thread.

She went anyway. "I don't think it's because you can't or won't be able to stop. I think it's something else." The blush on her cheeks deepened. "Is it because I said I can't stay?"

"No." Yes, and every other fucking reason I'd already outlined.

Her voice dipped. "I don't believe you."

Releasing her throat, sinking a hand into her hair, I reminded her why she was in my bed in the first place. "You know why you're here. How often do you have nightmares?"

"Please don't do that."

"Do what?" I knew exactly what. Massaging, coaxing, remembering her moan in the shower when I was washing her hair, I deliberately manipulated her emotions with my dominance. "Shelter you? Protect you? Make you feel safe?" From every damn thing I'd let happen to her.

Her hand landed on my chest, and her fingers hesitantly spread out over my heart. "That's not what I meant."

Fuck. "It should be."

"You know what your touch does to me, Demetrius."

One hundred milliseconds.

My body reacted before I did.

Adrenaline spiked, my pulse jumped, my brain chemistry fired with a whole new set of synapses, and every goddamn thing in my life shifted.

Demetrius.

Spoken by my own lavender-eyed Peitho goddess.

Fuck. "Remove your hand," I warned.

My Peitho goddess turned into Hedone. “Did you not enjoy the kiss?” Her fingers trembled. Her voice turned whisper soft. “Did I do it right?”

Every chain I’d locked around my desire for her broke.

One second, she was curled into my side, her head on my shoulder, her hair draped over my arm.

The next she was on her back.

Shoving her thighs wide with my knee, pinning her good arm above her head, robbing her of choice, driving my hips against hers as my T-shirt rode up on her, I caged her in. “Did you do it right?” I thrust my hard cock against her bare cunt. “Did I enjoy it?” Manic, I didn’t give her room to inhale. My mouth against hers, I ate her shocked gasp. “I want to *consume you*.” Her sex soaking my boxers, I thrust again. “Is that what you want to hear, little one? That the only thing keeping me from fucking you right now is my boxers, your injuries and the very last thread of my control?”

“You’re not hurting me.”

“I will.” Given one more inch of leeway, I would destroy her.

The hand that I’d left free wrapped around the back of my neck as her mouth whispered against mine. “You said you would shelter and protect me.”

“Outside the bedroom.” I ground my hips. “I’m not that man in here.”

With a sharp inhale, she spread her legs wider and dug her fingers into my flesh. “Good.”

Not fucking good. “I’m not asking your pain level, respecting a single goddamn boundary or being careful.” Feeding off her raw, innocent desire, I wanted to fucking devour every inch of her. “I am *not* what you need.”

“You’re everything I want.”

No, I fucking wasn’t. I would hurt her, break her, ruin her. “Tell me to release you.”

“No.”

“Tell me I’m depraved.” I wouldn’t fucking stop until I painted her with my seed.

“No, Demetrius.”

Fuck. “Say my name one more goddamn time, and I will fuck you into this mattress, Violet.”

“*Demetrius.*”

Shoving my boxers down, I surged.

I didn’t check her. I didn’t prep her. I wasn’t merciful.

I sank to the goddamn hilt in a single thrust, ripping into the tightest cunt I’d ever felt.

Her lips parted with a scream.

Gripping her throat, I drove my tongue into her mouth.

Insane, depraved, home, I fucked my lavender-eyed Aphrodite.

FORTY

Hanna

“Demetrius,” I whispered, sealing my fate.

The fury in his emerald gaze darkened, and for one suspended moment, the heat of him left the growing slickness between my legs as he pushed his boxers down.

Then his huge, hard length drove all the way into me with one unforgiving thrust.

Piercing pain and shock from his invasion erupted through my entire body, and I did what I had never done.

I screamed.

His hand wrapped around my throat, his tongue sank into my mouth, and he pulled his hips back. Then he shoved back in harder and deeper, and it happened.

Consumed by his sheer size, his strength, his dominant invasion, his darkly scented musk, I stopped thinking.

I stopped being me.

And I became his.

Relentlessly driving into my body, holding me down, kissing me like tomorrow would never come, it was perfect.

He was perfect.

The pain magnificent, the feel of his possession better, I was slipping into oblivion.

Then his hips shifted.

Circling against mine as he thrust, he touched something deep inside me, and the pain shattered into an explosive heat of pleasure so intense, my entire body arced off the bed.

Growling into my mouth, he did it again.

The moan crawled up my throat and disappeared into his kiss, but the fire had spread.

He thrust.

I arched.

He touched my soul.

I shook.

He took.

I gave.

Then he drove hard and deep, and his rough, dominant command gave me permission. "Come."

Brilliant, terrifying, breath-stealing, the tremor started in my core and erupted. Breaking me into fractured pieces, his powerful grip holding me together, the fire consumed me, and I did exactly as he told me.

I came with an animalistic cry that filled his entire bedroom.

Then my shirt was ripped over my head, his boxers were gone and he was driving into me harder and faster.

New flames leapt from sheer friction and chased my orgasm as he thrust deep and roared.

Matching the beats of my pounding heart, his hot release pumped inside me, and suddenly I was flying apart all over again.

Shaking, pulsing all around him, my body gripping every inch of his hard length that was buried inside me, I looked up into storming emerald eyes.

Silent, fierce, staring down at me intently, still holding my throat and my wrist, his chest rose and fell rapidly as he ground his hips in a deliberate, unhurried, circular pattern.

The wildfire came back, desire spread and realization at what he was doing stuck.

I couldn't stop myself.

My heart climbed onto his balcony. My soul spread her wings. My throat raw, I rasped the only name in my heart. "Demetrius." I curled my fingers into his hair. "I know what you are doing."

His nostrils flaring with a deep inhale, he growled low and feral. Then he grasped the backs of my thighs and pushed my legs to my chest. Holding me firmly in place for a long moment, he then slowly withdrew from my body.

Trying and failing not to wince in pain as his huge length left me, I wanted to close my legs as he seeped out of me, but one of his hands immediately took up the space where his body had just left mine.

Swirling his fingers over my swollen soreness and wet thighs, he gathered his release and pushed it back inside me.

Sucking in a sharp breath, my body flinched at the invasion. But my mind? It leapt at the act and recklessly jumped off that balcony.

As if knowing I was falling too hard, too fast, he pushed another finger inside me, stroked deep, and suddenly I was flying.

He circled.

I soared.

And the thoughts came.

Hold me down. Force me to stay. Take away my choice. Give me reason.

My mind fell apart, but my body orgasmed, and the tears followed.

Withdrawing his fingers, releasing the leg he was still holding, he gathered me in his arms and pulled me in close against his chest.

I heard his heartbeat strong and steady in my ear, then I was really crying.

My emotions fell down his muscular abs, his seed dripped out of me and onto his lap, and he still held me.

But he didn't speak.

He said nothing as he stood and carried me into his shower.

My traitorous heart thought of all the other women he had carried, and sobs joined the torrent of my emotions.

Keeping his silence, turning on the water, he drowned out the sound of my jealousy, but this time, he didn't walk right into the spray.

He waited until steam was rising, then he took us both under.

Hot water cascaded down, and he hung his head, but he didn't take his eyes off me.

He watched me cry, and he held me.

Minutes, hours, a lifetime—I didn't know how much time passed before he gently set me down and grabbed the soap.

Then he was washing me and watching me.

Lowering his tall frame, he started with my feet and worked his way up my thighs and over my hips before fluidly rising back to his full height. Stroking his large hands over every inch of my body except for my breasts and the juncture of my legs, alternating his gaze between his reverent touch and my eyes, he ignored his impossibly huge, hard length.

But I didn't.

I looked at his body every time he looked at mine, and the fire didn't simply grow. It took on a life of its own. My nipples were hard and aching, my core was pulsing with an agonizing emptiness, and every caress of his hands stoked a new kind of pain, but he didn't touch me where I needed it most.

He merely stared.

Then he quickly soaped himself, but when his hand wrapped around his throbbing erection, he gripped himself hard and slowly stroked twice.

Undone, burning need rattled from my throat and escaped my lips with a heated moan.

I reached for him.

Instantly releasing himself, his hand shot out and swiftly clamped around my wrist, holding me at bay as he set the soap down.

Embarrassment flamed, but so did unbearable desire at his dominant grip, and I asked, "May I touch you?"

"No."

I wanted to weep. "Please?"

Not answering, holding my wrist hostage, he angled under the water he'd been letting fall over me and quickly rinsed himself.

I was about to beg him to touch me when he moved out of the spray, released my wrist, and coasted his hands over my aching nipples before palming my heavy breasts. "Scale of one to ten, pain level?" He pinched the tight buds.

Oh God.

My head fell back, and I groaned loudly.

So, so much pain, but not how he thought. His hands had been gentle every place on my body they'd needed to be, but now I wanted more. "I'm fine."

"Eyes on me," he demanded.

With the hot water falling over me, I picked my head back up and looked at him.

"Pain level?" he repeated, his tone sharper.

I had to think about it. Maybe it was him, maybe it was having sex for the first time that I was consciously aware of, maybe it was the tape or the knowledge that no bones were currently broken, but I didn't hurt. Not really. My knee was a

little sore. My lower back felt the remnants of his thrusts. My ankle was an afterthought, and my shoulder was behaving. I was about to say one, when his eyes narrowed.

“Don’t lie to me,” he warned.

“Two,” I admitted.

“Do you normally have a high threshold for pain?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “I don’t know.”

Abruptly leaning down, his hot mouth covered my nipple and he sucked hard.

Desire shot between my legs, my body arched into him, and I gasped.

Then he bit.

My sharp cry echoed off the tile walls. My fingers dug into his hard biceps, and the heat of his mouth left just as the pain morphed into unbearable need.

Before I could beg for more, he was palming the affronted flesh and massaging as he demanded an answer. “Pain level just now?”

Feeling the surge of wetness between my legs, my nipple too cold, wanting to thrust my hips at him, I lost all shame. “Please, don’t stop.”

“Pain level.”

“I... ah.” Oh God. “From the ache or the bite?” Because the ache was worse. So much worse. “Please, touch me.”

Releasing one breast, he cupped me. “From my bite. Answer. Pain level.”

I moaned. “Three.” Five. “Please. I need more,” I begged. “I need you again.”

“No.” He gently stroked two fingers through my wet heat. “You’re swollen. Pain level here?”

“Throbbing.”

He eased one finger inside me but then stilled. “I asked for pain level, not need.”

Remembering his earlier warning not to lie, not wanting to answer, needing his finger to stroke me, I said nothing.

“Answer me,” he ordered.

I struggled for words. “I prefer not to.”

“Five? Six?”

“I...” *Oh God, please.*

“You what?” He stroked me deep.

I flinched and blurted out the answer. “I have no comparison to measure it by.”

He started to withdraw his finger.

Shame and desperation flooded in, and I grasped his wrist. “Please, don’t. You asked. I gave you the truth.”

“You also flinched when I stroked you.” His finger left me, but then his thumb rubbed a tight circle over my most sensitive spot.

Desire collided with relief and erupted past my lips with a rasped moan.

I was giving him his twenty-four hours. I knew I would the moment he had said it. But now I had a whole new reason to never want to leave.

FORTY-ONE

Delta

I wanted back inside her.

Fuck, I wanted to come in her all goddamn day.

I addressed the obvious. “You’re not on birth control.” I hadn’t seen any in her small toiletries bag when I’d glanced in her backpack.

Gripping my wrist with one hand, my arm with the other, grinding her hips as I rubbed her clit, she answered on a moan. “No.”

“I came inside you.” *Fuck*, I wanted to breed this woman.

“Yes,” she murmured, her eyes closing as she started to contract around me.

“When was your last period?”

“Umm.” Her legs started to shake.

I stilled my fingers. “Last period.”

Gripping my wrist harder, she opened her eyes and blinked away the drops of water clinging to her eyelashes. “I-I’m not sure.”

“Approximate.”

“Months.”

My jaw ticked. “Has it always been irregular?”

The color flushing her cheeks grew right before her voice dipped. “What is regular?”

I fucking stared at her. Wet hair, huge violet eyes, taped shoulder, skin so pale she looked like a fragile nymph.

Gamó, she was fragile.

She was also innocent and had never been taught a single damn thing about being a woman. And I'd just fucked her. Roughly.

“You should get your period once a month, unless you're on certain types of birth control.”

The color drained from her face right before she dipped her head. “I have never had that.”

Because she'd been beaten, malnourished and psychologically traumatized. *Fuck*. I had to ask. “Saunders ever give you shots or pills?”

She shook her head.

I had to follow the line of questioning through, but so help me, if she answered in the negative, I was calling in Conlon or November to come watch her while I fucking went after Saunders.

I asked. “Where you always conscious around him?”

She let go of my wrist. “He never gave me anything.”

Because unconscious victims didn't show pain. I changed the subject before I couldn't. “Your hair is lighter since I've washed it.” Minor shade difference, but I'd noticed.

She nodded. “It's semipermanent.”

“Don't color it again,” I ordered.

Already retreating on me, she didn't comment.

Fucking selfish, I sank a finger back inside her tight, wet cunt. “How sore are you, *mátia levántas?*”

She flinched, but not as much as the first time I did it. “I-I don't know.”

“Compare it to my teeth on your nipple.” Stopping just short of drawing blood, I'd bitten her hard to test her.

Her body responding to me even as her mind was shutting down, her hips rocked slightly. “About the same.”

“Do you want me inside you again, little one?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes, please.”

“You’re going to be sore,” I warned, already withdrawing my hand from between her legs.

Gripping my arms, watching me ease my finger out of her, she both took me by surprise and threw gasoline on the already raging fire of destruction that had been my self-control. “Twenty-four hours,” she quietly rasped.

I picked her up by the waist and barked orders. “Left arm around my neck, right leg around my hips.”

She complied.

The head of my engorged cock already at her slick entrance, I sank to the hilt.

She cried out, her cunt gripped me tight, my eyes briefly closed, and *fuck*, I almost came on the spot.

Holding her impaled on my cock with one arm wrapped around her, I shut off the shower and walked out. Grabbing a towel, I set it on the counter to soften her landing and eased her ass down as I widened my stance.

Then I drew back until only the head of my cock was penetrating her before I eased back in, closely watching her face for tells.

Her full lips parted, her eyes closed, and she drew in a steadying breath as she lifted her feet to the counter and instinctively leaned back onto my arm for support.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Violet and lust-hazed, her gaze met mine.

“Pain level on your back in this position?”

Her right hand released its grip on me, and she stroked my chest with a featherlight touch. “I’m okay, Demetrius.”

My fragile nymph turned into a siren, my cock pulsed with precum, and my dominance came out in full force.

Thumbing her clit, I issued orders. “Look down. Watch me slide in and out of that sweet cunt. Know who owns you as you watch yourself come on my cock. Look as I pulse every ounce of my release deep inside you. You hear me, *mátia levántas?*” I thrust hard and deep as I circled her clit. “You ready to come? You ready to see me pump you full of my seed?”

Her legs trembling, her cunt already pulsing, her wet hair fell over her shoulders and dripped water onto her hard nipples as she looked down and cried out the only word I wanted to hear pass her fuckable lips. “*Demetrius.*”

“Come on me, little one,” I demanded, rubbing her clit hard.

She fucking came.

Groaning, gripping me, shaking, pulsing, she fucking let go exactly how I told her to.

Grasping a handful of her hair, thrusting deep, then pulling back two inches so she could see me pulse, I barked one more order. “Watch me fill you, *korítsi mou me ta levánta mátia.*”

I fucking followed her over the edge. “*Eísai dikós mou.*” I pumped her full of my seed. “All fucking mine, little one. *Mine.*” Pulling her head back by her hair, I sank my tongue into her mouth and kissed her. But then I forced myself to pull back because I had a point to make.

Wet lips, wet cunt, wet hair, still pulsing on my cock, clinging to me, my *matákia mu* looked up at me.

“Keep watching,” I commanded.

“Okay,” she whispered, trembling.

“Not my eyes, beautiful.”

Color flushed her cheeks, and she looked down.

Carefully pulling out of her, I quickly spun her around to face the mirror.

She immediately crossed her arms over her breasts and drew her legs together.

“No.” Grasping her knees, I pushed her legs open. “Look.” I drew two fingers through her sweet cunt that was dripping with my release. “No woman has ever had my seed.” Shoving my come back inside her, I cupped her. “Never tell me again that you’re not beautiful.” I rubbed my palm over her clit. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on, *mátia levántas*. Understood?”

Her pulse racing, her breathing rapid, her cunt constricting around my fingers like it should, she gave me a nod.

“Vocalize,” I demanded.

“Yes,” she rasped.

“Good, little one. Close your legs.”

She complied.

Keeping my fingers inside her, I turned her back around to face me and gently stroked. “Pain level?”

She shivered. “I’m okay.”

She wasn’t, but I was selfish enough not to remove my fingers yet. “What’s your morning routine?” My obsession with her growing by the minute, knowing I needed to give her some semblance of familiarity, all I wanted to do was dominate the fuck out of her.

“I’m sorry?”

“What would you do right now if I wasn’t here?”

“Um.” Her eyes closed. “Towel-dry my hair and brush it.”

Still gently stroking her, hard as fuck again, wanting to feel my seed inside her all damn day, I carefully pulled half of the wet tape from her shoulder. “What do you use from the toiletries case in your backpack?” I wanted to know what made her smell like sunshine and lavender.

“Sunscreen.” Her small hand clutched my wrist, and she shivered again. “Why does it feel like that?”

“Pleasurable with a bite of pain?” I unwrapped her knee.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I’m stimulating your G-spot.” I took the tape off her ankle. “What do you prefer for breakfast?” I asked only to distract her as I stroked her again and carefully peeled the rest of the tape from her clavicle.

She moaned. “Anything is fine. Why are you...?” She panted. “Why are you doing this?”

“Getting you used to me.” Getting answers out of her. Feeding my depravity. “You’re going to come again for me, little one.” Adding pressure to her clit with my palm, I stroked her with more intent.

Her legs hitched up, her nails dug into my wrist, and her head fell back. “*Demetrius.*”

The groan that came out of her almost made me come as her cunt pulsed hard around my fingers. “That’s it, *matákia mu.*” I unintentionally switched to Greek. “*Grip me hard. Pull my seed back inside you. Feel where I’ve been.*”

Tears fell down her cheeks. “I don’t understand.”

Switching back to English, I kissed her wet cheeks. “You’re beautiful when you come, little one.” But I had to walk the fuck away before I sank inside her swollen cunt again. Reluctantly, I eased my fingers out of her. “Stay right there.” Grabbing two towels, I wrapped one around her shoulders and the other around my waist. “Close your legs, little one, and wait there.” Leaving a kiss on her forehead, I strode out of the bathroom.

Glancing at my cell on the nightstand, I took note of the missed calls from November before walking into my closet and grabbing the only lavender dress shirt I allowed myself to own, one that made me think of her every time I’d worn it. Thirty seconds later, I was striding back into the bathroom with my shirt, some K-tape and her backpack from the living room, and her leggings and bra from the guest room.

Her knees pulled to her chest, still sitting on the counter where I’d left her but now facing away from the mirror, she

met me with those eyes.

I set the clothes on the counter and fished her toiletries case from her backpack before dropping it to the floor.

“Turn, little one.” I gently spun her on the towel she was sitting on, then took the brush from her case.

Pulling the towel around her in closer, she looked at me in the mirror. “What are you doing?”

Tending to her. Indulging myself. Feeding my depravity. Fantasizing about breeding her. “Brushing your hair, *mátia levántas.*”

FORTY-TWO

Delta

“Is this what you mean by submissive?” Sitting on the bathroom counter, facing the mirror, she asked the question both hesitantly and with a voice that couldn’t have been more submissive if she’d tried.

Careful not to pull her hair, I worked through a tangle with my fingers. “Yes.”

“What is total power exchange?”

Gamó, this little one’s innocence was going to be the death of me. “This.” I drew the brush through her long locks.

She looked up at the mirror and met my gaze.

I explained. “Me taking care of you. All the time.” In every damn aspect of her life. “You letting me.” That’s all she needed to know for now.

“That’s what you like?”

Using the towel, I squeezed some more of the water from her hair and made a mental note to get a hair dryer. “It’s what I prefer.” I brushed the length of her hair again.

“Why?”

“This is who I am, little one.”

In another departure from what I thought she would do, she didn’t question me any more on the subject matter. “Sometimes you speak in Greek.”

I mentally switched gears with her and read into her statement. “You mean sometimes I call you terms of endearment in Greek. And, yes, sometimes I speak Greek to you.” I looked at her in the mirror. “You bring it out in me.”

Color bloomed across her face and neck. “Is that bad?”

It was so fucking good, I wanted to come inside her again. “The opposite.”

“Do you speak Greek with the other women?”

“There are no other women.” There was no more avoiding reality. The truth I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge was staring at me with lavender eyes, and I’d already crossed the line. I’d taken her to my bed. I’d come inside her. I was showing her who I was. Quentin would kill me if he were here. But he wasn’t, and I was done fighting my self-imposed morality. “And, no, I’ve never spoken Greek in an intimate manner with other women, *matákia mu*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Directly translated it means ‘my little eyes.’ Colloquially, it’s a term of affection.”

She dipped her head. “You have affection for me?”

Since I first laid eyes on her. I tipped her chin. “Did I come inside you?” She was mine.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Twice.”

I checked in. “How does that make you feel?”

For a long beat, she didn’t reply. Then her word choice went off script. “More than shivery.”

“More than,” I repeated, digesting the answer. “Do you prefer your hair up or down?”

“For what?”

“Breakfast, then errands.”

Her entire body stiffened. “Errands?”

“Clothes, bank.” A tour of her newly purchased penthouse that I now fucking regretted because I wanted her here with

me, but the still semi-sane part of me knew it was the right move. She needed her own safe place.

She was shaking her head before I finished speaking. “You said twenty-four hours. You didn’t say anything about errands.”

Having my own deal thrown back at me had my jaw ticking, but I wasn’t my fucking father. I didn’t force women, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to force her. I was, however, going to make every minute of the next twenty-four hours count.

I’d show her exactly who I was and every damn way I could make her body respond to me. I’d give her a taste of what it would be like if she chose us. After that, I’d give her the keys to this life—her Jeep, her place across the hall, and my penthouse. Then I’d fucking stand down.

She’d been stripped of choices her whole life.

The decision to stay had to be hers.

I fucking knew that.

Except it was taking every ounce of self-control I had not to dominate the hell out of her, force answers, bypass the hard work on my part, and get to the bottom of what she was hiding so I could fix it. But that wouldn’t make me any better than my old man or that piece of shit Saunders. It also wouldn’t instill trust. And that, I’d promised her I’d earn.

Reminding her of our conversation, I kept my tone even. “We discussed this last night.” Grabbing an elastic from her toiletries bag, I drew up a small amount of her hair in front and secured it. “You need access to your bank account, and you need clothes.” Mimicking how I saw her hair in some of the surveillance images November had found, I straightened the elastic so it was centered, then ran the brush through the ends one more time.

“I don’t need you to buy me clothes.”

“So you said.” I set her brush down and picked up a roll of K-tape before grasping the back of her calf and resting her foot against my chest. “How’s the ankle this morning?”

“Fine.”

I wrapped her ankle. “Knee?”

“Fine.”

I taped her knee. “Shoulder?”

“Fine.”

I grabbed a second roll and taped her collarbone. Then I braced my hands on the counter on either side of her. “You don’t need to always be fine with me.”

She dipped her head. “They don’t hurt.”

Because she had a high tolerance for pain. “Lifting you down and checking your back.” Taking her by the waist, I eased her to her feet and turned her to face the mirror. Skimming my hands down her back, I ran them back up, pressing my thumbs over either side of her spine.

She grasped the counter but didn’t flinch.

“Pain level?”

“One.”

I looked at her in the mirror.

“Two,” she quickly amended. “But only by my tailbone.”

Fuck. That was my fault. “Noted.” I grabbed her bra and fastened it behind her back. Minding her clavicle, I fed her right arm through one of the straps and pulled it up.

She focused on my hands. “You’re dressing me?”

“Yes.” I repeated the process on the left side, then grabbed my shirt and held it up. “Arms.”

Reaching back, she slipped her hands into the sleeves.

Pulling the shirt up and over her shoulders, reaching around her to button it, I watched her in the mirror. “I like you in my clothes, *mátia levántas.*”

“Why?”

So she could smell me all day. “Call me possessive.”

She looked over her shoulder. “Are you?”

“Of you?” Now? “Yes.” I rolled the cuffs of the shirt up to her elbows.

“Because we...?”

“Had sex. You can say it, little one.” I wasn’t hiding from this. “And, yes, but only partially. This isn’t a new sentiment.” Grabbing her leggings, I squatted and held them for her. “Hand on my shoulder for balance, left foot first.”

She complied.

Careful of her left knee and right ankle, I pulled her leggings up to her thighs and over her sweet cunt, sans underwear. Kissing her mound once over the material, I rose to my full height and grabbed her backpack.

Fishing out the hair dye and her colored-contact lens case, I tossed both in the trash on top of her ruined clothes from yesterday.

Staring at what I’d done, she inhaled sharply. “Demetrius.”

That was another thing I never saw coming. The sound of my name crossing her lips. My cock hard again, I gripped her chin and tipped her face up. “You’re not hiding what you look like anymore, Violet.”

“But—”

“No hiding. Except there is something we are going to keep private between us.”

Alarm coated her expression. “What?”

“You may call me Demetrius in here, in the bedroom, in this penthouse. When it’s only the two of us, you may use my given name. But this is going to remain private between us. In public, I’m Delta or Ridge. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Do you prefer to be Hanna in public?”

She blinked, but then her eyebrows drew together. “Please.”

“Done.” I stroked the side of her face. “You’re frowning. Do you have questions, or is there something else we need to discuss right now?”

She studied me but said nothing.

Caressing her cheek, I issued a quiet command. “Speak, little one.”

She inhaled.

Then she caught me unawares again.

FORTY-THREE

Hanna

In public, I'm Delta or Ridge.

I lived my life on the edge of a cliff.

He was named after one.

His seed was dripping out of me. I was dressed in his shirt. He was in a towel, and I was surrounded by his lavender haze.

This was all new to me.

I didn't have questions. I had a mountain of them. A mountain I didn't know how to climb.

His thumb stroked my cheek in the softest of caresses. "Speak, little one."

I inhaled.

Then I asked. "Why do I remind you of a life you left behind when you were fifteen?"

His steady breath and penetrating stare didn't waver. "I said you bring out my native language."

"Isn't that the same thing?" He had implied he'd hated his childhood. How could it be good that I brought that out in him?

"No."

I waited, but he didn't say any more. "I don't understand."

"You weren't meant to. It was a cryptic response. Ask what you really want to know, *matákia mu*."

“Why would it be good that I make you want to speak Greek when you said you left that life behind because you had an unhappy childhood?”

“I haven’t entirely left Greece behind.”

“What does that mean?”

“Stay more than a day, and I’ll tell you.”

Reality came crashing in. “I... can’t.”

“So you’ve said.” His hand stilled, and his expression didn’t change, but I felt the shift. I’d disappointed or angered him.

I couldn’t even blame him, but this wasn’t how I wanted to spend what precious little time I had with him. “I’m sorry.”

“For something you’re going to do or something you’ve already done?”

In that moment, I had regret.

I tried to never let it in. Regret was as invasive as anger, and I knew the depths of either could swallow me whole, but I regretted that I’d never paid better attention in school. I wasn’t smart, not like him. I couldn’t keep up with his mind or his conversation or the way he seemed to know what I was going to say before I said it.

I wished I’d had the energy to do more at school than run track. I wished I hadn’t spent every night half awake, frightened to fall asleep, waiting for an anger storm to come at me. But even if I hadn’t had the upbringing I did, even if I’d slept every night in peace and had no worries and studied my hardest, I knew it wouldn’t have prepared me for a grass-green-eyed Navy SEAL who spoke like he knew the answers before he asked the questions.

He deserved more than who I was, but that was all I had.

I was me, and I couldn’t apologize for what would come after tomorrow. “I’m sorry I’m not smarter.”

“Your intellect is greater than you give yourself credit for, and I don’t need you to be anyone other than who you are.”

For the second time in two days, I wished for hate. “I don’t like compliments.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Then why do you give them?”

“I wasn’t complimenting you. I was stating fact.”

His hand on my cheek, his exposed chest, every dip and hard angle of his solid muscles, the beautiful color of his skin, the scar cutting across his stomach—I couldn’t even manage to be frustrated with him or his answer. I just wanted to be back in his bed with his arms around me. “I don’t want to go to the bank or to get clothes.”

“I know. When I told you it was a good thing that you provoked me to speak Greek, that was a compliment, *mátia levántas*.”

“Then, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. This is also a compliment.” He leaned down and brought his mouth to mine. “You’re beautiful. You were perfect this morning, and your submission and trust are a treasure. Thank you for that gift, little one.” His lips touched mine.

Then his tongue dominantly sank into my mouth.

The flame that he had ignited in me flared into a roaring burst of fire, a vibration of a growl erupted from his chest, and sparks shot through my veins.

One moment he was an impenetrable Navy SEAL, the next he was a Greek god of dominant, consuming sexual prowess.

Falling into his kiss like I was plummeting over the edge of a cliff, I grasped onto his arms, arched my body into him and his hard length, and silently begged for more.

As fast as he had completely stripped me down to raw, aching desire, he pulled back and rose to his full height.

He stroked his thumb over my bottom lip with intentional force and promise. “More later, little one.”

The deep roughness of his voice made me shiver.

He arched an eyebrow. “Cold?”

Shamelessly tasting his kiss on my lips, I shook my head.

“More than shivery?”

Heat rushed across my cheeks, quickly followed by reality. “Explosive,” I whispered with an honesty he wouldn’t understand.

He winked. Then he casually reached for the deodorant he had on the counter next to a bottle of cologne that bore the same name, Chanel Platinum Égoïste, and applied it. “You said you use sunscreen.” The bathroom filled with his intoxicating scent.

Sinking, entranced, already in too deep, I stared at him and memorized every flex of his muscles and pop of his veins on his hands and arms in case this was the last time I got to see him like this. “Yes.”

“Take it out for me, *matákia mu*.” He casually ran his hands through his damp hair, and it settled into a perfectly tousled style that was all at once effortless and purposeful.

Reaching for my small cosmetics case that he’d left on the counter when he’d taken out my hairbrush, I retrieved the travel-sized tube and held it out.

“Good, little one,” he murmured, taking the sunscreen from me and squeezing some into his palm before rubbing his hands together. “Close your eyes.”

Before I could protest or realize what he was doing, his fingers were gently rubbing over my entire face, neck, and the small exposed area of my chest, working the lotion into my skin.

When his hands left me, I opened my eyes.

“Now I know why you smell like lavender.” Holding the small tube, he glanced at the label before putting more on his hands. “Arms,” he ordered simply.

Panic struck. Remembering his reaction when I had told him about my scars, I watched his expression. When it didn’t change, I held my arms out.

Focusing on his task, he spread the sunscreen over my scars, taking longer than he did on my face. When he was finished, he grasped my chin, but he didn't say anything.

Not wanting to think about my arms, not knowing if I would have this chance again, I stepped around one of the questions sitting at the very top of that mountain. "You said you were too old for me."

"I still am."

Hurt sank in. "But we were... intimate." My core swollen and sore and now pulsing with needy emptiness after that kiss, I feared the sensation would last me a lifetime the moment I walked out of his penthouse.

"Yes, we were." His hand slid down the front of my leggings. "And we're going to be again." He stroked me once, then retreated.

"Demetrius," I whispered.

"Come." Grabbing my backpack with one hand, he took my hand with the other.

FORTY-FOUR

Delta

“Come.” Taking her hand, I led her to my gun safe in the walk-in closet as something I couldn’t pinpoint nagged at the back of my mind. “Remember these numbers.” I rattled off the combination. “Watch.” I opened the safe, set her backpack inside, then closed it and stepped aside. “Open it.”

She glanced up at me.

Expression locked, I held position.

Hesitant, she stepped forward and slowly worked through the numbers, then turned the handle.

The safe opened, and once again she threw me. Not even glancing at, let alone commenting on my own stacks of cash, guns, extra magazines, ammunition and pile of burners, she instead looked to me for validation on the task she’d been given.

“Good.” I tipped my chin at her backpack. “Take out ten thousand dollars, but leave the backpack in the safe.”

Her throat moved with a heavy swallow. “Why?”

“Ten thousand,” I repeated.

Slower than when she’d worked through the numbers opening the safe, she carefully removed one stack and held it out to me.

I didn’t take it. “Would you like your own cell phone?”

She shook her head.

“What if I asked you to carry one?”

She dipped her head.

Choosing my battles for now, I shut the safe and spun the dial. “Your money’s safe. I’m buying you clothes. We’re stopping at the bank so you know how to make a deposit into your account.”

“I need this money,” she rasped in a panic.

“You’ll have it. I’m not taking it from you, and neither is anyone else. We’re simply depositing it into your account.”

She lowered her arm. “I need the cash.”

Not bothering to ask why, I played my hand. “And you’ll have it. As soon as we get you an ID in your legal name, you can make as many withdrawals as you like.”

She played right into my backhanded move. “How long will that take?”

“Once we get copies of your social security number and birth certificate, we’ll work on getting you a photo ID. I know your social from when I opened your bank account. We’ll start there. Entire process will be a couple weeks.” Legally, it would. November could have copies in an hour, but I didn’t tell her that.

She blanched. “I can’t wait that long.”

“You know the combination.” I tipped my chin at the safe. “You saw my cash reserves. Help yourself to whatever you need.” I’d welcome the opportunity to track her if she did, but she wouldn’t touch anything in that safe except her damn backpack.

“I’m not taking your money.”

She may as well. She was my beneficiary—a fact I wasn’t going to divulge yet. “Taking implies without consent. I’m consenting. End of discussion.” I turned toward my clothes. “I’m getting dressed. Grab your shoes from the guest room and meet me in the kitchen.” She didn’t need to see me holstering an M45.

“I need my backpack. I can’t just openly carry ten thousand dollars.”

“Your backpack will be secure in the safe today, and you can slip the bundled cash into the waistband of your leggings, or if you prefer, I can carry it for you until we get to the bank.”

Without comment, she carefully placed the money on top of the safe, then walked out.

Quickly getting dressed, I pocketed the cash and holstered my piece, then opened the safe again and grabbed an extra magazine. As I was picking up my cell, it rang.

Glancing at the screen, I answered. “November.”

“I’ve been calling you.”

“I saw. You didn’t leave a message.”

“Your cell’s unencrypted, and someone’s been attempting to hack it. Geo location and texts. I’m blocking it, but I wasn’t going to risk leaving a message. I traced the hack to a subpar private detective agency based out of New York. Do you want me to put a permanent stop to this? Reverse hack into their client base?”

Fucking finally. “No, let it happen, and quick favor. After I hang up, I need to send you a text to an unencrypted cell that you let get hacked. Reply in the affirmative, but don’t actually take any action. Leave the cell on a couple hours, then destroy it.”

“Copy.” He rattled off a number.

I memorized it. “Got it.”

“There’re also two Jeeps pulling into your garage right now. One of them has a plate registered to you, the other is a dealer plate. The driver in the vehicle registered to you accessed your garage using your code.”

I glanced at my watch. They were early. “Thanks.”

“Do you want the new vehicle added to my encrypted GPS tracking system?”

I briefly thought about what her reaction would be to the Jeep. She wouldn't be happy, that I knew, but beyond that, I couldn't pin down whether she would ignore it completely, prefer to drive in it, or use it a few times out of guilt. I also took note of how November made sure to mention AES's system was encrypted, which was code for it was staying that way. "If I said no, would you listen?" I knew November wouldn't, but I was testing myself.

November answered honestly. "No."

"Then why ask?" I knew why.

"Pretense."

"And perception." They were powerful tools.

"Yes. Any particular reason you're asking what you already know?"

"Testing myself." Hoping my blind spot only applied to her.

"The woman," he stated knowingly.

"She's throwing me off my game," I admitted.

In a rare exchange of personal context, November revealed more about himself than he ever had. "The right one will do that to you."

"Apparently."

"Send your text. Letting the hack happen now." November ended the call.

I quickly shot him a text to the burner number he'd given me.

Me: I have her now. She's safe, and she's going to stay with me, but add extra security here at my condo. I'll let you know if we need anything else.

As asked, November replied.

November: Good copy. Consider it done.

I pocketed my cell and was grabbing a new, encrypted burner for myself when something she'd said earlier hit me.

Explosive. She'd specifically used that word, and now I knew what'd been nagging at me.

I dialed a number from my burner.

November answered immediately. "Delta."

"You know my burner numbers?"

"I know everyone's burner numbers. It's my job. FYI, the hack on your cell took. They're now attempting to get into your building's security feeds, which I'm blocking."

"Copy and thanks. Can you put me through to Kilo?"

"He's with Alpha."

"It's important."

"I'm not questioning the importance. I'm saying he's with Alpha. You'll have better luck reaching him if I put you through to Alpha. Kilo rarely answers his phone and frequently disables the voice mail."

"I know, but he usually answers for me."

"The call won't come through as your number. It'll show as the command center."

"Text him first and tell him you're putting me through."

"Hold." The line went quiet a beat, then started ringing.

Seven rings later, Kilo answered. "Did you figure out the correct question to ask?"

I didn't take it as an insult, Kilo knew how I operated, but I was pissed. "Yes. Were the pyrotechnics actually faulty?"

"No."

"Tampered with?"

"Intentionally set to blow in a specific direction with aim toward maximum impact."

"Both times you consulted?"

"Yes."

"What was the intended blast zone?"

“Away from the stage.”

Fucking Christ. “Did you tell anyone?”

“The tour manager, right before I said to lose my number.”

Kilo was more than careful, but I asked anyway. “Did anyone else hear you?”

“I made sure they didn’t.”

“Because?”

“The tour manager was the only one without motive.”

“You didn’t mention any of this when we spoke yesterday.”

“You didn’t mention you were kicking it with Canada’s daughter.”

Fuck. “Alpha told you?”

“No. You just did.”

Goddamn it. “How did you put it together?”

“At the time, I didn’t. I wrote off that fucking drummer as insane. Figured he was looking for fame any way he could get it. The way the charges were set, if something had gone down during a concert instead of rehearsal, it could’ve been mistaken as an accident to an inexperienced investigator or someone without prior military experience. But after you called, I looked up the drummer. Now I know why he was giving me the death stare on those consults. If you’d been more forthcoming yesterday, you could’ve saved us both this call.”

I ignored his spot-on accusation. “Did you use AES servers for your search?”

“No.”

“Copy. Tango Yankee.”

“Don’t thank me. Watch your six.” Kilo hung up.

FORTY-FIVE

Delta

Running the new intel I had through every probable scenario, more pissed by the second, I strode into the kitchen. But then I paused.

Wearing my shirt, standing on tiptoe, holding onto the counter, my *mátia levántas* was trying to reach the upper cabinets where I kept the coffee pods, but she was too damn short.

Taking the hit to my chest, I walked up behind her and wrapped an arm around her waist. “Careful, little one.” Reaching past her, I grabbed the box and placed it on the counter, making a mental note to call Christensen about the height of the upper cabinets in her penthouse. “How do you take your coffee?” Still holding on to her, I grabbed a mug from another upper cabinet, placed it under the coffee maker and inserted the pod before pressing start.

“I saw the coffee maker.” Her voice dipped. “I was going to make it for you.”

I turned her around and grasped her chin in a preemptive strike before she tried to hide from me or this conversation. “Do you drink coffee?”

“No.”

I took a second hit to the chest. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t do anything.” She blushed with embarrassment. “You had to make your own coffee.”

“It’s the sentiment that counts, but I don’t expect you to make me coffee. You don’t serve me, *mátia levántas*.” I touched my lips to her forehead to soften the reprimand. “What do you drink in the morning? Tea? Juice?”

“Just water.”

I studied her a moment. “What do you prefer to drink?”

Her gaze drifted. “Water is fine.”

I threaded my fingers into her hair and grasped her nape. “Because water is all you ever had or because you actually prefer it?”

She shrugged her good shoulder. “I’ve had soda.”

Soda. Like a child. Also like her father. “Coke?” Quentin was the only SEAL I knew who drank soda like it was water. Hating coffee, tea, and energy drinks, he swore by Coke and the superiority of it over all other forms of caffeine.

“I’ve had that,” she answered noncommittally.

“Do you prefer it?”

She gave me more vague bullshit. “It’s nice sometimes.”

“On a hot day?” I asked knowingly.

Her gaze immediately cut back to mine. “My father used to say—”

“Nothing beats a Coke on a hot day, and that’s a fact.”

“How did you...?” Her eyes welled. “That’s exactly what he used to say.”

“I remember.” I made a mental note to buy her a fucking case of the soda.

“You know a lot about my father.”

“I wish I knew more.” If it’d ease her loss, I’d tell her everything I remembered about him.

She nodded but didn’t comment.

I read into her silence. “He was a good man, little one.”

She looked away. “I can make breakfast. You cooked last night.”

I moved my palm to her throat, gripped her jaw, and tilted her face up toward mine. “We’ll discuss our dynamics later and how this isn’t a quid pro quo between us. Right now, I’m addressing your reaction to what I said about your father. I’m always willing to talk about Quentin with you. Grief doesn’t have rules or a timeline. Understand whatever you’re feeling is valid.”

A tear slid past her defenses. “He left me.”

There it was. The anger side of grief I knew she’d been holding in. “It wasn’t intentional. He loved you beyond measure.”

“It may not have been intentional, but he made choices.”

“Yes, he did.” So had I. Ones I needed to own up to with her. “I did the same, little one.”

“That’s different.”

I left her tear on her cheek as a reminder to myself. “Is it?”

“Yes,” she stated definitively as she swiped at her own face.

“I don’t see it that way.” Needing to run downstairs, wanting more time to address this subject matter, I didn’t shy away from it, but I didn’t come out and ask for forgiveness either. I said what I needed to in that moment. “Especially not now.”

“The past is the past.” Pulling out of my grip, she turned and reached for the coffee as she murmured the reality we were both facing. “You can never go back.” She held out the mug for me with both hands like a sacrificial offering.

The pose, the mood shift, the sorrow in her eyes, the tone of her voice, what she’d said, I read into all of it and analyzed the fuck out of it. This wasn’t about her father or her childhood.

This was about sex.

And I was addressing it right now.

“Put the coffee down, Violet,” I commanded.

She didn’t flinch, but she may as well have. Radiating tension at my tone shift, she pivoted and set the mug on the counter, but she didn’t turn back around.

“Face me,” I ordered.

Her shoulders rose with an inhale. Then she turned.

“Speak,” I demanded. “Every thought you’re thinking about this morning and last night between you and I.”

“You said there was no you and I.”

Gamó. This woman held on to words. “No, you accused me of saying there was no you and I. I stated that there was an ‘us.’ There always has been, but that dynamic shifted dramatically the moment I took you to my bed. Now you’re hiding emotions surrounding that shift behind the grief of losing your father, and I’m separating them. If you have something you need to say, if there’s something we need to discuss about this morning, then speak to me.” No fucking way was I letting this go unchecked. She could hide her damn secrets about why the hell she was in Miami all she wanted. But I wasn’t letting her off on this.

“I don’t have anything to say.”

Bullshit. “You have sixteen years’ worth to unpack, and I’m concerned about every damn one of them, especially where the fuck you were between age eighteen and nine months ago. But right now, I’m most concerned about this morning.” And why the fuck she’d said you could never go back, in the tone she’d said it, after pulling away from me and after her comment about the past. Because that I could draw the connection to. It was a straight fucking line between me sinking inside her sweet cunt and her cutting me off.

“I don’t want to go shopping,” she blurted, giving me the first taste of true frustration she’d allowed herself to show.

“Heard and understood.” We were still fucking going. “Next.”

“I can’t be the tide.” Her voice pitched. “*I can’t be the tide.*” Then her face and her voice fell to the goddamn floor. “But you make me want to be.”

The tide.

The fucking tide.

She wanted to come back, but it didn’t matter. Nothing I did today, nothing I said would make a goddamn difference to change her mind. She was leaving.

“Understood.” I turned toward the door. “I’m going downstairs.” Unlike her, I’d come back. But I selfishly didn’t fucking give her that reassurance.

I walked the hell out.

FORTY-SIX

Hanna

The front door shut, but not with a slam or even a loud bang.

It simply closed, and he was gone.

I sank to the floor in his perfectly pressed lilac shirt and lost it.

I didn't know how to do this. I didn't know how to protect myself from him. I was being horrible, I knew I was, but the moment he'd come up behind me in the kitchen, I had felt the difference. In me, in him, in us.

He was right.

There was an us.

We *were* us.

I hadn't flinched from him coming up behind me.

I hadn't even thought to brace myself for the impact of abuse.

I'd smelled his cologne and felt his body heat, and my body shivered as the soreness between my legs grew into a pulsing, aching need. But more than all of that, I'd wanted to turn and wrap my arms around him.

I'd wanted his arms around me.

I wanted to feel as if I belonged.

I wanted his hug.

Because his embrace, when both of his arms were wrapped around me, it felt like home.

I didn't have a home.

I didn't even remember what it felt like to have a home.

The sentiment was so foreign that I hadn't even recognized what I was feeling yesterday when he'd wrapped me in his arms.

But now I did, and I wanted it back.

I wanted him.

I wanted him to brush my hair. *Oh my God, he'd brushed my hair.* I wanted the careful way he'd bathed and dressed me. I wanted his sunscreen-scented hands caressing my face as much as I wanted his thick fingers inside me, turning me into a wildfire.

I wanted everything he had so selflessly given to me, and I wanted the rough, dominant man he was in the bedroom. I wanted all of it, but I didn't understand it.

I didn't even know what quid pro quo meant.

But I could guess, and nothing about this, about us, was even, and I couldn't change that. I'd never be able to change that. I didn't have what he had. I couldn't give him what another woman could. One who was educated and experienced and smart and had a job. I couldn't offer him anything because I had nothing.

Nothing except my plan.

My one plan.

I couldn't even promise I would have a future beyond that.

No past, no future, no going back, I was nothing, and he was everything.

But now he was gone, and it didn't matter. Except it did, because I thought I was the one who would be leaving, but he had walked away, and it hurt.

It really, really hurt.

And I didn't know what to do.

He hadn't said he was leaving. He'd said he was going downstairs. I knew the difference. I knew he said what he meant, but that wasn't the point.

There was a ticking time bomb on this, on us, and his twenty-four-hour clock was already well underway as each second of his absence struck my heart and marked a louder toll in my head.

Sitting on his spotless kitchen floor, staring at my perfectly styled hair in the shiny accidental mirror of his oven door, drowning in an expensive cloud of lavender haze that hid my taped shoulder, I stared.

"Get up," I whispered.

Leave.

One goal.

Protect your heart.

Stick to the plan.

Get your backpack.

Keep moving.

Every part of my body suddenly hurting, I pushed to my feet, and that was when I noticed it.

The shirt he'd put me in perfectly matched my painted toenails.

Standing there, I stared.

Wanting to cry, I stared.

Wishing I could go after him, I stared.

I was still staring when the front door opened with a soft click.

Startled, I looked up.

Striding in without making a sound, he didn't enter the penthouse like a hurricane.

He didn't radiate anger.

He wasn't a storm waiting to unleash hell.

He was a six-and-half-foot, imposing Navy SEAL in a dress shirt and suit who was quickly and efficiently sifting through mail.

He was everything I had remembered, but now, since this morning, he was more. So much more that I noticed immediately that he wasn't looking at me. He hadn't even glanced my way when he'd walked in.

“Do you know how to drive, little one?”

Drive? Little one?

He still didn't look at me, and that's when I saw it.

This was his storm.

This was his anger.

Demetrius “Delta” Ridge Demos always stared at me. He had since he'd first found me in my garden. But he'd never stared at me how everyone else did. He didn't look at me like I was a freak. He didn't stare as if I were a spectacle. He didn't look, then quickly glance away as if pretending not to see who and what I was.

He stared at me like I was a real person, and that's why there was an us.

But he wasn't looking at me now as he walked past me and opened the fridge. “Simple question, little one. Do you know how to properly operate a vehicle?”

This was Demetrius angry.

And it was more punishing than if he had never walked back through that front door, because at least then I wouldn't have this experience that would turn into a memory I would relive over and over.

I wanted to apologize. I wanted to beg him for forgiveness. I wanted to grab his arm and make him look at me, but I did none of it. This was my doing, and now I knew how every cryptic declaration of my temporariness in this life he was trying to give me must feel like to him.

I deserved this.

I'd created it.

Now I had to live with it or leave.

But I couldn't bring myself to give up this day with him no matter what might come, so I forced myself to push everything down and focus on his question. "I've driven before." When *he* was too intoxicated to drive, I'd had to. I didn't know if it was properly or not.

"Never had a lesson?"

I didn't tell him I'd had a lesson in panic when *she* hadn't woken up for a full day and her breathing had become shallow. Or how my fourteen-year-old self had dragged her to the car and did my best to get to the parking lot of the hospital's emergency room. How I'd pulled her back out of the car, then left her there unconscious on the pavement before quickly driving off.

I didn't think any of that was what he meant by a lesson.

"I don't drive on any fast roads." I didn't know what else to say or what else there was to know. "Red means stop. Green means go." There was a gas pedal and a brake and a gear shift. "The speed limit signs tell you how fast you can drive. I use the turn signals." Did that count enough for him to look at me?

"Message received."

Apparently, it didn't. I looked down at his now-cold cup of coffee. "I don't think it was."

"Explain," he demanded as he pulled things out of the refrigerator.

"You're not looking at me." I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "You're angry with me."

Closing the fridge, he leaned a hip against the counter and crossed his arms in an exact replica of the same position he'd taken yesterday.

Except yesterday we hadn't... he hadn't... been inside me.

Not saying anything, waiting for me to speak, he remained so perfectly still I didn't know if he practiced it or had been

trained to do it. As if the measure of stillness was directly linked to intimidation, he held his position like an imposing statue of dominance.

He was also staring at me.

I could feel it all the way to my soul.

But it took me three heartbeats before I lifted my head all the way up and met his gaze, because I knew what I would see.

Or I told myself I knew what I would see and that I was prepared for it.

Except I wasn't.

I would never get used to having this warrior's attention focused solely on me.

Intense grass-green eyes bore into me, and a quiet warrior stole my heart.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"For?"

"Not being enough."

"For who?"

"You," I barely breathed.

"Am I enough for you?"

My heart thundering, regret for every terrible way I had handled this morning churning in my stomach, I didn't lie. "You're too much." I didn't say it right. "I mean, you're more. Much more."

"Do I know what it's like to live with ocular albinism?"

"I... I don't know."

"I do not," he stated without any emotion. "Do you know what it's like to be a SEAL?"

I shook my head. "No. Not at all." I could never do what he had done.

“You are who you are. I am who I am. Neither of us walks in the other’s shoes.” A storm flared in his eyes. “Do not ever tell me again that you’re not enough for me.”

Oh God. “I’m sorr—”

“No apologies either,” he warned.

I inhaled, once, twice. Then I dared to speak my heart. “Please, don’t be angry with me.”

“For what? You having free will and choosing to utilize it? For you wanting to be the tide and come back to me? For giving me your trust and your body as I came inside you this morning? I’m not angry at you, little one. I will never be angry at you unless you intentionally hurt yourself, harbor insecurities without speaking to me about them, or refrain from telling me if I’m hurting you.”

I couldn’t stop the emotion falling down my face any more than I could the question on my lips. “Why are you so nice to me?”

“Because”—pushing off the counter, he switched to his dark poetry of Greek—“*eísai i psychí mou.*” Closing the distance between us with his long stride, he cupped my face and touched his lips to my forehead. “*Eísai dikós mou.*” His mouth met mine, and he kissed me once. “*Mou aníkeis.*”

My heart skittering past the point of no return as every part of my body tingled, I grasped his wrist. “I don’t know what any of that means.”

For one breath-stealing moment, he stared down at me. “Be the tide, *mátia levántas.* Come back to me, and I will tell you.” Releasing me and averting his gaze, he removed his suit jacket and draped it over a stool before turning back toward the food on the counter. “Take a seat and rest that knee while I make breakfast.”

Once again, I dared to speak the truth. “I’m not hungry.” Shyness crept in, and I almost didn’t say it. “Not for food.”

“You’re eating. Then we’re doing our errands.” He glanced over his shoulder and met my gaze with a storm in his eyes I

recognized. “Later, we’ll see how sore you are. Sit.” He focused back on the stove.

My entire body stoked by a flame only he could ignite, I foolishly ignored the huge black gun in a holster at the small of his back and did exactly as he told me to.

FORTY-SEVEN

Delta

I wanted to fuck her on the kitchen island.

I wanted to fuck her, period.

Instead, I fed her.

Showing enormous restraint, I didn't pull her onto my lap and spoon-feed her.

I silently watched as she pushed scrambled eggs around with her fork and ate half a piece of toast after inhaling all of her strawberries and melon.

Not touching my fruit, I ate my eggs, then swapped our plates without comment.

Her fork poised midair, she glanced at me.

Not saying a fucking word, I ate her eggs.

“You don't like fruit?”

“Not if it means the difference between you eating and not eating.” Food was fuel.

“Thank you,” she quietly rasped before spearing a strawberry.

“You're welcome.” I started to make a mental note to tell the cleaning service to stock the fridge with more fruit, then stopped myself. Same as I had to stop myself from being fucking pissed off when I'd gone down to the garage to sign for the Jeep. I'd meant what I'd said to her. She had free will.

So did I.

I was sticking to my objective. Handle that fuck Saunders, get her set up, and figure out why she was intent on leaving.

But for now, I was going to take every minute I had with her because I knew all too well tomorrow wasn't a goddamn guarantee.

She ate her last piece of fruit and set her fork down.

I glanced at my watch and grabbed my plate. "Did you get enough to eat?"

"Yes, thank you."

Grabbing her plate but leaving her glass of water, I stood. "Wait." After tossing everything in the dishwasher, I grabbed a couple Advil from the cabinet and held them out for her.

"I don't need any medicine, thank you."

"You'll be on your feet for an hour."

Pulling in her bottom lip, she ducked her head.

I was about to tell her to look at me and download her thoughts when she glanced back up.

"I'm on my feet most of the day, every day. An hour will be fine. But I would prefer to not go shopping."

"The Advil isn't only for your knee and ankle, and I understand. I've heard your preference each time you've stated it. I've also heard every time you've said you're not staying. I'm still buying you some clothes and shoes that fit. To expedite the process, we're meeting someone I served with and his wife." I stretched the truth. "The wife has shopped for other female AES clients before." It was only one time that I knew about, and technically the woman wasn't an AES client.

Alarm spread across her features, and she was shaking her head before her mouth opened to protest. "We're meeting people?" Standing up, she stepped away from the island and me. "I-I can't do that."

"We are, and you can." I set the Advil next to her glass. "Neil Christensen knew your father. You can trust him. If I thought otherwise, I wouldn't be taking this route."

Her breathing rapid, her body stilled. “What route?”

I gave her half the truth. “Yesterday, I asked Christensen’s wife to get you clothes and shoes. I gave her your size. She asked for your style preference. I couldn’t answer for you, thus the errand.”

“I already told you what I wear. You’ve seen my clothes.”

Holding her gaze, I didn’t comment.

Her face fell. “I embarrass you. How I look, what I wear.”

“This route is about giving you choices. You know exactly what I think of you and how you look. You do not now nor will you ever embarrass me.”

Looking more distraught by the second, she moved back another step. “I-I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t get embarrassed, Violet.”

She inhaled at her name. “Everyone gets embarrassed.”

“I don’t.”

“That’s... that’s not possible. Other people’s actions could embarrass you.”

I altered my tone. “I own who I am, little one. Other people’s actions are not a reflection of my character.”

“What if I have a panic attack in the middle of the clothing store?”

Now we were getting to the real issue. “Then I will tend to you.”

“What if I cry and everyone looks at us?”

“Then they look.” I took one of the steps between us. “I will still tend to and protect you.”

“What if they think you’re hurting me or causing my panic?”

“Then they think it.” Closing the gap between us, I grasped the side of her neck. “You can’t control what others think, little one. No one’s opinion of you matters except your own.”

“Yours matters.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” I swept my thumb over her bottom lip. “Take the Advil, and let’s get our errands done so we can come home.” I brought my mouth to hers. “Because I don’t kiss in public, and I want my mouth all over you, tasting every single inch.” I pulled back. “Questions?”

“No,” she rasped in a whisper.

“Good.” I tipped my chin at the anti-inflammatories as I grabbed my jacket and put it on. “Let’s go.” Before she could protest more, I walked to the front door and held it open.

She quickly downed the Advil with a shaking hand, then followed.

As she walked out of the penthouse, she momentarily halted and took in the propped-open door across the hall, the movers, and the boxes lined up all the way to the elevator. Then she dropped her head.

Settling my hand between her shoulder blades, feeling the tension in her back, I led her past the organized chaos and pressed the call button.

She didn’t speak until we were on the elevator and the doors were closed.

“Demetrius,” she whispered in distress.

“Violet,” I countered, knowing what was coming.

“What did you do?”

Exactly what I said I would. “You’re going to need to be more specific, little one.”

She exhaled slowly. “Did you buy the penthouse across the hall?”

I didn’t answer. I waited.

She caught on. Looking up at me, she repeated the question. “Did you buy that other penthouse?”

“Yes.” The elevator came to a stop, the doors opened, and I ushered her out to the garage level. “Same as I purchased you a vehicle.” Keeping my gaze on hers, I nodded toward the first parking spot.

She glanced over, and her lips parted with a sharp inhale. “Demetri—”

“We’re no longer in private,” I reminded her.

“Delta,” she corrected before looking up at me again. “You can’t do this.”

Taking issue with her verb choice, I raised an eyebrow. “I what?”

“You shouldn’t have done this,” she rephrased before glancing at the Jeep again. “I-I can’t...” She crossed her arms. “I don’t...” She shook her head. “The top is down.”

That was the point. So she didn’t feel closed in. “If you’d prefer it up or a different vehicle, let me know.”

“It’s not the Jeep.”

I knew exactly what it was. “Good. Then you’re driving.” Pulling out the key fob from my pocket, I handed it to her.

Reluctantly taking it, she kept looking at the Jeep and the open back where I’d had the salesman remove the top. “I don’t even have a driver’s license.”

She had several in the backpack that was purposely locked in the safe upstairs. “We’ll get you one.”

She rattled off another excuse. “I’ve never driven in traffic like Miami before.”

“I’ll instruct you if you need it. Come.” Applying enough pressure with my hand on her back so she knew my intent, but not enough to hurt her, I ushered her toward the vehicle.

Two feet away, she stopped and let loose. “You can’t just give me a readymade life, Demetrius.”

This time, I gave her a pass on both my name and choice of verb. “I can and will. It’s exactly what I should’ve done sixteen years ago, and again five years ago, but then we

wouldn't be here, and this morning wouldn't have happened. I'm selfish enough to not apologize for a single second of being inside you. I have no regrets on that front. I want you in my bed and in my life. That's never going to change. But sex this morning and what's going on right now are two entirely different subject matters. I am giving you the penthouse and a vehicle and access to your bank account. I am going to shelter and protect you. If you want to refer to that as readymade, so be it. But I'm also going to give you a key to my place, and that's where your analogy falls apart. This isn't an off-the-rack, preplanned life. This is us. What you choose to do now is up to you."

She didn't say a damn word for ten seconds.

Then her eyes welled, and she whispered, "I can't drive right now."

"Understood." I gave her a choice to both reiterate what I'd said, and because she needed the illusion of having one right now. "Which vehicle do you want to take?" I indicated the first three parking spots.

She looked from the Jeep to the company SUV to my matte black Bentley Continental. "You own three cars?"

"You own a Jeep. I have a personal vehicle, and AES provides me with the Range Rover."

"Whichever one you prefer to drive is fine." She held the Jeep's key fob out to me.

Taking it, I led her to the passenger side of the Bentley and opened the door.

She stared for a beat, then got in.

I secured her seat belt, hoping her small hand would land on my arm because I knew she was upset and overwhelmed, and I wanted her reaching for me. I wanted to be her shelter and protection as much as I wanted to be her confidant and anchor, but as I'd mentally predicted, she didn't reach out. She didn't even watch my movements.

Closing her door, I scanned the garage as I rounded the rear of the vehicle. Wondering what the fuck was taking

Saunders so long and how the hell I could get through to her without dominating the fuck out of her in bed, I got behind the wheel.

Seconds later, I'd backed out of the parking space and was driving toward the exit.

Staring at the Jeep as we passed, she quietly murmured to herself, "No closed-in spaces."

I was right. This woman held on to words.

But fuck me, she was holding on to the wrong goddamn ones.

FORTY-EIGHT

Hanna

I was so overwhelmed, I needed a new word for overwhelmed.

The penthouse, the Jeep, going to buy clothes, a bank account—it was all too much.

But more than all of that was what he had said.

This isn't an off-the-rack, preplanned life.

This is us.

What you choose to do now is up to you.

My heart crushing, my soul weeping, I wanted to fall apart.

He didn't understand. I didn't get to choose. I didn't have that luxury. But, oh God, I wanted it. I wanted it so much that every minute more I spent with him, the idea of being the tide was growing.

“We're here.” Demetrius's deep voice interrupted my spiral as he pulled into a parking space. “Do you need to talk before we go in?”

I glanced at the name of the store that I had heard of but never stepped foot in, and I didn't know if life was playing a cruel joke or giving me a sign.

I glanced at an emerald-eyed SEAL who had all but handed me his heart, warrior-style, with his speech in the garage.

I want you in my bed and in my life. That's never going to change.

What did I say to that?

Please, yes. I want you too. I want you so much it hurts. Turn the car around. Take me home. Make me stay. *Make me stay.* “No, thank you.”

Nodding once, he got out of the car.

A moment later, my door was open and his hand was out.

I selfishly took it.

He helped me out of the car. Then he slid his hand under my hair and grasped my nape in a dominant show of possession and protection that I'd already become so reliant on, I wasn't sure how I would survive without it once it was gone.

With him at my side, the South Florida heat hit me differently than it ever had, and I shivered.

“You're safe, little one,” he quietly reassured as he led me toward the store.

“Please don't make me try on any of the clothes.” I had never done that, not in any store.

“I'm not going to force you to do anything. If that's your preference, then pick some items, and we'll call it.”

“If this is all this is, then I don't understand why your friend's wife can't do it?”

“I already told you why, little one.” His fingers gently stroked my neck, and he lowered his voice. “They're here.”

My head down, I hadn't noticed the striking couple waiting for us right outside the store until it was too late and I had looked up.

“Oh *my God*,” a beautiful brunette practically squealed.

Standing next to her, a hugely muscular man with ice-colored eyes who was even taller than Demetrius barely

glanced at me before tipping his chin at Demetrius in a movement so slight, I almost missed it.

The woman reached for my upper arms and stared at my eyes. “Are those contacts? Please tell me they are, because I’m going to buy them right now.”

The man said something to her in a foreign language I didn’t recognize.

“Oh, hush,” she answered back. “I’m not insulting you, am I?” Worry crossed her pretty face for a second. “You’re stunning, really. Are you a model?” She looked up at Demetrius. “You didn’t tell me she was a model. Why am I here? You don’t need me.” She laughed and looked back at me. “Unless you just wanted some girl time while we shopped?” She waved a dismissive hand, then linked her arm with mine. “Sorry, I’m rambling. Come on, let’s do this. The men can pretend to talk to each other while they look around every five seconds for doomsday to hit.” She started to lead me into the expensive department store Demetrius had driven us to in his expensive car.

“Ariella,” the tall man growled in a low voice that was all warning as he held open the door for us.

She laughed. “It’s fine, Viking. We’re good.” She looked at me as she tugged me into the cool air-conditioning that was scented with too many perfumes to distinguish one from another. “We’re good, right? I’m Ariel, by the way. Don’t listen to what my Viking of a husband calls me. No one calls me that except him.”

“Hanna,” Demetrius supplied before I could. “And she’s not trying on anything today.”

Ariel abruptly stopped walking and looked back at Demetrius. Then she laughed. “Oh my God, you *are* exactly like Neil.” She looked back at me. “He talks for you, doesn’t he? Bossy, pushy, the works. Am I right?” She smiled like it was a very good thing.

“I—”

“Hanna can speak for herself,” Demetrius interjected. “She can also choose when she prefers not to.”

Ariel’s smile didn’t waver. “I knew it.”

“*Ariella*,” the huge man chastised.

She glanced at her husband, and her eyes softened. Then she stage-whispered and teased him. “*Bossy*.” She looked back at me. “Let’s shop. *And* gossip,” she added. “It’ll drive them crazy.”

Suddenly beyond overwhelmed, so much so that I wanted to flee, I glanced back at Demetrius in desperation.

Except he didn’t look like the Demetrius who’d taken me rough and left his seed inside me before washing every inch of my body.

He looked like Delta the SEAL who’d unapologetically bought a penthouse and Jeep, and he was already moving toward me.

“Ariel, give us a minute.” His hands wrapped around my shoulders, and he pulled me into his chest.

“Sure, of course. Just bring her upstairs when you’re ready. Viking and I will go ahead.”

Demetrius waited until they were walking away. “You’re safe. Take a breath.”

I wasn’t safe.

Not from him. Not in a department store with security cameras. Not from interacting with people, or the fantasy life he was dangling in front of me, or the thought of driving that Jeep, or being near him, smelling his scent—all of it was too much. “Please, I want to leave.”

He cupped my face and looked down at me. “Inhale.”

I didn’t need to breathe. I needed to leave. We were drawing attention. He drew attention. I’d never been in public with him before, but I should have realized this would happen. He was so tall and muscular, and so handsome that people

were looking at us. Women were looking at him. “I-I can’t do this.” I pulled back.

He caught my nape. “Can’t do what? Be in public?”

Tears welled, and embarrassment added to my panic. “Please don’t do that.” I didn’t want to be a freak. Not to him. I didn’t want to be this way at all, but I was. I’d had twenty-three years to get used to the way I looked, but that didn’t mean I was comfortable with it or okay with always being a spectacle.

Maybe he didn’t get embarrassed, but I did.

This was exactly what I had been afraid of. I’d tried to warn him that this would happen. But he’d been so confident, and he’d said all the right things. Except now it was happening anyway, and I didn’t want him searching my eyes, looking at me like he was reading my every thought and turning it into one of his observations. Not now. Not after this morning.

With a clipped nod, he did it anyway.

Then his hold on me switched from one meant to comfort to one that was suddenly impossibly dominant. His fingers gripped my nape tighter. He moved me to his left side. He angled my body under his arm, and he propelled me toward a service hallway.

With only marginally fewer people around, he stopped by a column, backed me into it and effectively caged me in.

Widening his stance so my feet were between his, bringing his hips to mine, his hands took my face again. But this time, he leaned down like he was going to kiss me.

Except he didn’t kiss me.

He silently, intensely, and dominantly stared at me.

Then he spoke.

Every ounce of Navy SEAL came out with commanding authority while he used his entire body as a protective shield from the outside world. “You are done hiding. You are done being afraid. We’re going to shop for one hour. I’m going to buy you whatever you want. Then I’m going to put you back

in the Bentley, open the windows, and you're going to be fucking free." He grasped me tighter.

"Delta," I whispered.

"You're going to allow yourself to experience what choice feels like with someone who protects and respects you. No closed-in spaces, *matákia mu*." He lowered his voice to dark seduction. "Then I'm going to feed you, fuck you, and hold you." Abruptly pulling back, he let go of my face and took my hand as his voice returned to that of the Navy SEAL. "Let's go."

Stunned breathless, no longer panicking, I let a six-and-a-half-foot Greek god lead me to an elevator.

FORTY-NINE

Delta

Twenty minutes in, and I was done.

I glanced at Christensen, who hadn't taken his eyes off his wife. "How long is this going to take?"

"This was at your request."

"Don't remind me."

"The daughter is overwhelmed."

"No shit."

"She does not like to be in public. You should take her home."

"Again. No shit."

"You are fucking her."

"You're an asshole."

Christensen glanced at me, then looked back at his wife who was holding up the twentieth fucking outfit to my little one. "You think Traylor would not approve."

"Quentin's dead."

"Then why are you acting guilty?"

"I'm not acting any way." I didn't fucking act.

"You referred to her as your niece, you refrained from speaking her true name, and you are using my wife to avoid directly interacting with her on a personal level."

“I’m not avoiding interacting with her, personally or otherwise,” I argued.

“I did not say you were not fucking her.” He tipped his chin toward the women. “That is close, personal interaction. You are avoiding it.”

“Do you take Ariel shopping?”

“No.”

“Then drop the lecture.”

“I pick out and purchase my wife’s clothing.” He threw me a look. “Then I give them to her.”

Bullshit. “You’re telling me everything your woman has on now, you bought without her present?”

“Yes.”

I called him on it. “You personally, not an assistant or some shopper you gave parameters to?”

He didn’t comment.

That’s what I thought. “That’s not personal interaction.”

He ignored my point. “The daughter is wearing your shirt. Follow through.”

“I am, but she needs to have the power of choice given back to her. This is that.”

“This is my wife choosing her clothes.”

“There’s more to it than what you see.” I wasn’t about to give him or anyone else a deep dive into her or my psyche.

“There always is with guilt.”

“Says the man with firsthand experience.”

“I was not referring to myself.” He glanced at a text on his cell, then pulled out two card readers and two sets of keys. “The penthouse will be ready for occupancy in three hours. Locks have been rekeyed, card readers are newly programmed.” He handed the keys and cards to me.

Taking them, I thanked him in Danish before switching back to English. “*Tak*. When you have an opening in your schedule, I need the upper kitchen cabinets in both penthouses lowered by a few inches.”

Looking back at the women, he didn’t comment on my request. “We are being watched.”

“I know. Eight o’clock, brunette, black suit.” I’d picked up the tail on my six after we left my garage.

“She followed you in from the parking lot.”

“She followed us from my penthouse,” I corrected.

“Do you want me to handle it?”

“Got it covered.”

“The worst of all deceptions is self-deception.”

“You’re quoting Plato to a Greek?”

“Yes.” Always unapologetic, Christensen answered in the affirmative before pointing out the obvious. “The brunette is neither a professional nor discreet.”

I didn’t disagree. “No, she isn’t.”

“You know who it is.”

It was a classic Christensen statement—not a question, but I answered anyway. “I do.”

“This is related to the stepbrother and the scars on the daughter’s arms, and you are going to exact revenge.”

“Without question.”

Christensen glanced at me. “Where wisdom is called for, force is of little use.” With a sixth sense, he moved toward the women right before his wife looked up and called for me in a singsong voice.

“Delta, we need you.”

Following Christensen, I pulled out my credit card and handed it to a saleswoman before I grasped the back of my little one’s neck and lowered my voice. “Good?”

“I would like to leave now, please.”

“Understood.” I glanced at Christensen’s wife.

“Oh, no. I know that look.” Ariel dumped some more clothes onto the checkout counter. “We’re not done yet. She needs shoes.”

Gamó. Looking down at my lavender-eyed beauty who was clearly done, I addressed Christensen’s wife. “One pair, Ariel. Ten minutes.”

“I can work with that,” Ariel replied cheerfully as the saleswoman handed my card back to me.

My little one spoke up. “I would prefer running shoes.”

Of course she would. “Done.”

“Okay, wait,” Ariel interrupted. “Can I make just one suggestion? Two pairs of shoes.” She looked at Violet. “I promise, just flats, totally comfortable. I know the perfect brand, and they have them here. You’ll love them. Size seven, right? We can get running shoes and the ballet flats in less than ten minutes, promise.” She smiled.

My little one looked to me.

“Up to you.”

“Okay.” She nodded at Ariel. “Thank you.”

“Yay! And you’re welcome, anytime. I mean it.” She linked her arm with Violet’s. “Let’s head downstairs. Delta can you grab the—”

“Already ahead of you, and I have her.” I took the shopping bag from the saleswoman.

“Right, of course.” Ariel laughed and released Violet’s arm only to take her husband’s.

We followed them downstairs as Ariel chatted, Christensen occasionally answered her in Danish, and Violet remained quiet.

Once Ariel was unleashed in the shoe department, she kept her word.

Minutes later, she was engaged with Violet, and Christensen and I were standing a couple meters back.

Christensen mentioned it before I did. “The brunette left.”

“I saw.” My cell vibrated with an incoming call, and I glanced at the screen. “Keep an eye on them for a moment. I need to take this.”

Christensen nodded as his phone rang.

I answered my cell. “November.”

“I just got a call from a woman demanding to see you. She refused to give her name but said she was on her way in to AES and needed a meet ASAP. I traced the call.”

I beat him to the punch. “Trident Media Group.”

“Yes. Do you want me to let her upstairs if she shows?”

“Yes.” I glanced at my watch. “Put her in the main conference room and let her sweat. If she doesn’t bail after thirty minutes, text me and let her know I’m on my way in.”

“Copy. Need any other intel on her before she shows?”

“No, thanks.” I hung up and made another call.

Conlon answered on the second ring. “I don’t know if I should be flattered or alarmed that you’ve developed a habit of calling me.”

Ignoring his bullshit, I glanced at the women, then at Christensen as he stood three meters back, taking his own call. “I need you at my place in thirty minutes.”

Conlon chuckled. “Now I’m definitely alarmed. And curious. Should I bring wine? Is this a date?”

Asshole. “You’re going to be giving a self-defense lesson.”

“*Right.*” He sighed. “Okay, I’ll bite. What’s the catch, and why aren’t you teaching your violet-eyed prize how to defend herself? And for the record, I think this is a terrible idea considering she appeared injured the last time I saw her, which was only yesterday, in case you forgot.”

“Call her that again and you won’t be speaking for a month.”

“Promises, promises.”

“That was a threat. And you’re going to simulate the self-defense moves with her. Talon’s checked her out, but you need to exercise extreme caution with her left knee, right ankle, right clavicle, coccyx, and lower lumbar.”

“That’s quite a list, and I’m still not hearing what the catch is.”

Fucking Conlon. “She needs the lesson, and I need to run an errand.” Despite hating him in that moment, I knew that with his penchant for fight clubs and not getting the shit kicked out of him, he was the most qualified to give her actionable tactics and techniques she could use.

“Ah, there it is. Glorified babysitting. How old is she?” He chuckled.

“Ask me that question in person,” I warned.

He laughed in earnest. “I think I’ll take a pass on that one.”

“Thirty minutes,” I repeated as I watched my little one cross her arms and tuck her head down.

“Right. You do realize that after the whole runaway capture stunt, I’m close to being her least favorite person.”

Ariel signaled for me. “She’ll be read in before you show. Don’t be late.” Ending the call, I pocketed my cell and strode to the women.

Ariel handed me one box. “We’re done.” Her smile was off. “And it only took nine minutes.”

I glanced at the box, then at my little one. “This is only one pair.”

Ariel answered. “They didn’t have her size in the running shoes. The salesman offered to order them or get her another pair to try, but Hanna declined.” Ariel lowered her voice. “And I don’t blame her.”

I held out the box and my credit card to said salesman and immediately picked up on the problem. The cocky fucking asshole was so busy staring at my woman, he didn't make eye contact with me.

Stepping into his personal space, not letting go of the box or my card, I forced the prick to look up at me. "Do you know what I have a problem with?" I glanced pointedly at his name tag. "*Mark.*"

The fucking asshole wasn't looking smug anymore. "Ah, no, sir."

"Disrespect."

Christensen appeared on my right.

"Y-yes, sir." Looking like he was about to shit himself, the asshole glanced between us. "I wasn't, I didn't mean—"

"Ring up the purchase," I ordered.

The prick pivoted in double time, and I reached for my little one. Once my hand was securely around her nape, I brought her in close.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, head down.

"You did nothing wrong, *matákia mu.*"

The asshole reappeared with the shoes in a shopping bag, my credit card and an insincere apology. "Here you go, sir, and I'm sorry." Digging his own grave, unable to control himself, the fucking prick glanced at my woman, then Ariel. Except he didn't look at their faces, he fucking checked out their breasts. "I'm sure you get it. I—"

"Christensen," I clipped.

Already reading me, Christensen took Violet as I handed her to him and ushered both women toward the exit.

I leveled the asshole with one look. "Get your manager."

The cocky fuck almost smiled. "I really don't think that's necessary."

"You really don't want me to repeat myself."

Without further comment, he hustled in back.

A moment later, an older gentleman approached me, sans the asshole salesman. “Mr. Demos, I’m Edward Santos, the manager. How can I help you?”

That fuck Mark had remembered my name from the credit card. Good. “I’m going to help you, Santos. Pull up the security footage from the past ten minutes and watch your employee, Mark. His behavior toward the two women I was with was unacceptable.” I pulled out one of AES’s generic business cards and handed it to him. “I trust you’ll handle the situation so I don’t have to.”

Santos glanced at the card, and his eyes went wide. “Yes, of course, Mr. Demos.”

“Delta,” I corrected.

“Consider it taken care of, Delta.”

Sparing him a clipped nod, I walked out to find my woman between Christensen and Ariel.

Ariel had her arm around Violet’s shoulders. “I hope you took care of that little shit, Delta.”

Christensen rapidly spoke in Danish to her.

I only caught the gist of it as I took Violet under my arm.

Ariel rolled her eyes at Christensen. “Well, I would’ve told you if you hadn’t had your phone glued to your ear. Besides, I told that little shit my eyes were on my face, not my tits.”

“*Ariella*,” Christensen growled.

“What? I said it politely. Hanna, back me up. Did I tell him off politely or not?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Besides, I can take care of Hanna and myself in a shoe department at Neiman’s.”

“Next time, don’t,” Christensen warned before glancing at me.

“It’s handled,” I assured.

Tipping his chin, he scanned the parking lot. “Clear.”

“Copy.” I glanced at Ariel. “Thanks for the assist.”

She smiled. “Of course, anytime. And I already told Hanna to call me if she ever wants to hang out or go shopping.”

“Thank you,” my little one murmured uncomfortably as I turned us toward the parking lot.

She was silent as I walked us to the car and stowed the bags in the trunk, but by the time I got her into the passenger seat and buckled her seat belt, her eyes had welled, and she was dumping insecurities.

“I’m sorry. That was my fault. It’s always my fault. I can’t go out without contacts. I can’t be in public. I look like a—”

“If you finish that sentence, we’re going to have a problem. To be perfectly clear, we don’t have a problem right now. You did nothing wrong. The salesman harassed both you and Ariel. That was not your fault. It was his, and mine for not being there. The latter won’t happen again.” I cupped her cheek. “You have clothes and shoes. You don’t need to hide or wear contacts. You deserve to be anywhere in public that you choose to be, and I’m right here.” Fuck, I wanted to kiss her, but I wouldn’t disrespect her by drawing attention to us like that. “I’m right here, little one,” I repeated so she would hear me.

Miserable, she met my gaze. “But you won’t always be with me.”

“I can be.” She only had to make the choice.

A tear slid down her face. “I’m ruining our day.”

“You ruin nothing.” Ignoring the double hit to my chest of her tears and lack of response to my blatant offer, I swept my thumb across her cheek. “And I owe you a ride with the windows down.”

She grasped my wrist with both hands. “I’m still sorry.”

“You still have nothing to apologize for.”

“Promise?” she whispered.

“Promise,” I assured, rising to my full height and stroking her cheek once more before I reached for her door.

Right as I closed it, she murmured a single sentence.

“Please remember that.”

FIFTY

Hanna

After driving me to the bank with the windows down as he had promised, Demetrius had shown me how to fill out a deposit slip and take it to a teller.

Now we were walking back to his expensive car, but I didn't feel free or like I had nothing to apologize for.

Despite his hand never leaving the back of my neck in the bank, I'd felt paranoid and frightened enough to keep my head down the whole time, but not so much that I didn't see the teller smiling flirtatiously at Demetrius.

I was still thinking about the woman as he opened my car door and issued an order. "Let it go, little one."

Internally shivering like I did every time he called me that, I got in the car.

He reached in and buckled my seat belt, but then he paused and met my eyes. "You have nothing to be jealous of."

Just as he had warned me, he didn't kiss me or touch me affectionately in public, but in that moment, I almost wished he would. I wanted his hand on my cheek like he had done in the parking lot in front of the store.

Embarrassed, feeling so far out of my element with him, I spoke foolishly. "I didn't say I was jealous." But now I understood why he had behaved how he had with that awful salesman.

"Your body tensed when the bank teller looked at me, your hand fisted when she spoke to me, and you remained silent

throughout the entire transaction. I only have eyes for you, *matákia mu*. Nothing will change that.” He shut my door and strode around the front of the vehicle.

Once he slid behind the wheel and started the engine, his cell phone began to ring. It rang four times, stopped, then rang again.

It happened two more times before nerves got to me. “You’re not going to answer your phone?”

“I’m with you. Whoever’s calling isn’t important.”

I got it then. The point and apology he was making, dominantly and unreservedly.

A Navy SEAL turned private security contractor was telling me I had his attention—that I was his priority—and not a bank teller, a salesman, his work, or anyone else was going to take that away from me again.

“Thank you,” I quietly replied.

Without a word, he took my hand, laced his fingers through mine and drove us back to his penthouse.

For fifteen minutes, I allowed myself to just be.

I pushed my plan and the ticking clock to the back of my mind, closed my eyes and gripped his warm, strong hand.

But like all good things, it didn’t last.

As he pulled into his parking garage and put the windows up, his deep voice broke the bubble I was hiding in.

“After I get you upstairs, Victor is stopping by to give you a lesson in self-defense while I make a quick trip to the office.”

My heart fell as anxiety rose. “Do you have to go in?” I didn’t want him to leave me, and I really didn’t want self-defense lessons. Not from that man Victor.

“Yes. I’ll be less than an hour. Wait there.” He got out of his fancy car and retrieved the bags in the trunk before opening my door and holding out his hand.

I took it. Of course, I did. Because I would take anything I could from this man. But after he led me to the elevator and the doors closed, I had to try to get out of the lesson.

“I don’t think I should have any self-defense lessons right now.”

“Pain level?” he asked as he looked down at me.

In that moment, I really wanted to lie to him, but I couldn’t bring myself to. “I just want to wait.”

“Pain level,” he repeated.

“Since the Advil?”

“Yes.”

“Zero.”

“Before the Advil?”

“One.” Except between my legs.

His eyes narrowed.

“Two,” I amended as heat flamed my cheeks.

Of course he asked. “Two for your ankle, knee, tailbone, back or collarbone?”

“Not those places,” I admitted shyly.

“Understood.”

The elevator doors opened to a now-empty hallway.

He didn’t mention the absence of movers and boxes, and neither did I as he unlocked the door to his penthouse and pushed it open for me to enter first.

I crossed the threshold, his scent struck me, and all at once, a feeling of relief and yearning overtook me.

Stopping short, fighting a new level of sadness, I looked out at the view.

A view I may never see again after tomorrow.

After closing the door and setting the bags down, he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

Then, as if he knew me better than I knew myself, as if he knew I needed him in that moment, he brushed his lips against my temple and quietly gave me a dominant command. “Breathe, *matákia mu.*”

I didn’t just breathe.

I breathed him in.

The world fell away, and for one impossible moment, I was home.

He was my home.

And I foolishly opened my mouth. “Please make me stay.”

His deep voice turned rough as his arms tightened around me. “Choose me, little one, and I will.”

“*Demetrius,*” I barely whispered.

His cell phone rang, and he inhaled.

Then his lips touched my temple again, and he released me. “I have to take this, but we’re finishing this conversation after I get back and Victor leaves.”

With one more brush of his lips, he walked down the hallway toward his office as he answered his call.

FIFTY-ONE

Hanna

A moment later, the front door opened, and Victor waltzed into the penthouse like he owned it. “Fancy meeting you here, love.” He gave me a model-worthy smile.

I said nothing.

“Right.” Stopping a few feet in front of me, he dropped the smile as his hands slid into his pockets. “Still excellent at the silent routine, I see.” He tilted and dipped his head as if to study me. “Do you know why I’m here?”

His attention made my skin crawl. “No.” Yes. But I was ignoring it.

“Delta didn’t tell you?”

I gave him more of my *silent routine*.

“Right,” he drew the word out slowly. Then, with his eyes on me, he turned his head slightly to yell over his shoulder. “Delta!”

A green-eyed SEAL appeared from the hallway.

As if he could see behind his back and knew Delta was there without looking, Victor threw an accusation at him. “You said she knew why I was coming.”

“She does.” The deep bass of his voice was quiet but penetrating as the two words carried across the room.

Victor lifted an eyebrow at me. “You understand that I’m here to teach you self-defense?”

I understood. But that didn't mean I wanted him touching me. The thought alone was making my nerves burn and my skin feel like fire. The urge to run was so strong it was making my heart race faster than the spinning in my head. None of which I wanted to say.

When I didn't reply, Victor asked, "Do you speak French?"

I shook my head.

Pivoting, Victor faced Delta. Then he switched to what I assumed was French. "*Elle a peur.*"

With no hesitation, Delta replied in what I also assumed was French. "*Je sais. Mais elle doit apprendre l'auto-défense.*"

Victor spoke rapidly. "*Je ne la forcerai pas contre sa volonté.*"

"*Je ne t'ai pas demandé de la forcer,*" Delta replied equally as fast before switching back to English. "Get it done." He disappeared from the doorway.

"*Laissez-la exprimer ses émotions et appuyez-la dans ses décisions,*" Victor yelled after him before turning back to me and pasting on a smile. "Right. Okay, pet, here's the deal."

"He speaks French?" I asked, interrupting him.

His smile turned wary. "He speaks a lot of languages."

I knew he was fluent in Greek, but the rest somehow took me by surprise and momentarily erased my anxiety. "Because he was a SEAL?" Because he had moved around a lot in his childhood?

Same as Delta could do, Victor made any kind of emotion disappear from his expression. "Some of the languages he knows were most likely learned during his time on the Teams."

I digested that and what he was implying. "And the other languages?"

"You'd have to ask him."

"How many does he speak?"

Victor tilted his head again and studied me a moment. “All right, love, I’ll make you a deal. For every self-defense move you learn, I’ll answer one of your questions.”

“Any question?”

This time his smile seemed real. “Smart girl.” The smile left. “And the answer is no. Some things you’ll have to ask Delta yourself.”

Out of habit, my gaze dropped, but I told him one of my truths. “I don’t want you to touch me.”

“I understand, pet. Would it help if I told you that I’m not going to hurt you and I’ll be careful?”

Victor would hurt me. Anyone touching me now who wasn’t Demetrius would feel like the worst kind of betrayal. Hurt was going to be unavoidable, but I didn’t want to explain that any more than I wanted to ask him the questions about Delta that I really wanted to know. “Why isn’t he doing this?”

“I can think of a few reasons.”

I looked up. “Like what?”

Raising an eyebrow, he skillfully wove me into his web. “Is that one of your questions?”

“Is it one you’ll answer?”

Slowly shaking his head, he smirked as if to himself. “Those eyes, pet. They get you whatever you want, don’t they?”

The shame and panic were instant. Dropping my head, turning into myself, my tendons straining, my muscles tightening, my mind shutting down, I knew I was going there, but I was helpless to stop it.

The same fresh-rain scent that I’d remembered before filled my head a fraction before dress shoes appeared in my line of vision. “Apologies, pet. I didn’t mean anything by the comment. But seeing as you’re already retreating on me, I’m going to apologize again. This time in advance because your first lesson starts now.”

Before the last words were out of his mouth, his hands were on me.

Grabbing my upper arms, he spun me around. One second he'd been feet away, the next his chest was to my back, his arms were locked around my torso, and his breath was landing on my neck as he spoke in my ear. "First rule, never let a man you don't know get close enough to overpower you." He shifted his stance wider. "But if he does.... *Fuck.*"

I heard him.

I felt him.

He wasn't physically hurting me, but it was too late.

My mind tuned out, my body followed, and every muscle went lax in the only form of self-defense I knew.

Before I could slip through his hold and fall to the floor, his arms shifted, and he picked me up. Placing me on the couch, pushing the coffee table aside, he squatted in front of me and lowered his voice. "You should have told me you panic when someone touches you, pet. Do I need to get Delta?"

My heart racing, the room spinning, no air in my lungs, I tried. Here and now, I silently chanted. *Here and now.*

"Hanna?"

Hanna. *Hanna, Hanna, Hanna.* Here and now. *Here and now.* I was her. I was okay. He wasn't *him*. I nodded. "I-I'm fine." Remembering Demetrius's deep voice from only minutes ago and his dominant command, I took a breath, but this time I held it.

"Right." Victor scrubbed a hand over the lower half of his face. "The answer to your first question is six."

Holding it a moment longer, I exhaled slowly. "Six?"

"Languages that Delta speaks. Six that I know of, at least."

Sucking in another breath, I met his gaze.

The man with hazel eyes listed them off as if in apology. "Greek, Italian, Russian, French, Arabic and Pashto. Seven if

you count English.”

I didn't even know where Pashto was spoken. “I didn't know.”

He smiled. “If it makes you feel any better, neither did I, and I didn't get that intel directly from Delta. So let's keep that little secret between us, shall we?”

The panic threaded through every nerve in my body morphed into embarrassment so deep, I wanted to sink into inexistence. “I didn't even finish high school.” I'd never gone back after that day a Navy SEAL had come to see me. I couldn't. I hadn't been allowed to.

“Highly overrated institution.” Winking as he stood, Victor's expression became serious again. “Anything else you need to tell me before we try this again?” Unbuttoning his cuffs, he rolled first his left, then his right sleeve up.

The panic came back. “Can you just tell me?”

His hands went to his hips. “I could.” But then he didn't say anything else.

Neither did I.

Demetrius came out of the hallway again, but this time he met my gaze as he headed toward the front door and lifted an eyebrow.

Miserable, unsure if I had a choice, deep down not wanting one if it meant he would make the decision for me, already missing his absence when he had not even left yet, I didn't respond in any way.

Demetrius nodded once at me as if he understood, then glanced at Victor. “Leaving now. One hour, max. Like I said, mind her left knee, right ankle, right clavicle, coccyx, and lower lumbar. If she sustains any more injuries or has so much as one extra bruise by the time I return, there'll be a 45 APC round buried in your chest before you can think to form an excuse.”

“Right. Copy that, boss,” Victor replied to Demetrius as he frowned at me.

Demetrius strode out of the penthouse.

Victor kept staring at me. Then he brought up exactly what I hoped he wouldn't. "That's quite the laundry list of injuries, pet."

I'd had more. And not with the luxury of having them spread out. At least my nose was straight now and it was easier to breathe, but I still didn't know how Demetrius had known about it. Not that I was going to bother asking, because I'd discovered the one and only time I'd tried to leave *him* that security cameras were everywhere.

Anyone with money or connections could hack them and track you. Since then, I'd been careful. Or I had thought I had. But obviously I hadn't been careful enough, which now had me panicking even more about next week. All of which was why I needed to do this and learn at least some self-defense moves.

But I didn't want to learn them from Victor.

"Okay, pet. I get it. Your default setting is silence. Admirable, really. With anyone else, that is. Despite what you may think of me or Delta or whatever else is going on in that pretty head of yours, I am here to help."

Help. There was another word I didn't understand.

People didn't help me. Not *his* band, not *his* agent, tour manager, assistant, friends, stage crew, *her*, no one.

He'd kept me hidden as much as possible, but I'd spent almost four years on that tour bus when they were first starting out. They had all seen me at one point or another. They'd all seen what *he* had done. I knew I couldn't blame them. I couldn't let that kind of anger or hate into my heart. It would kill me faster than *he* ever could, but that didn't mean that I hadn't thought about every one of those people who had said nothing.

Done nothing.

Just like I had done nothing to help *her* as she drank herself to death.

I'd been no better than those people.

But now I was trying to be.

I had a plan.

The one I needed to stick to.

One goal.

I had to do this.

But as I sat there on a couch in an expensive penthouse that was terrifyingly high up, the height, the view, the ocean below, all of it became less frightening as it became harder and harder to remain focused. Not on what I had to do or what I was going to do no matter what, but on what came after.

I hadn't allowed myself to think about an after before looking up into emerald-green eyes in that garage.

Now it was all I could think about besides my plan.

But I no longer had one goal.

I had two.

Except I couldn't afford two. I may not survive the first. I knew that. I'd known it the moment I'd decided to do it, but now my traitorous heart and mind were reaching for more when this was never about me. I didn't deserve for it to be.

For a single moment, I let the devil of hate in, and I embraced him.

I hated hope.

I hated it more than I hated my stepbrother, stepmother, and father dying combined.

I hated it more than I loved an emerald-eyed Greek warrior who wore custom suits and brushed my hair and looked at me like I was the only person in his world.

I hated, hated, *hated* it.

I said the silent chant one more time.

Then I inhaled and pushed it all over that balcony that was too many stories up for it to survive and looked up at a

stranger.

“Right,” he quietly said, assessing me.

“Right,” I repeated.

“She speaks.” His smile was reserved and real, and I disliked everything about it.

“Were you a SEAL?”

His smile disappeared. “No, Marine. Force RECON.”

I frowned. “Do Marines have to keep their word like SEALs?”

“Semper Fi,” he stated seriously.

I didn’t know what that meant, but I saw and heard the way he had said it, and I had to trust it. “Please don’t touch me.”

His expression instantly became solemn. “Okay, pet, here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll start this your way. I’ll talk you through the basics, show you some necessary moves and how to protect yourself, but then we’re going to simulate some drills. No force, no heavy-handedness. But real-life scenarios your muscle memory can attach to because that’s how this works. If at any time you need to stop, just say the word and we’ll take a breather. All right?”

Bracing myself, trying not to panic, I nodded.

“Okay.” He smiled. “Here we go, love. Pay attention. I’m going to quiz you on this after.” He winked.

Then he began to speak.

For the next twenty minutes, he talked about hammer strikes, heel palm strikes, groin kicks, and elbow strikes and escaping from a bear hug attack, a headlock, and when your hands are trapped. He showed me hand positions. He demonstrated as he spoke, and he rattled everything off so quickly, I was sure he had done this before or was some kind of martial arts expert or MMA fighter.

When he finished talking, his hands went back to his hips. “What do you say, pet? Ready to try out some of your newly

gained knowledge?”

No. “On you?”

“Would you prefer to wait for Delta?”

“No.”

“Right. Okay, up you go.” He held out his hand. “Same deal applies. For every self-defense move you learn, I’ll answer one of your questions.”

Remembering what he had said about not letting a man get close enough to overpower me, I glanced at his outstretched hand with reluctance. “Why is he having you do this?”

“Delta?”

“Yes.”

“Angling for an answer before you learn a move.” He chuckled. “I like it.”

I waited.

His hands went back to his hips. Then he countered my question with one of his own. “Does Delta touch you?”

Instant and hot, embarrassment flamed my cheeks, and I didn’t answer.

Either reading into my silence or knowing more than he let on, he asked another question. “Have you ever reacted to him like you have to me?”

I looked away, but I shook my head.

“There’s your answer.”

Confused, I glanced back at him.

He smiled. “To put it mildly, he likes you, pet. If you’d pulled the terrified, slack-muscled, drop-to-the-floor card on Delta, that would’ve been the end of your self-defense lessons from him. Now, up you go. Let’s do this before Delta comes to his senses and decides to kick my ass for kicking yours.” Grabbing my hand this time instead of offering his, he pulled me to my feet.

I didn’t shut down.

I didn't even flinch.

Victor's smile widened. "Progress already, pet. I like it."

"Are you British?" Could Force RECON Marines be British?

He laughed in earnest. "No, but I like that you think I am." He winked.

"How do you know French?"

Grabbing me from behind, he locked his arms. "Come now, you don't want to waste your questions on me. Bend forward at the waist and shift your weight. Remember what I've already taught you. It doesn't matter who's bigger, stronger, or quicker, pet. Take any advantage. Use any leverage. Throw those elbows for me and show me who's boss."

I did as he told me.

Two tries later, I learned my first real self-defense move.

FIFTY-TWO

Delta

Stepping off the elevator on the top floor of AES's headquarters, I wasn't one pace into the lobby when November walked out of Alpha's large corner office with his laptop.

His focus on his screen, he met me halfway to the main conference room. "She's been here an hour." He typed one last thing, then looked up. "Pacing the entire time."

"Copy. Did you identify yourself when she came up?" November usually didn't.

"No."

"Where you parked in Alpha's office the whole time she was here?"

"Yes. Optics."

"Good." Nothing like the perception of being ignored by the head of a multi-billion-dollar global security firm to make you nervous. "When's Alpha due back?" I purposely hadn't looked toward the conference room, but in my peripheral line of sight, I saw the woman had stopped pacing and was watching us.

"He and Kilo are landing at Executive as we speak."

"Are both of them coming in?"

"Yes."

Perfect. "This will only take me a minute. When I'm done with her, I need to talk with you privately, then Alpha and

Kilo.”

“Copy. I’ll let them know. You know where to find me.”
He headed toward the command room.

“Question,” I called after him.

November glanced back.

“Did you hack her cell?”

“She turned it off as she drove into the garage and left it in her vehicle. There’re no other devices on her, wiretap or otherwise.”

Translation, he’d hacked the fuck out of her but wasn’t tipping his hand yet, intel-wise. It also meant the brunette wasn’t completely ignorant. She knew what she was walking into. The latter two observations I didn’t give a fuck about. The former I told myself no longer mattered. I’d set my trap. I’d gotten as far as I expediently could without serious backup. It was time to completely read in November and Alpha on my plan, but fuck. It not only sat wrong, it tasted like betrayal and failure. Two pills I never fucking swallowed.

Both of which I had a feeling were going to come back and kick my ass in relation to my *mátia levántas*.

“Understood,” I replied to November before striding toward the conference room.

The second I pushed the door open, the woman in the black suit from the department store was bitching. “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting, Mr. Demos?”

“The name’s Delta. Address me properly or leave.”

Defiant, her hand went to her hip. “Do you think I don’t know who you are?”

“I think you have thirty seconds of my time as a courtesy toward your employer. In which I’m going to do the talking, and you’re going to listen.” I didn’t wait for confirmation. “Amherst and your client, Steven Saunders, will be in this conference room tomorrow at noon sharp. Otherwise you, Amherst, Trident, Saunders, Saunders’s entire management team and security detail, past and present, will all be

answering to me personally. The largest public scandal to hit Trident Media Group and the lawsuit that follows my path of destruction will pale in comparison to what I'm capable of."

"Seriously? You *kidnapped* Styx's sister. You're lucky I'm not standing here with the cops."

"Kidnapped," I stated, leveling her with a lethal stare that housed every year I'd served on the Teams. "Would that be after the sixteen years of assault and battery your client committed against his *stepsister*, including rape, cutting, torture, broken bones, permanent disfigurement and mental abuse? Or would that be after you tried to pay her off with a hundred thousand dollars in cash that has your fingerprints all over the ten grand bundles?"

Schooling her expression after my second question instead of the first only dug her fucking grave deeper. "You have no proof."

"You're right." The mention of her prints on the cash was an educated guess that'd just paid off. "I have damning evidence."

"You're never going to get away with this," she spat. "Styx is this generation's most talented drummer. He *is* Relative Freq. They're the biggest band out there right now. They have millions of fans. There's no such thing as a scandal when it comes to stars like this." Crossing her arms in a rookie, telltale mistake that showed fear, she sank herself further. "You think you're the first jerk to attempt to extort Trident or one of our clients? Our attorneys are going to have a field day with you and your security firm."

"Make no mistake, the storm you're facing is me, not AES. After I'm finished with you and everyone else who was complicit in Saunders's abuse of his stepsister, your attorneys won't know what hit them."

"Did you just threaten a woman?" she asked incredulously.

"No. I threatened you." Specifically her livelihood. A pertinent detail I purposely left out. Same as I left out that the threat I'd made against Amherst, Saunders, the manager and

Saunders's security guards wasn't only monetary. "Consider it your second and last courtesy. One minute past noon tomorrow, if I'm not standing here with Amherst and Saunders, it will no longer be a threat." I walked the fuck out.

"Hey!" she yelled, following me. "We're not done talking, and if you think Leo Amherst is going to show up here because some retired military jerk threatened him, you have another thing coming!"

Passing the elevator on the way to the command room, I hit the call button. The doors opened, and I spared her a glance. "Navy SEAL," I corrected. "Leave."

Striding toward the command room, I swiped my card key and entered as the elevator doors closed with the brunette inside.

November didn't glance up from his desk. "Not your most subtle moment."

"Wasn't meant to be. Can you hack her cell and find out who her first call is to?"

"Already on it. You told her you were a SEAL."

Watching the security cam footage of the elevators, studying the brunette's agitated body language as she descended to the garage level, I mentally read past November's comment and connected the dots. "You know who she is."

"The brunette?"

"No." But her too.

November typed at warp speed. "You threatened the brunette."

"Not bodily." But I would burn Trident Media Group to the fucking ground if I had to. "When did you figure it out?"

"Who the runaway is?"

"Yes." The brunette exited the elevator, hustled to her car and got behind the wheel.

“When you asked about the concert venue.” November glanced at his screens. “The brunette’s powering up her cell.”

“You ran backgrounds on the bands that performed at the venue within the date parameters I gave you.” Parameters I’d specifically set to throw him off the scent.

“Only one band. The drummer for Relative Freq, known professionally and now legally as Styx, was formerly Steven Saunders. Son of Sandra Saunders. Sandra Saunders, now deceased, was the former widow of Petty Officer Second Class Quentin “Canada” Traylor, SEAL, KIA sixteen years ago. In addition to leaving behind his wife and a stepson, Traylor was survived by a biological daughter from a previous marriage. Violet Hanna Traylor.” November typed as he glanced at the monitors on the wall. “The brunette’s calling Amherst.”

“Can we listen in?”

“Yes.” November brought up audio and a second later, Amherst’s canned voice filled the command room.

“I don’t pay you to fuck around, Mindy. I pay you to keep the goddamn band in line.”

“You pay me to handle Styx, and frankly, doubling my salary wouldn’t be enough to deal with his shit,” the brunette replied angrily as she started her car. “Now he’s your problem. If you’re not at Alpha Elite Security in their conference room on the forty-fifth floor of their downtown location by noon tomorrow *with* Styx, I can’t fucking help you anymore.”

“Fuck them, fuck their meeting and fuck Styx. Get him in the goddamn studio.”

“I’ve already told you a hundred times. Styx won’t come into the studio until he gets his sister back, and that’s not happening. Not unless you want an even bigger problem on your hands than this fucking meeting. And trust me, Styx getting her back will make all of your other problems combined feel like a walk in the park by comparison.”

“My only goddamn problem is you,” Amherst bellowed. “I don’t give a shit about the sister. Get Styx in the studio, take the meeting yourself, and do your fucking job!”

“You’re lucky I am doing my job!” the brunette yelled back. “That’s what this phone call is about, you asshole. They have more than enough to topple this Relative Freq house of cards you’ve been stacking since you put that psycho Styx on a tour bus for four years and allowed him to keep his stepsister as his hostage and forced laborer with no pay. If you honestly think after that and this latest nine-month tour—which I’ll remind you, the sister tried to escape from after the first fucking show—that your precious NDAs and hush money you hand out like candy are going to keep a lid on Styx’s behavior, you’re out of your goddamn mind.”

“And you’ll be out of a goddamn job if you don’t handle this. I’m not going to any fucking meeting. DO YOUR JOB, MINDY.” Amherst hung up, and the brunette screamed inside her car.

November cut the audio and glanced at me. “You need to read in Alpha. Amherst won’t show.”

I didn’t disagree, but I was focusing on something else he’d said. “When did Traylor’s widow die?” The Virginia Beach house Quentin had bought still had S. Saunders listed as the owner when I’d run a search earlier, which was the same intel I’d gotten before I’d gone looking for Violet when she’d turned eighteen.

“Five years ago,” November replied.

I fucking saw where this was going. “Exact date?”

November focused back on his keyboard and typed a few keystrokes. “August fourteenth.”

A month before Violet had turned eighteen. Plenty of time for Saunders to browbeat her into thinking she was his dependant and had to do exactly what he said. “COD?”

“Alcohol poisoning.”

Cursing myself for being so willfully blind and the worst goddamn offender of complicity in this entire fucking mess, I asked one more question, because Quentin had never said. “What happened to Quentin’s first wife?”

“Car accident. The vehicle was struck by a drunk driver. Traylor was deployed. The daughter was eighteen months old. She was secured in a car seat and unharmed, but the wife died on the scene.”

Isoús Christós. “Quentin never mentioned that.”

“I wouldn’t have either.”

I didn’t take the comment personally. November hacked the hell out of everything, but his personal privacy was his religion. Eating my rage and self-hatred over what I’d let her go through, I had to force myself to focus up. “How far out is Alpha?”

“ETA five minutes.” November glanced up again. “You need Alpha to contact André Luna.”

“I know.” André Luna, former Force RECON Marine sniper, owned Luna and Associates, a Miami-based personal security firm. Staffed with dozens of former Spec Ops Marines, Luna ran the tightest security firm in the States. The only difference between AES and L&A was that Luna’s outfit usually operated stateside. Luna also had a crucial contact I needed, and Alpha knew Luna better than I did. “Did you get everything else I need?”

“Most of it.”

Fuck. “What’s missing?”

“The signed affidavits.” November focused back on his keyboard. “You need boots on the ground for that.”

“I asked you to handle it. I told you Kilo had an in.”

“Not my specialty, and getting into the venue isn’t the issue. Getting stage crew to sign vague affidavits that say they were present and working the week that Relative Freq played their last concert there is the issue. Send Whiskey or Blade in. Echo if you want it handled by force.”

“You think Blade wouldn’t use force?” *Christós.* There was a reason his call sign was Blade. “This needs to be under the radar. Not an opportunity for Echo to draw on every potential witness to expedite the process.”

November didn't reply. It was his equivalent of suppressing an opinion.

"Speak your mind," I ordered.

Looking up and turning in his chair to face me, November gave me his full attention. "This entire op is Goliath, and you're David. Sending Echo in isn't a bad idea."

Yes, it fucking was. "It tips my hand." And this wasn't a goddamn op. It was her life. "Echo doesn't blend."

"That's the point. Send him in under the guise of security personnel."

"No." Echo was more inked up now than when Quentin died, but Saunders could still potentially recognize him. "Can you handle this or not?"

Silence.

Fuck. Reading November like a book, I sighed. "Where's Blade now?"

"Already en route to the venue." November turned back to his three-monitor setup.

I shook my head. "You knew me, Alpha, Zulu, Echo and Kilo served with Quentin."

"And Bravo, but yes."

"That's why you sent Blade." If Saunders had someone watching our movements or had ears at the venue and someone tipped him off with a cell phone pic, Saunders wouldn't recognize Blade.

November glanced at the wall of monitors that took up the north side of the command room. "After Echo, Blade was the obvious choice."

Invisible, lethal, impatient, intimidating, and mentally unhinged at the drop of a hat. I didn't comment on November's operational call to use Blade. "How long before I have what I need?"

"Three witnesses?"

“Optimal.” But November knew that. Which meant he’d taken additional liberties. “You prepared more.”

“Yes. Six affidavits in total. Drafted with the basic facts and corroborating dates you requested, but I left room to add in still images of security cam footage.”

“I only need signatures for my purposes.”

“Understood, but if this gets into the hands of attorneys, you’re going to need more than signatures on vague affidavits that won’t hold up in court. Which is why I left room on the paperwork for the signees to add additional comments or intel to their statements.”

“This isn’t going to court.” I’d never let it get that fucking far. This was me giving my promise to her one shot. If Saunders lawyered up, he was signing his own death certificate. “How many affidavits did you ask Blade to actually get?”

“Three minimum, all if possible, and Blade drove up to the venue. His ETA back in Miami is tomorrow at oh eleven hundred.”

Six affidavits. More ammunition, but tight timeline. “Copy.”

November’s cell pinged with an incoming text. “Alpha and Kilo are on their way up.”

I glanced at the wall of monitors. “I see them. One more thing. Can you track where Saunders currently is?” When I ran my own search after talking to Ghost, I hadn’t found Saunders. Not that it mattered now where he was. I’d given the brunette almost twenty-four hours to produce the fuck, and Trident had the means to bring him in from wherever the hell he was hiding out.

“Already did. Five hours after you disabled the encryption on your cell, Saunders flew private into Executive. He’s currently camped out at a Trident-owned waterfront estate on Palm Island with three bodyguards.”

The command room door opened, and Alpha strode in, followed by Kilo.

Per usual, Kilo silently stood back.

Alpha didn't. With his gaze locked on me, he tipped his chin. "You've been busy."

Too little too late. Sixteen years too late, to be exact. "I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Call Luna."

"For?"

"Luna's client, Leo Amherst. I want him in our conference room at noon tomorrow."

Alpha exhaled. "Tall order. Amherst's no longer a client of Luna's. Also a very public ask. Paparazzi follow him almost as much as his clientele."

Didn't fucking care. "He'll come once he hears what I'm offering."

"Which is?"

"An opportunity not to hang himself."

"Explain," Alpha demanded.

"Amherst's biggest client is Steven Saunders."

Alpha frowned. "Canada's stepson?"

"Goes by Styx now. He's the drummer for Relative Freq."

Kilo spoke up. "A drummer who has a penchant for explosives."

"And beating the fuck out of women," I added.

Alpha's tone turned lethal. "Saunders is responsible for the state Traylor's daughter is in?"

"Yes. If Amherst and Saunders aren't in our conference room by noon tomorrow, I'm taking matters into my own hands." No one was going to be left standing.

"And if Luna does get Amherst to show?" Alpha asked as he pulled out his cell.

“I’m taking Saunders out at the knees, and Amherst is going to facilitate it to save himself.” I may have promised her not to kill Saunders for now, but I sure as fuck was killing his career and access to any more victims.

“Understood.” Alpha made the call.

FIFTY-THREE

Hanna

“Excellent, pet. You’re a natural, but that was our last drill today.” With a quick squeeze to my good shoulder, Victor headed toward the kitchen. “Have a seat while I get us some water.”

Exhausted and a little sore but riding a high I had never experienced before, I did as Victor told me to and sank onto the soft leather sofa that only yesterday Demetrius had pushed back from the open slider doors.

Lost in thought, missing Demetrius, feeling like yesterday had been a lifetime ago, not knowing how I would have the strength to leave tomorrow morning, I didn’t notice Victor come back until a bottle of water was being held out in front of me.

“Thank you,” I murmured, taking the designer brand of mineral water I never would have purchased for myself.

Victor sat on the opposite end of the couch as he opened his water and took a long swallow. “I think I owe you a few answers, pet.” He chuckled. “Or rather, you forgot to ask.”

I thought about it for a moment.

A half hour ago, I’d had so many questions I didn’t know what to do with them all. Now, I just missed Demetrius. And if I thought about it, which I didn’t want to, but if I did, the inappropriate salesman at the department store, my fear and shame, my reaction to the situation, it had all taken on a different shade since Victor had taught me some self-defense.

Victor smiled. “The silent routine is one thing, pet. But a quiet, pensive woman is a thing of danger. Out with it.”

“Delta purchased the penthouse across the hall,” I blurted.

His water halfway to his mouth, Victor paused, smiled, then drank. “Right. Is that a question?”

I looked at him. “He says he bought it for me.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure he did.”

“It’s not funny.”

“On the contrary, pet, I wholeheartedly disagree.” He grinned. “And the new Jeep in the garage? Is that yours now too?”

“I don’t even have a driver’s license,” I admitted.

Victor laughed outright. “Oh, pet. This is priceless. And for the record, not having a driver’s license has never stopped me. Or not having a pilot’s license, for that matter.” He held his water bottle up in mock salute. “Cheers to bucking the system.”

I had never heard the expression, but I could guess what it meant. “I don’t like to break the rules.”

His expression sobered as he glanced pointedly at my arms. “Seems to me like you have every reason to do whatever the hell you want. And not that you asked, but I’m going to address the penthouse and car anyway. Delta is giving you an out. I bet he’s already offered to—shall we say—*unalive* the prick responsible for that laundry list of yours.”

I didn’t say a single word.

“Listen, love. I’m shit for advice. Both giving and taking it, but know this. As long as I’ve known Delta, I’ve never seen him even remotely as close to protective as he is with you. Does he do his job? Does he do the right thing? Without question. But threatening me over a woman? Never seen it.”

Saving me from saying anything, not that I was going to, Victor’s cell phone rang.

He glanced at the screen and smirked. “Speak of the devil.” He answered. “Before you ask, yes, she is unharmed. Yes, she is more knowledgeable than when you left, and yes, she could probably kick my ass if my back was turned.” He winked at me. “Roger that.” He held his phone out to me. “It’s for you, pet.”

I took it from him, trying to remember if I had ever spoken on the phone before as I held it to my ear in the same manner as he had. Then, unsure what to do, I didn’t say anything.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to.

Demetrius’s voice filled my ear and spread all over my body, covering it in goose bumps. “How are you feeling, little one?”

Deeper than when he normally spoke to me, his voice sounded like it had when we were in bed last night, and my cheeks flamed. “I’m fine.” *I miss you.*

“You hesitated. What’s wrong?”

Turning my head away from Victor, I lowered my voice. “When are you coming back?” I couldn’t bring myself to say home, but I wanted to, desperately.

“I’m on my way now. Would you like to go out for dinner?”

Panic flooded my veins. “Is....” My voice cracked, and I tried to swallow down the sudden lump in my throat. “Is that what you prefer?”

“Am I on speaker?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Can Conlon hear me?”

I didn’t know if Conlon was Victor’s last name or real name, but I knew what Demetrius was asking. “No.”

“Then no, I don’t want to share you with the world and stare at what I can’t touch for two hours while I feed you. I want to come home and sink inside you. But I’m not so selfish that I won’t give you a choice. If you’d like to dine out, I’ll

make reservations. What type of food do you enjoy besides steak and fruit?”

The heat on my cheeks burned. “I don’t prefer a restaurant.” I wanted what he wanted. And I didn’t ever eat at restaurants.

“Understood. Takeaway preference?”

This time my flush wasn’t from his dominant and provocative words but from my own embarrassment. “I’m sorry?” I knew what takeout was, like from a walk-up or fast-food restaurant, but I wasn’t sure if that was what he meant because he didn’t seem like the type to eat fast food.

“I’m going to order us dinner. What would you like?”

Oh. “I can make something.” I knew how to cook a few basic things.

“To be clear, I didn’t ask you to cook. I asked where you would like to have your dinner come from because we’re not dining out, and I’m not cooking tonight. I’m going to spend that time with my mouth and hands on you.”

The flush came roaring back, along with a sharp pulse between my legs, and I barely managed a whispered reply. “Whatever you prefer, sir.”

“Violet.”

His dark, dominant tone sent a rush of heated shivers across my entire body. “Yes?”

“Be waiting for me,” he practically growled. Then his voice and the slight background noise were gone.

Pulling the phone away from my ear, I glanced at it, but I didn’t know what I was looking for. “I think he is done.” I held Victor’s phone out to him.

He chuckled. “Trust me, pet. When it comes to you, Delta is far from done.”

FIFTY-FOUR

Delta

Striding into the penthouse, my gaze cut from her to Conlon as he sat on the couch not three fucking feet from her, and irrational rage hit.

“Perfect timing.” Conlon stood up. “We just finished. Hanna’s a natural.” He winked at her. “Aren’t you, pet?”

Setting the case of soda on the kitchen counter, I leveled Conlon with a look. “She isn’t an animal.”

“Right.” He chuckled as he headed toward the front door. “Note to self. Erase pet from my vocabulary when in your presence.” He glanced at the Coke but smartly didn’t comment.

I switched to French. “*I may need you again tomorrow.*” Depending on a lot of factors, not the least of which was if I still wanted to level him for taking a seat near her.

“*You know where to find me,*” he replied in French before switching back to English. “Hanna, always a pleasure. Delta.” He tipped his chin and walked out.

Grabbing a glass and filling it with ice, I took it and a can of Coke to the couch and sat next to her.

Watching me pour the soda, she capped her water bottle and set it on the coffee table. “Are you thirsty?”

“No.” Not for soda. I handed her the glass.

She stared at it. “You got me Coke.”

“I did. Drink.”

She took a tentative sip. Then she drank half the glass. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. How’s your pain level?”

She studied her drink. “I’m okay.”

I didn’t ask if Conlon had touched her. He had. She smelled like him, and I wanted to wash every inch of her with my soap, then put her in my bed naked. “Was Conlon helpful?”

Her voice got quieter. “Yes, thank you. How was work?”

“It wasn’t work. What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re more reserved, shy, and uncomfortable than when I left. You’re not looking at me, and you’re no longer speaking freely with me. Something happened while I was gone. What was it?”

“I... Nothing happened. Victor taught me some self-defense.” She inhaled, then looked up at me. “And you came home with Coke that you bought for me because I mentioned it once.” Her voice quieted. “But now you’re angry.”

“I’m not angry.” *Gamó*, I was. Fucking enraged, but not at her. “I don’t like other men touching you, *matákia mu*. It’s as simple and complicated as that.”

“Then why didn’t you teach me?”

She didn’t just ask the question. She loaded it with hurt and confusion, inadvertently confirmed that Conlon had his hands all over her, and pulled the fucking trigger.

The impact of her aim along with the impending meeting, the new intel I had about that fucking tour bus, and her steadfast determination to hang on to her secrets was a targeted hit to my already-slipping control.

Taking the soda from her and downing the rest of it, I set the glass on the coffee table and stood. “I didn’t teach you self-defense because I never would’ve put you through the simulations in your current state. I would’ve waited until you

were completely healed. But I don't have time on my side, you're not offering me more, and I had to work within the parameters I had. Come." I held out my hand. "I'm showing you your penthouse before food arrives."

Folding her hands in her lap, she stiffened.

Like an asshole, I ignored the clear discomfort in her body language. "I took the liberty of choosing and ordered Chinese. We have a few minutes. Come."

Her voice went small as fuck as she looked out at the ocean. "I prefer not to."

"Why?" I didn't give her an opportunity to spin it. "Because it'll make it real? Because you don't want to leave? Because you want to be the tide? Or is it because you don't want your own place at all, Violet?"

That got her attention.

She looked up at me. But not with the reticence she'd been throwing off since I'd walked back into the penthouse. Instead, she looked completely fucking wounded.

"I've done everything you've asked. The X-rays, the shopping, the self-defense lessons. I've told you things I've never spoken of out loud to anyone, things I don't even allow myself to think about. But you asked, and I shared. In return, you've shared some of your past, some of which hurt very much to hear, but I'm still here. You wanted twenty-four hours. That's what I have to give. But every minute, this just gets harder." Her voice became so damn small, if I exhaled, I would've decimated it. "I can't be all of this, Demetrius. I can't be what I'm not, and you can't change the past. Why are you doing this?"

I wanted her. In my bed, in my arms, with my seed in her womb. I wanted to tie her permanently to me. I fucking wanted everything with her.

I lowered my hand. "I want honesty."

"So do I."

“That’s all I’ve given you.” Omission in the name of protecting her wasn’t dishonesty. But right now, it felt like fucking shit.

“No, it’s not. On the phone call, you were one way. You said... you said you wanted us. Except when you came back, that’s not what happened. Everything was different. When you left, you were Demetrius, but now you’re being Delta. And you said you had to go into the office, except when I asked how work was, you said it wasn’t work.”

Fuck. “It wasn’t.”

Alarm drew lines between her eyebrows and turned her voice more raspy than wounded. “What was it?”

I owned it. “At oh thirteen hundred tomorrow, I’ll tell you. If you still want to leave after that, I won’t physically stop you.”

“You won’t *physically* stop me?” The alarm turned to panic, and she shot to her feet. “Demetrius, what did you do?” Frantic, she glanced to either side of me, looking for a clean escape. “You promised. *You promised you wouldn’t do anything.*”

“And I haven’t.” Not yet.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t trust me,” I corrected, using every ounce of restraint I had not to pick her up and end this bullshit argument.

“How can I?” she cried, slipping past me and the coffee table, which took her closer to the balcony and terrace than she’d ever ventured.

“You can’t.”

Her voice pitched higher as she dropped her head but scanned from the hallway to the front door. “You’re talking in circles.”

“I’m telling you what you don’t want to hear. Sound familiar?”

Her gaze shot to mine. “The clothes, the car, the money—I didn’t ask for any of it.”

“You have it anyway.” The only question was what she was going to do with it.

“What did you do?” she whispered.

“Who do you want to answer, Violet?” Because she’d made the misinformed distinction. “Me or the SEAL?”

“Whoever’s going to give me answers,” she countered with more confidence than I’d seen from her.

“Don’t mistake our intimacy or my predilections for a different version of my dominance. They’re one and the same. I could be deep inside you right now, standing in a conference room surrounded by suits or downrange in the sandbox under enemy fire, and my answer and disposition would still be the same. If you want to know where I was today, then I’ll tell you.” I paused. “Tomorrow at thirteen hundred.”

“That’s one p.m.”

“That’s correct.”

She crossed her arms, not in defiance but in self-protection. “That’s more than twenty-four hours.”

“That’s your answer.”

“It’s not honest,” she argued, but the fight had left her tone.

“Yes, it is, but it’s incomplete intel because that’s all that I have to share right now unless you want to download everything that you haven’t told me.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair.” She knew that.

“You’re acting as if you think I’m purposely withholding information from you.”

“I don’t act. That’s exactly the situation. You’re protecting Saunders out of misplaced loyalty, fear or Stockholm

syndrome, and because you think your silence buys me protection. It doesn't."

She flinched. "I-I need to leave."

I fucking lost it. "To go where? To him? How about I save you the goddamn trouble of getting there by yourself? Sanders is on Palm Island, holed up at a Trident property with three bodyguards. Should I drive you?"

She jerked back a whole foot as her eyes welled.

Not taking a fucking ounce of satisfaction from her reaction or obvious distress, I pushed. It was too damn hard and I knew it, but I did it anyway. "Just say the word, Violet. You want to see him? You want to go back to him? Then fucking admit it. But don't for one second bring me into whatever misguided bullshit you're telling yourself. You're not protecting me from Saunders or his fucking label because I don't need it. I never have, and I never will."

A knock sounded.

Cursing in Greek, I pulled out a couple of twenties as I strode to the front door and opened it.

"Mr. Delta, your delivery arrived." The doorman on duty, Manny, smiled. "I thought I'd save you the trip and bring it up." He handed me the food I'd ordered.

Exchanging the tip for the bag, I handed over the twenties. "Thank you."

"Right back at you." Manny smiled again. "Enjoy your meal."

I kicked the door shut in response and turned to set the food on the counter, only to find her gone from the living room.

Seconds later, she came down the hallway in her new flats that actually fucking fit, and her backpack was slung over her shoulder.

Not daring to glance in my direction, she headed straight for the door.

I gave myself one pass at forcing her hand and bit out the warning. “Walk out that door right now and see what happens.”

Her hand poised on the handle, she froze.

“I made you a promise, and you gave me one in return,” I reminded her.

“That was before,” she murmured, miserable.

“Before what, Violet? Before I fucked you? Before you got scared that I said I would physically stop you from harming yourself? Before you realized that you could have a life with me?” Ruthless, I used every weapon in my arsenal. “Or before I held you, told you were beautiful and said I wanted it all with you?”

She sucked in a sharp breath.

I wasn't finished.

“I know you feel me between your legs right now. You hear my tone of voice. We both know I could drop you to your knees with one dominant command and you'd willingly obey.”

“Please, don't,” she begged.

“Don't what?” I used her own words against her. “Make you stay?”

“No.”

“Let you leave?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“No.” I was fucking done. “Turn around and walk to me, right goddamn now.”

One second.

That's how long it took for her to process the command, make the decision and let go of the door handle.

Pivoting, she walked to me.

Three feet away, she stopped.

“Drop the backpack,” I ordered.

It slid off her shoulder and hit the floor.

“I said walk to me, not stand three feet away.”

She closed the distance.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Like a slow, fucking torturous climb up Everest, she lifted her head and met my gaze.

Palming her throat, I grasped her jaw. “I’m not letting you leave right now. I promised to feed you, fuck you and hold you, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” Tears welled as I searched her eyes. “But not in that order, and I’m not only going to fuck you, *mátia levántas*.” I slid my hand to the back of her neck. “I’m going to make love to you.”

Silent tears spilled down her face.

Wrapping an arm around her, I issued an order as I lifted her off her feet. “Left arm around me, little one.”

She obeyed.

I pulled down her leggings, undid my pants and fisted myself.

Her tears kept coming.

Rubbing the head of my cock through her already-slick desire, I slowly fed her every inch until I bottomed out.

Crying harder, she wrapped her legs around my hips. “*Demetrius*.”

I drew my first full fucking breath in hours. “Right here, *matákia mu*.”

FIFTY-FIVE

Delta

Gripping her nape, buried to the hilt in her tight cunt, I stared into those eyes.

Gamó, those eyes.

Those fucking tears.

“Let it out, little one.” Holding still, not fucking her, needing her to let go of all of the bullshit that wasn’t us, I waited.

“Please,” she rasped, already pulsing around me.

“I feel you, little one. I know what you need, and I’ll give it to you. But first, you’re going to get it all out and let it go.”

Her small hand grasped the back of my neck as she pushed her hips into mine. “*Please*, I-I don’t understand. Tell me what to do.”

Any other fucking moment, I would. But she had to do this for herself. “I want us right now. Only us,” I clarified, holding position.

“It is.” She gripped my bicep with her other hand and tried to pull me in closer. “Just us.”

“No, it isn’t. Let those tears go. No outside world. Feel me. Only me, *matákia mu*.”

She drew in a deep breath and stilled her hips. Then she took another breath. “Okay.”

“Do you feel me inside you, little one?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “You’re holding me up.”

“I am.” And refraining from thrusting. “Do you hear my tone of voice?”

“Yes,” she answered even quieter.

“Do I sound angry?”

She shook her head.

“Do you have all of my attention?”

Tear-stained, beautiful and perfect, she pulsed around me. “I-I think so.”

“You do. Do I have yours?”

Color flushed her cheeks. “Yes.”

“Good. Then you’re going to trust me right now. No tears. No fear. No questions. Tuck your face against my chest, close your eyes and hold on to me, little one.” Not waiting for a verbal response, I pivoted, grabbed a bag of food and strode out of the penthouse.

Having immediately followed my orders, she didn’t see me walk us across the hall, but she tensed when she heard my door close.

Mission intent, holding my *mátia levántas* on my hard cock, I fished out the card key for her penthouse, swiped it and entered.

Quickly scanning to make sure everything was in order, I dumped the food on the kitchen counter, but I didn’t stop until I was at one of the glass slider doors.

This penthouse was basically the same layout as mine, but it had one key feature mine didn’t have.

Part of the open-plan living area had been sacrificed for a larger outdoor terrace.

Like a three-sided glass cube, a space had been cut into the middle of the penthouse, creating a five-meter-deep recessed area on the terrace. In the middle of the outdoor alcove was a U-shaped couch facing the ocean.

I opened the slider door.

The warm, humid breeze hit us, and her arms tightened around my neck as her fingers dug into my neck. “*Demetrius*.”

“You’re trusting me right now, little one,” I reminded her.

“I’m afraid,” she rasped.

“Am I inside you?” I strode toward the center seat of the couch. “Would I let anything happen to you?”

“N-no.” Her breath and her pulse accelerated.

“That’s correct.” Moving my hands to her hips in case she tried to bolt once she saw where we were, I held her steady and sat.

She sucked in a sharp breath as both the angle of my cock inside her and my position shifted.

I held her still for three beats.

Then I cupped her face and tipped her head up. “Open your eyes and look at me, little one.”

Violet eyes met my gaze as a gust of wind blew her almost-white-blond hair around her face.

“No closed-in spaces. No fear. No hiding.” I thrust once. “Just us.” Bringing my lips to hers, I pulled out halfway and drove back in with intent. “Just us, *agápi mu*.” I sank my tongue into her mouth.

Then I made love to her.

FIFTY-SIX

Hanna

Slow and controlled, and as steady and rhythmic as the waves, he drove himself in and out of me as the sultry breeze wrapped around us with the scent of ocean.

His tongue danced with mine in a show of dominance. His hands cupped my face. His fingers threaded into my hair, and he angled me into his kiss and his body.

He did exactly as he told me he would.

He made love to me.

His gentle but unyielding hold on me, the way his groans crawled up his chest before he released them into my mouth, how every thrust of his hips was both possessive and reverent, he made me feel beautiful.

And he made the world disappear.

I wasn't on a balcony. I wasn't afraid of heights. I wasn't terrified about who he had said was in Miami. I wasn't even thinking about my past.

Or the future.

I was here, in this moment, and I wanted to live in it forever.

Gripping his hair, wearing his shirt, my bare legs straddled over him, I rolled my hips with his, I caressed his tongue with mine and I moaned.

In and out, thrust and retreat, pulse and contract—we became the tide.

His huge palm slid from my cheek to my throat.

He pulsed deep inside me.

His fingers coasted down to my nipples.

He thrust his hips.

He pulled his mouth from mine.

His thumb circled my most sensitive spot.

He gave me a command. "Come now with me, little one."

His hips never wavering from their controlled rhythm, he drove in and out two more times. Then his hard length surged even deeper, and he flooded me with his release.

My cry carried on the wind as my core constricted all around him.

Gripping my throat, he drove his tongue into my mouth as our bodies pulsed and pulsed in time with each other.

Breathless, shattered, whole, with only his name on my lips, the wind blew my hair all around us, catching the strands in a fresh set of tears and sticking them to my face.

Keeping his hold on my throat but releasing me from his kiss, an emerald-eyed warrior made no move to brush my hair from my face. Staring down at me with an intensity that I had felt in every second of his lovemaking, he spoke in his dark poetry. "*Eísai i psychí mou.*"

I touched my fingers to his full lips. "I don't know what that means."

"I said you are my soul."

My breath caught, my heart leapt and every second of my life before this momentarily ceased. "*Demetrius,*" I barely whispered.

Catching my wrist, keeping his darkly intense gaze locked on mine, he drew my fingers across his jaw, then pressed his lips against the back of my hand. "You are beautiful."

Shivery tendrils crawled up my spine and spread as I pulsed around him, but he was wrong. Striking, austere, stoic,

arresting—he was the one who was beautiful. But he was more than that. “You feel like home.”

His inhale was sharp and unexpected, and it shifted his still-hard length inside me.

Embarrassment spread, and I immediately tried to retreat, both with my body and my words. Starting to pull my legs up, I apologized. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” He gripped my thighs faster than I could move away. “You’re not taking back what you’ve already given.” Before I could even begin to register what he had just said or what it implied, he was lifting me while keeping himself still buried inside me and stepping back into the penthouse.

Striding toward the kitchen counter, holding me with one arm under my backside, he grabbed the bag of food and walked right back out to the terrace.

The glimpse of the railing and the height and the ocean so many stories below us—it started to thread through my consciousness, making me panic. But he quickly turned and took the same seat in the exact same position, with my back to the ocean.

As if knowing where my thoughts were going, he issued a demand. “Eyes on me.”

I glanced once more at the dizzying height, then looked at him.

“Remember, no fear.” Gripping my hip, he thrust his still-rigid length. “Straddle me, *matákia mu*.”

Sore, full of his release, feeling it start to seep out of me, I knew what would happen if I so much as moved my legs. “If I do that, I will... you will... leak out of me.”

“Then I’ll come inside you again. Thighs around me, little one. Now.” He took out a white carton of food and chopsticks.

Powerless against his dominant command, no desire to have it any other way, I did as he said. Widening my legs, I straddled him.

He opened the container and stuck the chopsticks in, then held it with one hand as his other gripped my hip. “Closer, *mátia levántas*. Sink down on me.” He angled his hips up as he pulled me down. “Do you feel me?”

A new wave of desire fluttered low in my belly, and I gripped his arms as I shivered. “Yes.”

“Good.”

Releasing my hip, he grasped the chopsticks with his huge hand.

Realization struck. “You’re going to... while you are....” *Oh God*. My core pulsed.

His huge length grew harder. “Yes, I’m going to feed you while I’m buried deep inside you.”

A whole new level of shyness and desire surged through my mind and body. “Why?”

As if he knew I was suffering from warring emotions, he shamelessly laid out everything he was doing like nothing about this, about us, was forbidden or anything to hide from. “Why am I going to fill your stomach with food while I fill your womb with my seed?”

Oh God. “Yes.”

“Because I desire it.” Skillfully using the chopsticks, he grabbed a bite. “Because I prefer it.” He held the delicious smelling food up to my lips. “And because I can. Eat.”

I took the bite.

Tender steak and a savory sauce exploded on my tongue, and I couldn’t stop it. The small sound of delight escaped.

With his gaze locked on mine, he took his own bite.

Then the pleasure of my own experience with the new flavors suddenly transformed into pure sensual desire. Watching his full lips close around the same chopsticks that had been in my mouth, seeing his jaw flex, staring at his throat as it moved with a swallow, taking in the very dominant way he ate, I didn’t simply let out a small sound of pleasure.

I moaned. With need.

Then, just like that baby bird, I opened my mouth.

Spearing another bite, raising one eyebrow with a knowing look, he brought the food to my lips as his hard length pulsed inside me. “Do you approve?”

Heat flamed my whole face, but for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt a moment of complete freedom.

“You’re teasing me,” I accused before taking the bite.

“I’m feeding you and fucking you,” he corrected as he gently thrust his hips.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Delta

I fucked her, fed her, fucked her again, and now I was holding her.

On the terrace.

It was humid as hell, she was curled into my side, we were both sweating, and she was full of my seed.

I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do, but a variable I hadn't considered, one I didn't see coming, was eating at me.

Fucking guilt.

My plan of attack in motion, contingencies already thought out if the meeting didn't happen tomorrow, I was mission ready. What I hadn't prepared myself for was the guilt. Going behind her back, violating her privacy and trust—it would hurt her. It would also destroy everything we had right now once she found out, but it was the emotional pain I'd cause her that was annihilating me.

The fight, I'd prepared for.

In one way or another, the battlefield had always been my home. I knew how to ignore and override, adapt and overcome, and hold the line. Whatever I had to do, I'd fucking do it. I'd fight to get us back. Ending Saunders was mission success, but earning her trust was victory. That, I was going to battle for.

But *gamó*, I didn't want to hurt her.

Her hand trailed down my bare chest because she'd unbuttoned my shirt while I'd fed her. "You're quiet."

I'd never let a woman undress me. "I'm contemplating." And fucking enjoying her like this—half naked, unguarded and covered in my scent. But I could also read her tone, the intent behind her statement, and the insecurity she was harboring in my silence.

Her voice turned hesitant, and she traced a finger over my scar. "What are you thinking about?"

How she hadn't protested being on the balcony, but how she also wasn't looking at the ocean. That I hadn't heard back from Alpha yet. That Luna coming through and getting both Amherst and Saunders to show tomorrow were too many goddamn variables. That she hadn't asked how I knew where Saunders was yet. Wondering if she was going to come to my bed after I walked out on her in a few minutes. Not looking forward to that part of the fucking plan, but knowing it needed to happen. I was thinking about all of it, none of which I was going to tell her.

Because she needed freedom to choose.

With breathing room.

That was what this whole damn thing had boiled down to—the simplest common denominator I'd overlooked from the moment I'd laid eyes on her.

If this was going to work, I had to be her choice.

Not because of history, circumstances, sex, my dominance or my protection. I was handling fucking Saunders no matter what went down between us. This was about her preference. What she wanted.

If I was it, she needed to come to me.

But in order for that to happen, I had to set her free.

And *fuck*, I didn't know if I had the fortitude to walk out of her penthouse in a few minutes.

Encircling her wrist, I moved her fingers off my scar and evaded. "I'm thinking many things, *mátia levántas*. You?"

She fisted her hand. “He’s dangerous, Demetrius.”

There it was. “I’m more dangerous, *matákia mu*.” I looked down at her. “By magnitudes.”

“He’s crazy,” she whispered.

“I’m not.” I was. Over her. But as far as handling fucking Saunders, I was mission focused. He was dead, one way or another.

“This isn’t about your training or you being a SEAL.”

“No, it’s not.” There was no comparison between what I was capable of and that piece of shit. I’d looked up what I needed to know. Saunders had blown through most of his money and was living off Trident’s perks. And despite whatever sociopathic bullshit he fed off, he was going to find out his fame wouldn’t buy him protection from me or what he’d done to her. “It’s about trust between you and I.”

She was silent for a beat. Then she went off script on me again. “I don’t know how to navigate conversations with you.”

“You don’t navigate me, little one.” I dominated her. “However, honesty is always a preferred starting point.” Releasing her wrist, I intentionally threaded my fingers with hers to show her that she could confide in me.

She glanced down at our hands, then gave more than I expected. “If you know where he is, then that means you looked him up or looked into him. And if you did that, then you probably know... some things.”

I knew that I was going to end Saunders’s life. “I do.” The only question was when.

Subconsciously or not, she curled in closer. “But you’re not going to tell me what you know.”

She didn’t want to hear the truth. My promise to her had never been unconditional. “Do you trust me?”

My *matákia mu* looked up at me. Then she gave the answer I expected. “With my life.”

“And your heart, little one?”

“You already have that,” she whispered.

Good. “Then we are even.” And it was time for me to go.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Hanna

“Do you trust me?” His deep, dominant voice held a special kind of quiet that I only heard him use when it was just the two of us.

I looked up at a warrior who’d made love to me on a balcony thirty stories in the sky just to prove to me that I could conquer my fears.

I loved him for it.

But admitting my feelings now wouldn’t change what was already in motion.

I said as much as I could. “With my life.”

“And your heart, little one?”

With barely a breath, I gave him that truth. “You already have that.”

“Then we are even.” Untangling our hands, he abruptly stood up and gathered the remnants of the dinner he’d thought to grab as he’d carried me over here, mid-sex, with his hard length deep inside of me.

I shivered at the mere memory and his dominance.

Moving with the same controlled strength and confidence through the kitchen as he had when he’d been carrying me, he tossed the debris and put the leftovers in the refrigerator.

When he was done, he came back to me, but he didn’t sit.

Leaning down, his huge hand covered my throat as he grasped the sides of my jaw. Tilting my head up, he met my lips with his.

The heat of the single kiss, both searing and chaste, swirled low in my belly and lit a fire in my veins, but then his words struck like a wall of ice.

“That was us.” Releasing me, his intense gaze locked on mine, he stood to this full height and nodded toward the interior of the penthouse. “This is you. This is your place to land. Your penthouse, your bank account, your Jeep. All of that is separate from us. You owe me nothing. No expectations or obligation. That’s my protection. That’s my shelter for you. You’re safe here. You’re secure. You can live any life you want. The keys are on the counter.” He took a step back.

Alarm spread, and I made to get up. “Demetrius—”

“I am not finished. Sit.”

I sat.

“As far as us, you have a decision to make. I’ve shown you who I am. You will never navigate me. I will always dominate you. I will also cherish you. But make no mistake, I will never compromise who I am, Violet. Nor will I chase you.” He stared at me for one heart-and-soul-crushing moment. “The choice is yours. Take the time to think about it because I don’t do half measures.”

He turned to leave.

I stood up.

He opened the door.

I opened my mouth.

He walked out.

I tried to speak.

The door shut behind him.

I stood there.

But then I was moving. Not moving, running.

Panicked, stunned, hurt, upset—then it came.

Anger.

I threw open the door that he had intentionally closed. “You’re just going to leave me here?” It was weak to ask, but I was weakness. Before. Now. Without him. Especially without him. I never wanted to go back on that balcony, but at the same time, I wanted to rush to the railing, grip it, and look over the edge just to see if my heart would stop.

Because that would be less painful than watching his back as he strode away from me.

But pain wasn’t what was growing in my heart as he ignored me. Anger was.

“*Stop,*” I demanded.

Silent, he entered a code to unlock his door and pushed it open.

I wanted to grab his arm. I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to cry at every injustice I’d ever suffered. But most of all, I wanted to tell him that none of what he was doing was about me or my choice.

But even in anger, I couldn’t tell him that he was being selfish, that he was hurting me, that his choices were running down my leg, or that I now hated his soft lilac shirt.

Instead, my voice pitched higher, and the truth came out in an ugly torrent. “This is not what I want!”

Just like our first shower, when his soaked suit was plastered to his hard body, his muscles froze. Except that shower felt like a lifetime ago, and this time, he didn’t keep walking.

On the precipice of his threshold, inches away from a freedom that would close another door on me, on us, he stood there.

Then the man in uniform who had pounded his fist on my father’s casket, the Navy SEAL who had come to my school with a letter, the unwaveringly dominant warrior who had demanded I share my worst memories—he turned around.

“Go inside, Violet.”

My stepbrother’s cruelty abruptly and without warning replayed in my mind.

You’re not a fucking violet. You’re a crazy-eyed freak.

I gave the grass-green-eyed Navy SEAL my anger. “Violet died the night of my eighteenth birthday.”

The side of his jaw flexed, and his voice dropped to a lethal tenor. “If I’d known what was going on, I would’ve—”

“Protected me? Sheltered me? Taken me to your bed? Held me until the nightmares passed?” In a self-righteous rage, I spit the anger out. But as soon as I gave the ugliness a voice, it swung back and slapped me in the face with regret and shame.

His gaze darkened to a storm. “No.”

“Exactly. And just like you said, we wouldn’t have had this morning. Or this afternoon.” The very thought deflated me, and all of a sudden, everything was too much. I was too tired. I was at odds. I didn’t fit in my own skin, much less in his life or his clothes, and I didn’t want this—whatever *this* was right now. I wanted his intimacy. “What happened to what you promised in the phone call?”

“Don’t push me, little one.”

Little one.

The very thing that had started it all—the single term of endearment he’d called me when he’d stepped aside from being a SEAL, let his guard down, and shown me his true self. I didn’t care what he had told me. There were two sides of him. There always had been, and that original murmured slip by a huge man in an imposing uniform all those year ago had been so at odds with his presence and his sheer size and strength that I had remembered it.

It was exactly what I had been to him.

It was still who I was to him.

The meaning had changed. The nuance was different and the sentiment of it had grown, but the essence of it had not. It

never would. He was tall. I was short. He was older. I was younger. He was experienced. I was not. Those facts would never change.

He was Delta.

I was little one.

Little one.

The two words whispered in my mind like a dying echo as they faded into nothing, but I was still standing here, same as him.

I was waiting, and he was....

I didn't know what he was doing. Not turning his back on a promise he'd made sixteen years ago? Giving me his twisted sense of honor?

Did it matter what he thought he was doing?

His stare absolute, his dominant presence a hundred times more hardened than it had been when I'd first met him, his unbreakable hold on my very soul even tighter, he stood there, and he held his silent line.

He stood there and he broke me.

More than my father, more than my stepbrother, more than a mother I couldn't remember, he fractured the very last pieces of my heart and left them to wither like my garden of Royal Purple when Styx had destroyed the irrigation system.

Styx.

One hour with a Marine, and now I could somehow say my stepbrother's name.

Or maybe it wasn't the Marine at all but the Navy SEAL standing across the hall from me who'd just given me everything I could've ever wanted. A home, a car, a door that locked, money, freedom, protection, shelter....

Everything except the one thing I needed most.

He didn't trust me.

Standing on a threshold, harboring anger I could see in every hard line etched on his face, he'd demanded I make an impossible choice. It didn't matter that he didn't know what he was asking of me. He knew how he was treating me. He'd specifically said he wouldn't compromise who he was.

But he didn't give me the same courtesy.

He didn't even entertain the idea that I was protecting him.

He'd never believe me if I said I could.

And maybe that was the problem.

Demetrius couldn't separate me from my past or from what I was.

"Styx was right." I didn't want to admit it, but it was true. "I am a freak. I am an anomaly of nature."

"Say his name again."

It wasn't an order, it was a warning, and I was broken enough not to listen to it. "I will say it, because now I can. Because a Navy SEAL held me in a crowded store and told me I didn't have to hide. Then he had his Marine friend teach me some self-defense. So now I am going to say it, over and over." Because I wasn't going hide, and I wasn't going to do *this* anymore.

"Styx almost killed me. He used me for his own personal demons, and he broke me down to nothing to do it. He told me every other man would be worse to a freak like me. He said you would be worse. You *specifically*. He told me all sorts of lies, ones that if you hear them often enough, they change you. But what's done is done, and I'm not living in my past anymore. I can't. I wouldn't survive if I tried, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't take everything all over again and endure it a thousand times if it ended like this, because I would. I would do it just to have that moment on the balcony with you."

His nostrils flared, and he switched to a foreign language that sounded as ancient as he was commanding, then he let loose with a guttural string of words I would never know but didn't need to.

His anger was Greek. But his language was dominance.

I knew that tongue.

I knew his very dialect.

Except he wasn't going to let me speak it with him. "Don't bother trying to hide what you're saying. I can hear you in any language, Demetrius Ridge Demos."

"Violet—"

"You had your say, and I listened. Why don't I get the same in return?"

His growl was low and threatening, but he didn't tell me to stop.

So I didn't.

I let it all out. "I'm scarred and I'm broken. I know I am. But so are you." I wasn't educated, and I didn't have life experiences like him, but I knew what I was, and I knew broken like he knew war. "You asked me why I lied to you five years ago. How come you never asked yourself the same question? Why did you lie to me?"

"I've never misled you," he ground out.

"Then you were lying to yourself. Because you knew what was going on. I know you did. But same as me, you made choices. The only difference is, I'm not blaming you for your choices."

Like he had sixteen years ago, like he had five years ago, and like he had in that underground garage when I'd turned to run, he stood there. Silent, immovable, expression impenetrable, he gave me what he had always been. A dominant, emotionally unavailable, lethally trained SEAL. He gave me exactly what every other person of authority in my life had given, but I'd foolishly, ignorantly thought he was different because of one sentence that he'd said to a seven-year-old.

However pathetic, I gave him the final pieces of my hopeless truth. "I didn't leave Styx to save my life." I hadn't been that courageous. "I didn't leave because I was afraid of

dying.” Death would’ve been merciful. But instead, I’d stayed, and I’d remembered a single moment sheltered in my memory and steeped into my soul so deep, I couldn’t ever let it go. “I left because I believed in something.” Yes, my hand had been forced at the end, but I could’ve gone back and didn’t.

With his impossible grass-green-eyed gaze locked on mine, a Navy SEAL remained silent.

His hollow promise mocked my heart and played through my memory.

You will always have me, little one.

Except I didn’t have him. I never had. And that was my point. “I left because everyone is worthy of being chosen just once in their lives.” I was never his choice, but I deserved that. “I deserve to be chosen.”

Nothing left to say, I went back into a penthouse that wasn’t mine, and this time, I closed the door.

FIFTY-NINE

Delta

“I deserve to be chosen.” Turning her back on me, she walked into her penthouse and shut the door.

Anger radiating, I swore again in Greek.

Telling myself I’d done the right goddamn thing, I kicked the door shut and grabbed my cell as it rang.

“What?” I barked, not bothering to look at the caller ID.

“It’s Alpha.”

“Did you lock in Luna? Is Amherst showing?”

“Yes and yes.”

“With Saunders?”

“Affirmative.”

Fucking great. “Message received.” I started to hang up.

“We’re not done talking.”

“Yes, we are.”

“End this call, and I’ll rescind Luna’s orders,” Alpha warned.

“Then speak,” I commanded.

“You first,” he countered.

I had nothing to say. “You’re the one who gave orders not to end the call.”

“You’re the one who’s losing his shit.”

I didn't say a goddamn word.

Alpha exhaled. "All right, I'll start. Luna's coming in with a show of force. Amherst's undoubtedly bringing his team of lawyers, and Saunders will show with his security detail. Add in me and Kilo, and that's a crowded conference room. What do you hope to accomplish? Because we could've handled this a hell of a lot more discreetly, not to mention permanently."

I glanced at her leggings lying on the floor. Then I was remembering every second of pulling them off.

"Delta?"

Gamó. "I made her a promise."

"Which is?"

"That I wouldn't kill Saunders." I picked up the damn leggings and fucking folded them.

"Did she ask you not to?"

"Yes." I put the leggings on top of the other clothes in the shopping bag.

"Why?" Alpha demanded.

That was the million-dollar question, and my fucking blind spot. "Does it matter?"

"Significantly."

FUCK. "I don't know."

Alpha's pause spoke for itself. "Did you loop in November?"

"Yes." No.

"What did he come up with?"

I glanced at the bag with the fucking shoes. "Nothing."

"*Christ,*" Alpha muttered. "You love her."

I switched to Greek. "*Go fuck yourself. I'm old enough to be her father.*"

"And I'm older than Maila."

Switching back to English, I didn't touch the comment about his wife. "When did you learn Greek?" I grabbed the damn shoes and put them in the bag with the clothes.

"I didn't," Alpha replied. "I surmised. And I've heard you swear enough times to infer the first part. Fuck you back. What's your plan tomorrow?"

Pretend to keep my promise to her. "Threaten Saunders via Amherst."

"In front of the lawyers?"

"The evidence speaks for itself."

"I saw."

"We done?" I wasn't talking to him about Violet.

"No. You know Amherst won't go for this. Saunders's band is currently his biggest act. Trident's legal team will be all over you, and they'll walk out before you can cry wolf on a publicity stunt that they'd spin to their advantage no matter how you leaked it."

"I know." Like a fucking beacon, my gaze cut to her backpack.

"So you can see the forest through this clusterfuck."

"Yes." Debatable.

"Unlike her reasons for why she doesn't want Saunders dead."

My jaw ticked.

Alpha figured out my true intent for tomorrow. "You're using the meeting as a ruse to keep your promise to her."

I didn't deny it. "Yes." I picked up the shopping bag.

"Then what?"

"I handle Saunders. Discreetly and permanently."

Alpha stated the obvious. "After a dozen witnesses can testify to your motive."

"Suicide doesn't need a motive."

“Neither do missing persons,” he countered.

“Anything else?” I needed to give her the damn clothes. Her backpack, I was keeping.

“I heard you had Victor over earlier.”

Fucking Conlon. “And?”

“If you’re having Victor teach her self-defense, then you see something coming down the pipeline. Read in November. Get him on this before tomorrow’s meeting. If nothing else, have him dig up what he can on Saunders to back up your—”

“I already have plenty on that fuck.”

Alpha was silent a beat. Then he put it together. “Kilo. *Jesus*. That was the venue consult he did for Trident? Saunders’s band?”

“Yes.”

“Did Kilo determine if Saunders was behind the pyrotechnics issue?”

“No.”

“Your take?”

“It was him.”

“*Fuck*. My guilt’s compounding over Traylor’s daughter.”

I was already there. “Welcome to the club.”

“Not a club I want a membership in.”

No shit. “See you tomorrow.”

“Call November.”

“I have other matters to handle.”

“I’ll call him.”

“Do what you have to.” I was already hanging up and walking out my front door.

Cursing myself for not showing her how to use the security system in her penthouse, and for a hundred other regrets, I stood at her door and listened.

No sound.

Gamó.

Setting the bag down, I waited another minute.

Then I knocked twice and retreated.

Dialing my cell the second I had my door shut, I forced myself to stride toward my balcony. If I'd stayed in my entryway, I knew what I'd do. The instant I heard her, I'd open my door.

The call connected, and I was issuing orders. "She needs another lesson tomorrow."

"Right. Hello to you too." Conlon chuckled. "Trouble in paradise?"

I glanced at my watch. Ten fucking minutes without her and I was already losing my goddamn mind. "Oh eleven hundred. Her penthouse across the hall." I heard her door open.

"*Her* penthouse," Conlon replied sarcastically. "While I'd love to dissect that, I'm busy, mate. And I already taught her the basics today. Besides, rumor has it you're taking care of the problem."

"No one knows enough about me to have rumors." Asshole.

"*Right.*" Conlon chuckled again, then his tone sobered. "I'll make you a deal."

"No."

"You don't know the offer yet."

Yes, I did. "You feed off of hacking—computers, intel, other people's lives. You leveled your tone, you didn't give an excuse, and there is no deal. You were going to counter with an offer to train her in exchange for intel. Why I'm asking, why it has to be tomorrow. Then you'll use whatever I say as a platform for your agenda."

"You called me, and I have an agenda?"

Always. “Yes.” I heard her door close, and I glanced toward mine.

“I’m going to regret this, but I’ll bite. What’s my agenda?”

“Why do you hack?” I held the phone away from ear just far enough to hear both Conlon and any noise in the outside hallway because I was half expecting her door to open again and the elevator to announce its arrival.

“Because I can,” Conlon replied arrogantly.

“And flying without a pilot’s license, driving without a driver’s license, piloting helos with passengers when you’ve never had a single lesson? Leaving the Marines to become a mercenary?”

I got his full laugh. “Same answer to all of the above.”

“You channel your IQ and boredom by breaking convention and rules. That’s your agenda.” What the fuck was mine? Because with every second that ticked by, her words were sinking further into my head, and I was questioning what the fuck I was doing.

“Right. Okay. Thank you, Freud,” Conlon replied dryly. “Now that you’ve psychoanalyzed me, can we skip to the part where I ask what the real fucking problem is, and you actually answer? Because this isn’t about her needing a lesson in self-defense.”

“It’s exactly that.” I saw where this was going. I knew what she was going to do. I knew it the second she’d asked for that fucking promise I never should’ve agreed to.

“Teaching her how to escape a choke hold isn’t a panacea.”

Fuck this. I was done.

Conlon had already eaten five minutes of my twenty-fucking-four-hour sentence, and despite not hearing her door open again, I wasn’t going to explain to him the chain of events that was about to unfold. “She needs to be ready for what’s coming, and this conversation is over. Are you in or out?”

Conlon exhaled. “Fine, I’ll be there. But for the record, contrary to what your impassive analytics and detached statistics may tell you, I’m never bored. I take your calls because you’d take mine.”

“Oh eleven hundred.” I hung up, opened an app, and placed an order.

Then I did what I fucking should have in the first place.

SIXTY

Hanna

I didn't cry.

I didn't close the door to the balcony.

I didn't go get my backpack and leave.

I didn't even walk through my penthouse.

No. Not mine. His. He owned this expensive place and everything in it.

Staring at the couch on the balcony, I stood in the living room, wearing a lilac shirt and no pants.

I didn't care about the vast view of the ocean. I didn't see the beauty of the strawberry-orange and amethyst sky that was darkening to a deep navy or the millions of little sunset pennies reflecting on the tropical blue water.

I only saw that couch.

I only cared about him.

And I cared about—

A sharp double knock sounded on the front door.

My heart jumped fifteen stories higher than this penthouse, and I froze.

Listening, I waited—for my name, for his command, for two small words from his deep voice that was as dark as a midnight sky—except nothing came but traitorous hope. Spilling out from my fluttering stomach, it erupted across my skin like goose bumps, and before I could tell myself not to, I

was rushing to the entryway. Envisioning him silently standing there and waiting for me, I opened the front door.

I wasn't met with the emerald-eyed stare of an impossibly tall, dark-haired Greek.

Instead, there was the shopping bag of new clothes on the floor with my leggings neatly folded on top and my new whisper-soft, blush-pink ballet flats tucked in on the side.

No worn lavender backpack.

No toiletries case.

I knew what he was doing.

Nothing Demetrius did was accidental.

He'd planned for me to have to go into his penthouse.

He was making me choose, and he was making sure I had to see him no matter what. He'd also lied. There were expectations attached if I wanted my backpack from his penthouse. I could wait until he fell asleep. I could be quiet. I could try to sneak in, but I knew I was only lying to myself with that train of thought. No matter how quiet I thought I could be, he would hear me. And no matter how much I told myself I could walk in with one single purpose and ignore him, I knew I wouldn't.

I should've been angry with him. I should've been upset that he hadn't listened to anything I'd said. But I'd already grabbed the bag and closed the door, and my gaze was right back on that couch on the balcony as I remembered his warning.

I've shown you who I am.

Dropping the clothes in the entryway, I walked to the open slider door and stopped a foot from the threshold.

You will never navigate me.

I sank to the tiled floor.

I will always dominate you.

I pulled up my knees.

I'm more dangerous, matákia mu. By magnitudes.

Wet leaked between my thighs.

I looked down.

A drip landed on the floor.

I spread my legs.

A gentle ocean breeze whispered against my face and exposed core, then his seed came out of me.

“No.” Panic hit, my cry spilled onto the balcony, and I cupped myself as his deep voice played in my mind.

I'm going to make love to you.

“No, no, no.” Holding myself, I pressed my legs together.

I didn't want this. I wasn't ready for it. I wanted to be in his arms. I wasn't ready for every part of him to leave me. I wanted to be in his bed.

I didn't want to be *this*—a bag of clothes, a mess on the floor, holding myself together by trying to hold him inside me.

How had this happened?

You don't navigate me, little one.

Tears slid down my face.

Elsai i psychí mou.

His seed slid between my fingers.

I said you are my soul.

I wept.

SIXTY-ONE

Delta

I swiped the card key for her penthouse and shoved the door open.

One stride in, I fucking paused.

Half a second.

Five hundred milliseconds.

That was how long it took me to process the scene in front of me.

No lights. Balcony door open. Full moon. Humidity overtaking the air conditioning and her.

Sitting on the floor in front of the open slider, knees to her chest, one arm around her legs, cupping herself, tears on her cheeks, wearing my shirt and K-tape.

Isoús Christós.

Another five hundred milliseconds and I was Oscar Tango Mike.

Striding to her position, I shut the balcony slider, then reached for her.

She finally looked up.

Gamó. Those eyes. They said it all, and I cursed myself for the hundredth fucking time today.

Picking her up, eating guilt, I didn't say shit.

Neither did she. Not that she had to. I saw every mistake I'd made written all over her face, and despite them all, she

still curled into my chest.

I didn't deserve her, but I was taking her anyway.

Swiping the keys off the counter, grabbing the damn bag of clothes, I carried her back to my place. Shouldering through the door I'd left cracked open, I kicked it shut, dumped the keys and bag on my counter, and quickly set the alarm.

Then I was striding down my hallway and walking us toward my bedroom.

I didn't fucking analyze the fact that I'd done this before.

I didn't think about tomorrow.

I didn't fucking think, period. Not about a damn thing except her.

She was in my arms, but she was hurting. And I'd left her like that.

FUCK.

Hitting the lights with my elbow, I also didn't think about the fact that she'd been sitting in the dark. Or that the only lights on in my penthouse were a lamp in the living room, and the recessed motion-activated floor lights that'd turned on as I'd carried her down the hall.

The bathroom lit up like a fucking stadium, and she winced, ducking her head.

Turning the lights back off, except for a single dim one I left on in the shower, I set her on the counter.

Her head still down, she kept her hand cupped between her legs.

“Are you bleeding?”

She shook her head once.

Restraining from demanding she move her hand so I could see for myself, I silently cursed. She was so damn small and tight to begin with, and my cock was proportional to my height and size. I'd barely fucking fit inside her, and I hadn't been gentle. *Gamó.*

Zeroed in on that hand she kept between her legs, I unwrapped her ankle and knee. Unbuttoning the shirt I'd put on her this morning, I pushed it down her arms and unhooked her bra. Carefully removing the K-tape from her shoulder, I got her bra and my shirt off her free arm, but then I was stuck.

Her right hand still cupped over her sex, she didn't move.

Barely keeping a fucking leash on my dominance, I unholstered my M45 and set it on the counter. My wallet, phone and keys followed. Then I turned on the shower, kicked off my shoes and quickly stripped.

She didn't look up once.

My shirt and her bra hanging from her right arm, her hand stayed firmly in place.

Fuck.

I tipped her chin and waited.

More violet than lavender in the darkened bathroom, her eyes finally met mine.

I raised an eyebrow.

Her expression void of everything that made her who she was, she stared at me with pure fucking defeat.

The ax already lodged into my conscience, I asked. "Pain level?"

She stared at me another beat. Then she kicked me in the chest with a distressed, rasped whisper. "You are coming out of me."

Iisoús-fucking-Christós.

For a single second, I stared back.

Then I grasped her face with both hands. "I choose you, Violet Hanna Traylor. I fucking choose you."

SIXTY-TWO

Hanna

As he took my face in both of his huge hands, his expression turned so intense that he looked furious. “I choose you, Violet Hanna Traylor. I fucking choose you.”

My lungs filled with the very air he had taken with him when he had walked out of that penthouse, but then he stole it right back.

His mouth covered mine, and he kissed me.

Except it wasn't like any kiss I'd ever had by him.

His dominant possession gentled to a claiming, worshiping caress, he angled me into his kiss, and suddenly I knew what every piece of hurt and pain in my life had been for.

I had gone through hell for this very moment.

I'd survived for *this*.

Not for a penthouse or a car or that first kiss or seeing grass-green eyes in a parking garage. Not even for that dinner on the balcony.

This, right now, was my gift.

I belonged here.

I belonged to this Greek god of a man.

I had been made for him, and he for me.

But I also knew life was never that simple.

All I had, all I was guaranteed was this moment, so I wasn't going to waste it.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, kissing him back with every entangling emotion in my heart, I clung to him as his hands coasted down to my waist, and he picked me up.

With his heated groan filling my mouth and feeding my soul, he carried me into the shower. But unlike last time, he didn't set me down.

Walking us both under the warm spray, he held me, and he kissed me.

He kissed me so passionately, I didn't want to ever breathe without him again.

His tongue tangling with mine, his hard muscles slick with hot water, his scent like a drug, I was the baby bird. I was the lost girl in a field of lavender. I was the teenager too afraid to look up at a Navy SEAL in uniform. I was the trespasser hiding in a garage.

But I was also the woman with violet eyes.

I was who Demetrius Ridge Demos had chosen.

Matákia mu.

Mátia levántas.

Little one.

Pressing my back against the wall, bringing his knee between my legs, Demetrius gripped my hair and pulled back from his kiss.

Then my emerald-eyed warrior stared down at me as water cascaded over his impossibly huge shoulders, and he spoke in his dark poetry. "*Eísai i psychí mou.*"

I remembered.

You are my soul.

I grasped the back of his neck. "You are my home."

"Always."

A ripple of anxiety spread. "You can't promise me that." No one could make that promise to anyone.

As if understanding my fears, he amended his comment. “For as long as I am breathing.”

I didn’t want to think about a time when he wouldn’t be breathing, but his sentiment was the kind of real I understood. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“Don’t thank me, little one. I left you when I shouldn’t have. It won’t happen again.”

He couldn’t promise me that either, but I knew what he meant. “I think we each needed to understand.” To feel the other side of this day, this night, what we could lose. “Now we’re here.”

“We are.”

Despite the warm shower, heat touched my cheeks. “Can I thank you for that?” I wanted to feel him inside me again.

“No.” His arm left my backside, and my weight shifted to his muscular thigh that was still between my legs. “Keep your arms around my neck.” Quickly taking out the elastic from my hair, he placed it on his finger like a ring, then picked up the soap. “What’s your pain level?” With practiced efficiency, he soaped himself.

My blush deepened, and a swallow stuck in my suddenly dry throat as I watched him soap his hard length. “I’m fine.” I could not believe he had fit inside me.

Grasping my chin, he tipped my head up until my eyes were on his. “We’re not having sex again tonight, little one. You’re too sore. What’s your pain level on your injuries?” With a much gentler touch than how he had washed himself, he deftly coasted his large soapy hands over my heated skin, barely touching my hard nipples or the sensitive flesh between my legs.

A feeling that was deeper and so much harsher than disappointment struck me, and I was once again on the floor in front of that open slider as he leaked out of me.

“Stop.” His sharp, dominant command startled me as his hand slid to the side of my face. “I am not rejecting you, little one. Don’t go there. You see my desire for you. You’ve heard

my words. You're in this shower with me." His fingers gripped the back of my neck as his thumb stroked my cheek. "I will be inside you again. Very soon. That's a promise. Understood?"

Rejection. That was the feeling. Not trusting my voice, I nodded.

He studied my eyes for a moment longer, then he set the soap down and gave another order. "Close your eyes."

I'd no sooner followed his command and we were back under the warm spray, where he rinsed us both off. A moment after that, he'd turned the water off and was carrying me out of the shower as he grabbed a towel and tossed it on the counter.

Setting me down on it before grabbing two more towels, he ignored the rivulets dripping down his body. After wrapping one towel around my shoulders, he used the other to quickly dry my legs, then blot-dry my hair before wrapping the towel around his waist and jutting erection.

Picking up my brush from where he'd left it this morning, he started on the ends of my wet hair as he glanced at my collarbone. "I'll tape you up before we get in bed."

Not disliking the support of the tape, but also not liking the feel of it on my skin, I shook my head. Then I suddenly realized that my feet had not once touched the ground since I had been back in his penthouse, and I had not even thought to pick up my brush and detangle my own hair. I'd not even questioned him carrying me or bathing me. "Is this what it would always be like?"

He ran the brush through the length of my hair. "Me taking care of you?"

Me enjoying it. "Yes."

"Yes."

I watched a drop of water roll down his sculpted stomach muscles and disappear into the towel at his waist. Then I looked up.

As if he had been waiting for it, he met my gaze.

My thoughts bled out. "I didn't dry you off."

“Not how this works.” He set my small brush down next to his huge gun.

“Ever?”

“No.”

“Then what do I do for you?” Too shy to look at him as I asked the next question, I looked down. “How do I please you?”

He took the towel from my shoulders, along with the one from around his waist, and hung them back up with precise efficiency. Turning back around before I could fully take in the work of art that was his naked body, his palm landed on my throat and his fingers grasped either side of my jaw.

Tilting my head up, he stared at me in the dimly lit bathroom. “Did you like what you just saw, *mátia levántas?*”

His voice now lower and more quiet, no tilt to his eyebrow, he wasn't teasing me. He also wasn't only asking about my first glimpse of his naked body in its entirety.

I answered both the question he was asking and the one he wasn't with a single reply. “Yes.” I liked everything about him taking care of me.

“So did I.” Holding me captive with his intense stare, his gaze didn't wander. “That is how you please me, little one. Understand?”

Yes. No. Maybe. I had a hundred questions, but none I wanted to ask while I was naked and he was... himself.

Before I could stumble through an answer, he seemingly read my thoughts. “Let me rephrase. Understand for now?”

I exhaled. “Yes.”

“Good.” Kissing me once, chaste and sweet, it was at complete odds with his thoroughly dominant grip on my throat that should have been frightening, but it wasn't. “Tape?”

He had never frightened me, not with how he touched and handled me. “No, thank you.”

With merely a nod, he released my throat to pick me up and carry me to his bed. Then he pulled back the comforter and climbed in with me held secure in his arms. Once his long body was settled on his side, he gently, carefully adjusted me. Sliding his arm behind my neck, turning my body with a firm hand on my hip, bringing my back to his chest, he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into the cocoon of his hard strength. “Good?”

For three beats of my heart, I breathed it all in.

Him, us, his protectiveness and dominance. The hard length of his desire pressing against my back that made my core pulse with emptiness. The million tiny shivers fluttering low in my belly before they raced through my veins.

From my head to my toes, I memorized every inch of his warm skin pressed against mine.

Then I rolled over and looked up at him from the makeshift pillow of his bicep that he had given me. “I don’t want to face away from you.”

Wrapping both arms around me, he pulled me in closer. “Understood, *matákia mu.*” His lips brushed against my forehead, and he inhaled deeply. “Sleep now, little one.”

“*Home,*” I whispered, resting my hand against his heart.

“Home,” he agreed.

The dull aches of past injuries and the new tenderness in parts of my body that I did not know could feel pleurably sore all floated away as I breathed in dry amber, sandalwood, musk and lavender.

Tomorrow could wait.

Tonight, I was sheltered in the arms of my Greek warrior, and I was safe.

I drifted off to sleep.

SIXTY-THREE

Delta

I'd fallen asleep with my little one in my arms.

She stirred twice, and both times I'd gotten up.

The first was to check my cell and security system before throwing an outfit from her bag of new clothes into the washer. The second time was to toss the clothes into the dryer and grab a couple bottles of water because I planned on making her sweat when she woke.

Each time I'd gotten up, I'd had to disentangle myself from her. Each time I'd returned to bed, she'd curled back into me, never completely waking.

Now it was past oh seven hundred, and she still wasn't awake.

Hard as hell, wanting to fuck her, wanting to see her eyes and hear her voice, needing to gauge her mood, I thought about waking her, but I couldn't bring myself to.

Instead, I waited. And stared.

Taking in her worry-free expression, her long hair splayed over my bicep, the scars on her forearms, her hand on my chest, I mentally began to run down every feasible reason why she'd think she needed to leave one more time, but then I stopped myself.

It no longer mattered.

Today was happening. I was giving Amherst one chance to control Saunders, and Saunders one goddamn warning. Then

my obligation to that fucking promise was done.

After I took care of Saunders, whatever reasons she had beyond that, I'd handle.

For now, this morning was mine.

And I wanted my *mátia levántas* to wake up so I could fuck her.

Out of patience, I palmed her breast and lowered my head.

The moment my mouth closed over her nipple, she sucked in a breath and opened her eyes.

Swirling my tongue over the already hard peak, I looked up at her. "*Kaliméra, mikré.*"

"Demetrius," she rasped, sinking her hands into my hair.

Realizing I'd spoken in Greek, I didn't analyze how this woman stripped me down to my roots as I repeated myself in English. "Good morning, little one." Palming her other breast, I pushed her onto her back. "How did you sleep?"

"Good."

Her blush and half whisper, half rasp going straight to my dick, I pushed her thighs wide and settled between them. "Pain level?" Taking her other nipple into my mouth, I bit.

Her back arched, but her hands stilled. "Please don't do that."

"Don't do what, *matákia mu*? Kiss you? Bite you? Ask how you are before I fuck you?" I drew my thumb through her slick heat before circling her clit. "Sink my fingers inside you while I taste you?" Pinching her nipple, kissing down her stomach, I pushed two digits into her tight cunt. Then I sucked her clit hard.

Her sharp inhale unsteady, she gripped my hair tight. "I—*oh God.*" She blew out a breath as she widened her thighs for me. "Please don't make me seem weak. I-I will tell you if I am hurting."

Drunk on the intoxicating taste of her, it took me one full second to register what she was saying.

Then another tenth of a second to realize my mistake.

My mouth left her clit, my fingers left her cunt, and I was palming her throat as I gripped her jaw and hovered over her. “Understand this. You are not weak. I will always check in. You will always answer truthfully, and you will not circumvent me. This is a non-negotiable.” Next time, I wouldn’t make the mistake of not waiting for her answer when I checked in.

Her throat moved with a swallow under my hand. “I’m not fragile, Demetrius.”

“You are exactly that. Under me, in my arms, in my hands, you are fragile, breakable and a fraction of my size. That does not make you weak.” I fucking stared down at her to make sure she heard my next words. “That makes you my little one.” My responsibility. My property. She was my fucking soul. “Understood?”

She quietly submitted. “Okay.”

I asked again. “Pain level?”

Her sexy rasp wrapped around my cock. “I feel empty without you inside me.”

Gamó, this woman. “Not what I asked.” She was going to be the death of my sanity.

“I feel much better than I did. Thank you for asking.” Color spread across her cheeks, and her voice dipped. “Thank you for holding me all night.”

“I didn’t. I got up twice. You didn’t wake.” I kept watch over her expression as I asked my next question. “Do we need to talk about last night?” I’d chosen her. She hadn’t chosen me. Not verbally.

“I prefer not to talk.”

My hard cock already straining at her entrance, I knew what she wanted.

I didn’t hesitate.

I pushed into her tight, wet cunt.

Her legs came up, her head fell back and her mouth opened with a sweet fucking moan.

Pulling back, thrusting short and shallow, angling against her G-spot, I thumbed her clit.

She went off.

“Demetrius!” Her back arched off the bed, her cunt flooded my dick and she gripped me hard with contraction after contraction.

“Good, little one.” *Iisoús fucking Christós*. So goddamn good. “That’s it. Come on me. Show me who owns that sweet cunt.” Gripping her hips, thrusting to the hilt, I held her in place and ground against her clit, almost fucking coming as I let her ride out her orgasm.

Shaking for a full minute, she clung to me until her arms dropped, and she fell back onto the bed.

“You’re not done yet, little one. I’m filling that sweet cunt so you feel me all day.” Leaning over her, I kissed her deep and hard before pulling back. “Left arm around my neck.” Cupping the back of her head as she complied with my order, I lifted her as I shifted to my knees, then sat back on my heels.

Sinking down on my cock, she gasped at the new position.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, gripping her nape, I held firm as her hard nipples brushed against my chest. “Good, *matákia mu?*”

“So deep,” she replied, breathless.

Searching her eyes for discomfort, I thrust once. “Too deep?”

Slowly exhaling as her trembling hand threaded into my hair, she shook her head. “Not too deep. Too big.”

Fully seated on me, her legs suspended, she was at my mercy, and it made me fucking pulse hard. “My size is my size, *mátia levántas*.” She would get used to me. “Is this position hurting you?”

The morning sun falling across her like an *ángelos*, looking up at me with those eyes, she breathed in deep. Then she fucking decimated me. “I am home.”

My tongue sank into her mouth, and my hips surged.

I fucked my little one.

SIXTY-FOUR

Hanna

He put his mouth on me. He put his fingers in me, and he came inside me.

He fucked me.

He made love to me.

He made me shake, he made me cry, he used his body as a weapon and he filled me with his seed.

I was home.

He was home.

Sweat soaked, leaking onto him, held up by his arms around me and his hard length still inside me, I rested my head against his chest as he kneeled on his bed. Listening to his heart steadily beating, I fell in love.

I was already in love.

But this time, I fell in love with Demetrius the man.

And it hurt.

Before I could sink into the despair of my reality, he was lifting me.

Then he was carrying me into his shower, where he did what this Greek warrior of a man did best.

He dominated.

Silently, gently, stoically, he gave me his protection.

Caressing every inch of my body with his huge hands, he washed me and he worshiped me.

His fingers made me come as he rinsed my hair. His lips brushed over my heated flesh. His tongue drove into me as his body had in the bedroom.

He loved me how Demetrius Ridge Demos loved a woman.

Then he carried me to his vanity, set me on a towel, and he sheltered me.

He dried me. He brushed my hair, and he dressed me in a new pair of leggings and a soft, silky blouse that he must have washed sometime during the night, because it smelled like him.

But he didn't speak.

His intense gaze on mine, he watched me.

When he reached for my sunscreen, he finally spoke. "Close your eyes, little one."

Distant, reserved, his voice didn't match his gaze. "Something is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong." He rubbed the cream between his hands, then gently smoothed his fingers over my cheeks, nose and forehead. "Do you remember what I said to you last night about today?"

The reality I had been pushing down came rushing to the surface, and my stomach twisted. "Yes."

He put more sunscreen on his hands. "You're going to stay here while I step out. Two hours, max." He rubbed the lotion over the scars on my arms. "Conlon is coming over. He'll stay with you while I'm gone."

I had already thought about this last night.

Demetrius had said Styx was here. He'd even told me where he was, which meant I was going to have to be more careful. I knew I would be safe if I stayed here, but I also

knew the longer I did, the more time it gave Styx to watch this place.

I needed to leave.

Then I needed to keep moving for the next few days.

The sooner I left, the bigger head start I would have in making sure I wasn't followed. This was my plan. This had always been my plan. My one goal, and I was close—a few days close.

But as I looked up at Demetrius, that one goal had become two, and I felt like that piece of paper that had been torn in half.

I wanted to stay.

I had to leave.

I wanted to be the tide.

I didn't know if I could be the tide.

As if sensing my turmoil, Demetrius slid his hand under my hair and pressed his lips to my forehead. “Give me this, *matákia mu.*”

“Do I have a choice?”

He stared at me.

I asked the question I really needed to know. “Are you going to see Styx?”

No change in his expression, not even a blink, he remained silent.

I reminded myself that he had made me a promise. I rationalized that he would not betray me. I told myself that he was honorable. “Will you tell me where you were when you get back?”

“Yes.”

I wasn't ignorant. I knew that whatever he was doing, it had to revolve around Styx somehow. But he didn't know about any more of it, or he would have asked. He had asked me about everything else. And the reality was that no matter

what I did or said, I would not stop Delta the SEAL from doing whatever he was going to do.

Resigned, praying I had been careful enough, knowing that there was so much in life that was out of my control, I gave him what he wanted.

I nodded.

Not that a couple extra hours would make it any easier to do what I had to do.

Leaving Demetrius was going to hurt.

SIXTY-FIVE

Hanna

Sitting next to me at the breakfast counter in a custom-made black suit, Demetrius checked his watch for the third time.

Pushing the fruit around my plate with a fork, growing more panicked and miserable with each passing second, I said nothing.

“Eat, *matákia mu*,” he ordered.

The few bites I had taken already threatening to come up, I told him the truth. “I’m too nervous to eat.”

He pushed a glass of juice he had poured for me closer to my hand. “Drink.”

“I prefer not to.” Acidic orange juice sounded a hundred times worse on my stomach than the toast and fresh melon on my plate that he had made me for breakfast.

Without comment, he picked up his empty plate that had the remnants of the scrambled eggs he’d made himself and grabbed his coffee cup. After putting the dishes into the dishwasher, he grabbed a glass and filled it with ice before taking a can of Coke from the fridge. Returning to me, he opened the soda and poured it over the ice, then pushed the glass toward me. “Drink, little one.”

I couldn’t deny that the smell of the soda didn’t turn my stomach. In fact, it smelled appealing, but it was morning, and this was Demetrius, the man who fed his huge, muscular body mostly all protein. “You’re giving me Coke for breakfast?” I’d never had soda for breakfast.

“I’m giving you any calories that you’ll actually consume. Drink.”

I picked the glass up and tentatively took a sip. Then I drank half the glass before setting it down.

Watching me, Demetrius tipped his chin at my plate. “Now toast.”

I was about to argue when a knock sounded at the front door.

Walking toward the entry, Demetrius tapped on a security pad on the wall before he opened the door.

“Right.” Victor chuckled as he walked in and glanced from me to Demetrius. “Seems I went to the wrong penthouse this morning.” He flashed Demetrius a taunting half smile.

“You’re late,” Demetrius stated.

“I am.” Victor smiled wide. “Busy morning.” He winked. “You know how it is.”

Ignoring him, Demetrius strode back to where I was still perched on my stool and grasped both sides of my face. Lowering his voice, he spoke in his darkly dominant tone so only I could hear. “Remember this morning. *Eísai í psychí mou*. I will be one hour. We will talk then, *mátia levántas*.” Leaning down, he sank his tongue into my mouth and kissed me passionately. Then he abruptly pulled back and gave me a command. “Wait for me.”

Before I could catch my breath, his hands had left me, and he was striding out the door.

“*Right*,” Victor drawled, teasing the word out as he glanced between me and the front door that was already closing. “Looks like things have intensified since I was here last.”

I blinked back sudden tears.

That kiss wasn’t intensity.

That kiss was a goodbye, an apology and a complete contradiction all in one.

Panic gripped my heart and crawled up my throat. “What, exactly, is he leaving to do?”

“Exactly?” Victor asked.

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t say, pet.”

“Where is he going to do it?”

Victor stared at me.

I stared back.

He slowly shook his head. “If Delta asks, I’m going to blame your eyes, love.”

“Victor,” I warned.

“AES headquarters,” he admitted.

Oh God. “Take me there.”

“Sorry, pet, no can do.”

Grabbing the keys Demetrius had left on the kitchen island last night, I pushed off the stool and aimed for the front door.

Fast and stealth, Victor cut in front of me, pivoted and gave me an insincere smile. “I thought you said you couldn’t drive, love.” Catching me unawares, he snagged the keys from my hand. “Apologies, pet, but I can’t have you getting into trouble on my watch. Delta will be back in an hour, and you can take it up with him then. Deal?”

My heart started to hammer so fast, I could hear it. “May I see your phone, please?”

“Where’s yours?”

“I don’t have one.”

Victor cocked his head as he studied me for a moment. “Right. Okay, I’ll bite. Why don’t you have a phone?”

Trying to think of a plausible lie that would compel him to give me his cell phone, my gaze drifted and landed on my backpack. Then I remembered the phones in the safe in the closet in the bedroom.

Quickly grabbing my backpack, I headed down the hallway.

Victor called after me. “Okay, I admit, pet. That look on your face is concerning.”

Ignoring him, I walked into Demetrius’s closet and opened the safe.

“Well, this just got more interesting,” Victor quipped from the doorway.

Startled, not having heard him follow me, I shoved my backpack into the safe. Then I grabbed one of the phones that I had no idea how to use and pushed the only button on the side that I could find as I closed and locked the safe.

Nothing happened on the phone.

I pushed it again, and again nothing happened. I was swiping a finger across the screen like I had seen people do when Victor spoke up.

“I’ll make you a deal, pet.” He didn’t wait for my consent. “You tell me what you’re up to, and I’ll let you use my phone.”

Inspiration struck.

I looked up at a hazel-eyed Marine.

Then I tested his sincerity. “I need plan B.”

His expression locked down and he became all business. “Understood. Pack your things, love.”

“I’m not taking anything.”

He looked at me for only a second before stepping back and gesturing with his hand.

I walked out of the closet and the bedroom, then headed directly to the kitchen and entryway.

Bypassing me, Victor opened the front door and held it.

Briefly pausing to pick up the card keys to both penthouses because I didn’t know which one was which, I left the cell phone on the counter and walked out the door.

Moving past me and scanning the hall, Victor pressed the elevator call button. The doors slid open, and with a hand at my back, he ushered me inside.

He didn't ask me any questions on the way down to the garage, and I didn't supply any information.

With his hand still on my back, he led me to a black Ranger Rover that was identical to the one that Demetrius had driven, one that was now missing from the parking spot next to the Jeep and his fancy two-door car.

Opening the passenger side, Victor held the door, but unlike a lethally trained SEAL, he didn't buckle my seat belt after I slid into my seat.

After closing my door, he walked around the SUV, got behind the wheel and started it up. Then he glanced at me. "Do you have a destination in mind, love, or do you need me to provide you with one?"

Hoping it would work a second time, I looked directly at him. "AES, please."

Victor stared at me for a long moment.

Then he shook his head as if in resignation. "Have you ever seen an angry Delta?"

"Yes."

"Then you know this'll be my ass in hot water, right, love?"

"You were willing to take me somewhere other than where Delta is," I reminded him.

"Entirely different situation, pet."

I didn't see how. "I need to get there as quickly as possible."

"Of course you do," he muttered, backing the vehicle out of the parking spot. "But just remember this the next time you see me—at my funeral."

It was the second time that morning a man had told me to remember.

SIXTY-SIX

Delta

Late, fucking agitated, I walked into AES and went straight to the command room.

Typing, November didn't look up as I entered. "Delta."

"Do you have my folder?"

"Desk behind me." November glanced at the wall of monitors. "Luna just pulled in."

I grabbed the folder and quickly scanned the contents. "Text him and tell him to meet me in the conference room. Is Alpha here?"

"Text sent. Alpha and Kilo are en route. Blade's a couple minutes behind them."

"Copy." I headed to the door. "Let me know when Amherst arrives."

"Alpha called me last night."

I glanced back.

November looked up. "Trident's legal team has a thick file on Saunders."

I didn't expect anything less. "NDAs, battered women, and payoffs."

"Yes," November confirmed, not that I needed him to. "None of which I can give you to use in this meeting."

"The intel's enough." Walking out of the command room, I headed to the main conference room and dumped the folder

onto the large table.

I was spreading the pictures out haphazardly in a calculated move meant for maximum shock value when André Luna walked in, followed by two of his men.

Strapped and wearing his signature company black polo and black cargo pants, Luna held his hand out. “Good to see you, Delta.”

“Likewise.” We shook.

Luna tipped his chin at his number two, then at the man next to him who was almost as tall as me. Both were strapped and dressed the same as Luna. “You know Tyler, and this is Shade. Shade, Delta.”

I nodded at Tyler, then glanced at Shade. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Shade smirked. “Which one?”

I didn’t have time to answer.

Luna picked up a photo from the conference table. “*Jesu Cristo*,” he muttered in Spanish before switching to English. “Who is this?”

“Need to know.”

“I’d say I hope whoever the *pendejo* is that did this to the chica is six feet under, but since you had me coerce Amherst into taking this meet, I’m not holding out much hope.”

“He’s alive.” For now.

“Which client of Amherst’s?” Luna asked. “Alpha was vague on the details when he called.”

Instead of answering, I gave Luna an out. “You and your men don’t need to be here.”

Luna leveled me with a look. “If AES has a problem, Luna and Associates has a problem. You read me?”

I did. “Loud and clear, but fair warning, this could get public.” Violet would never fucking forgive me if it did, but I was prepared to do what I had to in order to ensure her safety.

Luna smirked. “You have seen the viral video of Tyler and the naked actress on the beach, right?”

Luna’s right-hand man smiled. “In my defense, she was high as shit.”

“Viral,” Luna repeated, throwing him a glare before looking back at me. “Not our first rodeo. Won’t be our last. I’m not afraid of the publicity. We deal with high-profile clients all the time. But I am concerned that you might be underestimating Amherst’s reach. He has the resources to buy off any witnesses you may have, and trust me, he does it on the regular for his acts. Without the victim coming forward and pressing charges, Amherst and his team of attorneys aren’t going to take this sitting down.”

Shade snorted. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“Hey.” Tyler picked up one of the photos of Violet being led out of the plastic surgery center with her nose taped. “Do you have this image in color?”

I started running down every detail in my head, looking for a connection I may have missed. “No. Why?”

Tyler studied the image for a second. “She looks familiar.”

“Familiar how?” I demanded.

Tyler glanced at Luna. “Remember that walk-in I told you about a few weeks back? The one who asked for you?”

“Vaguely,” Luna replied.

“Elaborate,” I demanded of Tyler, already putting this together. Luna had been out of town on an assignment for almost six weeks. He’d just returned a few days ago.

“Blonde, skittish, didn’t make eye contact, asked for Luna.” Tyler glanced briefly at the photo again. “Same posture as the woman in this photo, and she had a backpack she was wearing over both shoulders. When I offered to help her, she refused. She only wanted to know when Luna would be in. I didn’t outright tell her he was offsite, but I did say his schedule was booked with other clients and offered her an appointment.”

Iisoús Christós.

Luna.

Gamó.

It was goddamn Luna.

She was in Miami for him. Luna knew Amherst. She knew Amherst. Fuck, *fuck*, how did I miss this?

“Did she take the appointment?” I asked Tyler.

“Yeah. Hang on, let me check the schedule. I wouldn’t have booked something for Luna this week, so it’s probably next week.” Tyler pulled out his cell.

What the hell did she want with Luna that she couldn’t get from me? “Do you remember the approximate date she came in?”

“I remember it was first thing in the morning.” Tyler scrolled on his cell. “I’d just gotten in myself, and it was about a month ago.”

FUCK. “Luna, pull security feeds for your building.”

“Already ahead of you.” André typed on his cell.

“Found it. She came in almost six weeks ago.” Tyler rattled off a date. “Her appointment’s next Wednesday.”

“Name?” *Hanna Smith.*

“Hanna Smith,” Tyler replied.

“I’ve got the security footage. She came and left through the lobby. Kept her head down the whole time.” Luna held out his cell.

I didn’t need to glance at it to know it would be her, but I did anyway.

Baggy clothes, long-sleeved T-shirt hiding the scars on her forearms, faded lavender backpack on both shoulders.

I looked pointedly at Luna. “How do you know her?”

“I don’t.” Glancing at his cell again, he shook his head. “Don’t know the name or recognize what I can see of her.”

Pulling out my cell, I brought up the picture I'd taken without her knowledge. Ariel was in the foreground, holding out a shirt, but my little one, expression guarded, had her head up. Most importantly, her eyes were on full display.

I showed Luna.

“*Madre de Dios,*” Luna muttered before he looked at me. “That fucking drummer from Relative Freq. He’s the one who did this to that girl?”

A text came through on my cell.

November: *Amherst, three attorneys, three bodyguards and Saunders are on their way up.*

I was out of fucking time. “Download how you know her,” I ordered Luna. “Pertinent details only. Amherst is on his way up.”

Luna complied. “Met her once. Escorted Amherst to VA Beach to sign a new act to his label. Drummer had a reputation of being violent and wouldn’t come down to Miami. Amherst went to him and took me as backup. I remained in the front hall while Amherst took the meet, but I heard enough to tell that the drummer was fucking off. Drugs, alcohol, mentally unstable—didn’t know, didn’t care. Didn’t see the girl till we were leaving. She darted past the living room, and the drummer lost it. Yelling, cursing, he got up to go after her. Then I fucking cared. I blocked him by stepping in front of him, and he turned his anger on Amherst. Threatened to break contract if he was going to have security breathing down his neck every time he had to deal with his girlfriend.”

Fucking irate, I interjected. “He called her his girlfriend?”

“Affirmative,” Luna replied before continuing. “While the fucking drummer was losing his shit, I went after the girl. Lavender eyes, terrified, and way too young to be his girlfriend. I offered to remove her from the situation. She refused. I promised a clean break. Relocate, new ID, full setup. I told her the drummer fuck would never find her. She still refused. I gave her my card and told her if she needed an out to call me, anytime, anywhere, and I’d be there. She disappeared

into a bedroom, and Amherst said we were leaving. Drummer fuck was throwing shit around in the living room as we walked out. When we got in the car, I told Amherst we weren't leaving that girl in there. He said it wasn't our business. I gave him an ultimatum. I told him either he was getting the girl out or I was going back in for a hot extraction, and he and his contract could fuck off. Amherst made a call. Twenty minutes later, a couple of rent-a-bodyguards showed up and entered the residence. Five minutes after that, one stuck his head back out and gave Amherst the all-clear. We left. I never saw the girl again."

Alpha walked into the conference room with Kilo on his six, followed by Blade. "We ready?"

"Ready to watch Amherst shit himself," Shade muttered.

Blade glanced at me as he tossed six folders onto the conference room table. "We're ready."

SIXTY-SEVEN

Delta

Leo Amherst walked into the conference room, followed by three attorneys in suits.

Styx sauntered in next with his three bodyguards. Eying me, Alpha, Kilo and Blade, he smirked as he took a seat and kicked up his feet. His boots landed on top of two of the images of Violet as he pulled a switchblade from his pocket and started fucking with it. “Let me guess, I’m the guest of honor at this little soirée.”

My gaze locked on Saunders, I pushed two photos across the table toward Amherst.

Without looking at them, Amherst shoved them toward the closest attorney. “I’m not here for fucking show-and-tell.”

The first attorney, a female, went white and passed the photos to the next two attorneys.

I leveled Amherst with the only warning look he was going to get from me. “This is how the conversation is going to unfold.”

Styx snorted out a half laugh. “Why don’t you get your little groomed sub in the room? Then you can tell us all how this is gonna go down. I’m sure she’d like to hear it too.”

Amherst threw Saunders a disgusted glance. “Shut the fuck up.”

“You shut the fuck up, Leo. But before you do, why don’t you ask this jackass how he knows the *girl* in these photos? Ask him where he was yesterday while you’re at it.”

Ignoring Saunders, I focused on Amherst. “Rape, aggravated assault, kidnapping, forced imprisonment, mutilation, and disfigurement. That’s the beginning of the list of charges that will be brought against Saunders and Trident. This starts with a restraining order and the end of Trident’s contract with Saunders.” I glanced at her fucking piece-of-shit stepbrother. “Or it can start with you in prison.” I looked back at Amherst. “Your call.”

Amherst rose from his seat in a rage. “Is this a fucking joke?” Grabbing a couple of the folders Blade had brought, he held them up. “You think you can extort me with some fucking photos and these”—he tossed the folders at the nearest attorney—“whatever the fuck this bullshit is?”

The female attorney fumbled for the folders before they hit her in the face. Then she quickly opened one and scanned it. “Signed affidavits,” she supplied.

“*Signed affidavits,*” Amherst mocked, running his glare around the room as if it held any fucking weight. “I’ll tell you what you can do with these.” Picking the rest of the folders up, he shook them at me. “You can shove them up your ass.” He threw the paperwork back on the conference table. “My legal team will discredit every one of these bullshit affidavits and fake photos.” His glare cut to Luna, and he pointed. “And make no mistake, Luna. I’m going to personally see to it that your reputation is dragged through the mud for bringing me into this bullshit ambush. I’ll have the press destroy you. Your business is fucking done.”

Expression schooled, Luna didn’t take the bait, but the inked-up Marine standing next to Tyler with biceps the size of Amherst’s fucking head did.

Arms crossed, Shade snorted. “Go ahead, Amherst. See what happens.”

I didn’t know Shade, but I knew two crucial facts about him besides his reputation for being ruthless. Shade’s woman was Amherst’s daughter, and he hated Amherst. Knowing what I did about Luna, Shade’s presence here today wasn’t by coincidence.

Amherst went nuclear. “Are you *threatening* me? In front of my attorneys?”

“I’m telling you that you don’t own the press,” Shade replied dryly. “And just so we’re clear, I don’t bother with threats. I pull the trigger.”

Playing with his switchblade, Saunders smirked as he stabbed a piece of paper off the top of a legal pad next to one of the attorneys, ripped it free and dragged it toward him. “Is this going to take much longer?”

“No.” I refrained from pulling my own trigger. “Sign a confession, and you can leave.” I had no intention of getting a signed anything from Saunders, but the comment had the intended effect.

Amherst went apoplectic. “He’s not signing shit!”

Saunders pulled a Sharpie from the inside pocket of his leather jacket. “You want my autograph, Mr. SEAL?”

Ignoring Saunders, Amherst continued his tirade. “Everything here is circumstantial. You have no fucking proof!”

Saunders wrote something on the piece of paper before looking up at me and smirking. “What he said.” Stabbing the paper with his switchblade, he spun it around for me to see. *PEDOPHILE* was inked on the yellow sheet. “But nice try. Next time you want to attempt to extort me with something that little bitch said, have enough balls to bring her here.” He pointed his knife at me. “Then we’ll see what she says.”

I turned on Saunders. “What did you just call her?”

Luna and Alpha stepped forward. Amherst started yelling at Saunders. Trident’s three attorneys stood up from their seats to join in, and the elevator doors opened.

Victor walked into the lobby. With my *mátia levántas*.

My rage compounded.

Taking one look at the melee in the conference room, she turned and fled to the women’s restroom.

Before the door closed behind her, my cell was out and I was firing off a text to Victor.

Me: Get her out of here. NOW.

Conlon, the fuck, pulled out his cell, glanced at the screen, then looked at me and shrugged.

I sent another.

Me: TAKE HER HOME RIGHT FUCKING NOW.

Conlon casually eyed the shitstorm in the conference room, then walked toward the restroom and leaned against the wall opposite.

I texted November.

Me: Why the fuck did you let Conlon bring her up?

No response.

Me: Get her out of here, November. NOW.

November walked out of the command room and right into the women's restroom.

Ignoring the arguing going on around me, I fired off another text.

Me: WTF is taking so long, November? GET HER OUT.

“Delta,” Alpha clipped.

I glanced up. Everyone was still fucking arguing, and I knew I didn't have a choice. I had to switch tactics.

I shot off one more text. This time to Conlon.

Me: Bring her into the conference room. NOW.

I shoved my cell into my pocket and looked at Amherst. “I'm only going to say this once, so listen very carefully.”

SIXTY-EIGHT

Hanna

Victor stepped out of the elevator ahead of me and scanned the lobby before his gaze locked on the glass-enclosed conference room. His expression didn't show any surprise, and it struck me.

He knew.

They all knew.

A room full of impossibly imposing former SEALs, including one with emerald-green eyes who stood at the head of the table, but it wasn't just SEALs in that room. There were other former military-looking men in all black, two men and one woman in business suits, three bodyguards, Styx, and a man I knew.

Powerful, ruthless, Leo Amherst was yelling.

Then my gaze landed on one of the men in all black, and my stomach plummeted.

No. *No.*

All hope died, and my breath disintegrated.

This couldn't be happening.

Styx I was expecting. I knew Demetrius was up to something. But the other man, the one I had been waiting to see, the one I'd risked everything for just to get here, I hadn't been expecting him.

It had never occurred to me that this could even happen.

André Luna, president of Luna and Associates, according to his business card, a card he had given me years and years ago despite him obviously working for Leo Amherst at the time, he was my last hope.

André Luna was my *only* hope.

Not because he had made me that offer to extract me all those years ago. Not because he had promised that no one would find me. But because I knew, *I knew*, that Styx didn't remember him.

Styx had been drunk and on pills that day Leo Amherst had come to the house. Styx had been in a rage, and he'd blamed Leo for the two men who'd shown up after he'd signed the contract. Those men, he'd remembered. He'd sworn to kill them. He'd said he would kill Leo Amherst. He'd called Leo and told him he'd kill anyone else he'd sent to the house. The men left hours later, and I never saw them again.

But Styx never mentioned the muscular dark-haired man with kind eyes who'd given me his card, and I'd never brought him up because Styx couldn't kill who he didn't remember.

That's why André Luna had been my only hope.

I'd kept his card hidden in the lining of my backpack all these years because I thought I might have to use it one day.

I'd just never planned on why I would have to use it.

But now I couldn't.

Styx had seen André Luna.

He was sitting across from him right now, which meant that I could no longer ask André Luna for help.

Oh God.

This wasn't happening.

This was happening.

I had to think.

I needed a new plan.

I needed to do something and do it fast, but my gaze landed on the only man sitting with his feet defiantly on the conference table, and I saw his knife in his hand.

Suddenly dizzy, my breathing coming faster, I glanced at the elevator, but the doors had already closed. Frantic, I looked down the hall and saw my only other immediate means of escape, and I took it. “I-I’m sorry. Excuse me, I just...” I turned and fled.

Pushing into the ladies’ restroom, wishing I could lock the door, I was panicking. I was also suddenly reliving every moment that Demetrius had been inside me, and seeing him in the same room with Styx, even the thought of it, was making me physically sick at the same time that I felt completely betrayed.

Every ounce of my plan shattered, the shame of Demetrius seeing Styx unbearable, wishing I’d never told a green-eyed Navy SEAL how I lost my virginity, humiliated by everything he must be thinking, no idea how to save someone I loved, I tried to breathe.

I tried to calm myself down.

Inhale. Hold. Exhale.

But I was already going there.

The sensation of floating overtaking my body, I wanted to shut down and leave this place and disappear into the safe oblivion I’d created almost sixteen years ago. The one where I didn’t have to think or feel or hurt.

Except my mind was betraying me, and every suffocating memory started to hit like buckets of ice water being thrown at my face, one after another, with no in-between to catch my breath.

My father. My stepmother. My eighteenth birthday. Styx. The tour. That last night. Waking up in the van. The welts. His face.

Oh God, I wanted to run.

I needed to run.

But I stood there drowning as the door opened and a man walked in.

Feeling more naked than surprised at the intrusion, I silently chided myself for leaving my backpack at the penthouse, but it'd felt wrong to come here in expensive clothes with a filthy, worn sack full of money.

But now I regretted it because I couldn't run while I thought up a new plan.

Trapped, I backed up against the wall. "I-I'm sorry. I thought this was the women's restroom."

Holding a laptop under his arm, his eyes on me, the blue-eyed man stared with the same intensity as all the other former military men I had met, but there was something different about him. Something in his gaze that almost reminded me of the intensity of Demetrius's stare.

"It is." Reserved, quieter than I was expecting, his voice was as still as he was. "What does he call you?"

I knew he didn't mean Styx. "It... changes, sir."

"When you are frightened," he amended. "What does he call you?"

I didn't answer. I wouldn't. That was too private, and telling him felt like such a betrayal, an even worse one than whatever was happening in that conference room, that my stomach lurched. Dropping my head, desperate for any distraction, I stared at the pretty new ballet flats that would hurt to give up.

"Permission to speak freely, Miss Traylor?"

I barely swallowed down the horrible churning in my stomach. I didn't know what he meant or why he was asking permission, but it was suddenly much too small in the bathroom, and I couldn't leave because he was blocking my only way out.

Having no choice, I nodded.

"Delta has the capability and resources to extract you from your situation, but only you can decide to leave."

I didn't know why I felt the need to defend myself, but I did. "You don't understand."

"I may."

My panic struck a new high, and I looked up. I didn't know who he was or what he did, but I knew what money and power could buy and what it could destroy.

"You saw who was in the conference room," the man quietly stated.

It wasn't a question, so I didn't answer.

"What you may not understand is the depth of Delta's competency and commitment. Leo Amherst is no match for Delta." He stared at me for a moment. "Neither is Steven Saunders."

The door pushed open, and Victor glanced from me to the man. "November." He looked back at me. "You okay, love?"

No. "Y-yes."

Stepping into the restroom, Victor cocked his head. "You don't look okay. I can take you home, pet."

The only home I thought I had was standing in that conference room, betraying me. "No, thank you."

Victor nodded once and glanced at the man he'd called November. "Delta blowing up your phone?"

"Yes," November stated without intonation.

"Right." Victor chuckled. Then his expression sobered, and he looked back at me. "Are you sure you don't want to leave?"

"I'm sure." I wasn't, but an idea had formed. No, not an idea. A solution. My only solution.

"Well, this should be interesting." Victor pasted on a smile. "You ready to see your man, love?"

I didn't tell Victor that Demetrius wasn't mine. Not anymore. I merely nodded.

Victor opened the door. "After you." He glanced at November. "You coming to Armageddon?"

Inadvertently describing my idea, Victor put a name to my solution as it grew wings. Horrible, jagged, scarred wings that were never meant to fly.

"I'll be in the command room." November looked at me. "If, at any point, you need to disappear, either Victor or I will facilitate it, including but not limited to escorting you off the premises and reestablishing you somewhere else with new identification and complete discretion."

Taken off guard, I glanced from him to Victor. Would I sacrifice them? I didn't even finish the thought before I dismissed it.

Victor's usual casual expression turned deadly serious. "November has many talents, but this is one of his specialties, pet. If you want to disappear, he'll make it happen."

I looked at November and remembered two words he'd said to me.

I may.

Victor glanced at his cell phone. "Your presence is now being requested, love. And by requested, I mean demanded by a certain territorial SEAL."

I glanced at November again.

November tipped his chin at Victor.

"*Right,*" Victor drew the word out. "Party of two. Conspiratorial. I like it." He half chuckled. "I'll just give you two a moment while Delta loses his shit." Letting go of the bathroom door, he stepped out into the hall.

November focused on me, but he didn't speak.

"I... don't know if I can trust you."

"I can't answer that for you."

"So you aren't trustworthy?" Not that I was going to tell him my new plan, but I needed to know what he had meant by those two words.

“I’m former Air Force, specifically a Cyberspace Operations Officer posted at the Pentagon. I have the highest security clearance of anyone here at AES. I can’t and won’t tell you what my job entailed while I was active duty. But I will tell you that no one living, including the Pentagon, knows my true identity. If you wish to disappear, I’ll make it happen. If you wish to make him disappear, I’ll make that happen as well.”

Him.

A spark of hope flared, but I quickly put it out and let go of whatever November had been implying before with his two-word comment.

I only had myself to rely on now, and a part of me had always thought it would come down to this. But I still dared to whisper the weight that was crushing me from the inside because maybe, hopefully, it would make a difference. “Styx is vindictive.” I barely breathed the last part out loud. “He will kill a lot of people.”

November made an empty promise. “We’ll get to Saunders first.”

It was too late for that. The moment Styx had walked into this building, it’d been too late.

I gave November the only warning I could. “Styx has seen you all now.” I turned to leave, but then I paused. “Please try to keep Delta safe.”

November didn’t reply.

I opened the bathroom door.

Waiting in the hall, Victor glanced up from his cell. “Ready, pet?”

No. But I no longer had a choice. “I am.”

“Right. Then here we go, love.” Pocketing his phone, he turned toward the conference room.

Steeling myself, I followed.

SIXTY-NINE

Delta

Conlon opened the conference room door and held it.

She walked in, and a collective moment of silence hit the entire fucking room because my *mátia levántas* didn't simply enter.

She walked in with her head held high and her eyes on full display.

She also walked in without looking at me.

Glancing briefly at the photos on the conference table, she inhaled and fixed her gaze on him.

Styx smirked. Then he fucking ignored my directive like I knew he would. “Hey, sis. You want to set these fuckers straight and tell them this is all bullshit? Or should we let our sibling love burn to ashes?”

I watched her throat move with a hard swallow, and it took everything in my power not to put her under my arm and usher her the fuck out of here, but Saunders was right about one thing. She deserved to hear what the fuck I was going to say to Saunders and Trident. She needed to know that I was done fucking around. This bullshit was ending today. She'd either walk out of here with me afterward, or she wouldn't.

But she'd be safe.

Finally fucking looking at me, my *mátia levántas* gave me her violet gaze. “I don't know what's happening here, but—”

“I’ll tell you what’s happening,” Styx interjected, cutting her off. “I’m being accused of....” The fuck looked at me and smirked. “How did you put it?” He snapped his fingers. “Oh yeah, that’s right. Fucking and beating the shit out of my sister.” He looked back at her. “And he’s going to exact revenge in all sorts of creative ways if I don’t cease and desist. And oh yeah, ruin the band, tarnish the label, and eliminate thousands of jobs as he gets my next tour canceled and me locked up.” The asshole glanced back at me. “Did I miss anything?” Not waiting for a reply, he looked to Amherst. “Leo, does that about sum it up?” He glanced at the attorneys. “You got all that, you lawyer motherfuckers?”

Looking up at me with an expression I’d never seen on her face, one of total fucking detachment, she asked a question I’d not only predicted but was waiting for. “May I please have a word alone with Styx?”

“No.” Looking up, I issued an order. “Clear the room. Everyone out except Amherst and Saunders.” She wanted a private fucking word with this asshole? Then she could have it—in front of me, right after she heard exactly what I was going to do Saunders.

One of the attorneys piped up. “Mr. Amherst, I strongly suggest that you do not—”

“Get the fuck out,” Amherst barked, playing right into my plan.

The female attorney scrambled to grab as much evidence off the conference table as she could while everyone else started filing out.

Amherst barked at the woman. “That means you too. Get the fuck out.”

She jumped, then rushed out after the others.

Shade leveled Amherst with a look as he passed him. “I’ll let Summer know you’re still the same misogynistic asshole you always were.”

Amherst glared at Shade, and Alpha lingered.

I glanced at Alpha.

He raised an eyebrow.

I shook my head once.

Tipping his chin, Alpha walked out last and shut the door behind him.

Styx smiled salaciously at his stepsister. “Alone at last. What’s up, sis?”

Stepping in front of her to block his fucking view of her, I laid it all out. “Here’s what’s up. You touch her again, I kill you. You contact her, I kill you. You fucking breathe in her direction, I kill you.” I looked at Amherst. “End his contract.”

Saunders let out a half laugh as he continued to outline *PEDOPHILE* on that piece of paper while he scribbled around the single-word accusation. “Good luck with that. Leo will say whatever the fuck he thinks you want to hear. Then he’ll do what he wants anyway.”

My lethal gaze cut to Amherst. “He’s fucking done.”

Amherst threw it right back. “You don’t get to dictate what goes down here.”

“I just did. If Saunders performs or goes near her again, he’s dead. Then I’m coming after you.”

Styx leaned in his chair to look past me. “You sure about all of this, sis? I mean, we are family after all. Not even one little hug?”

“You,” Amherst roared, pointing at Saunders. “Shut the fuck up!” Dropping his hand and his voice, he looked at Violet. “I’ll keep Styx in line. He won’t come near you again. If you don’t press charges or go public, we’ll compensate you generously. You have my word on that.” The prick glanced at me. “My staff will keep him in line. He won’t go near the girl. As far as Styx not fulfilling his contract to Trident, that’s not going to happen. He stays. Period.”

No fucking deal. “I already stated the terms.”

Amherst tried to play the only card he had left. “If I release him from his contract, you and I both know I can’t legally keep an eye on him.”

“You’re not going to keep an eye on him. I am.” Right up until he took his last breath.

Saunders casually piped up. “And what if she comes to me?”

One quarter of a millisecond.

That’s how long it took me to move.

Ripping the fucking knife out of his hand and flipping it, I drove the blade through the leather sleeve of his jacket and impaled it into the arm of his chair. Purposely missing his bone and flesh this time, I gripped his throat and fucking squeezed. “What did you say?”

With his face turning beet-fucking-red, Saunders choked through a laugh. “I said, what if my sister wants to come to me? Did you ask her?”

I yanked the knife out of the chair’s arm and held it to Saunders’s throat. “Do you want to know the difference between me and Amherst?”

My *mátia levántas* spoke a single word. “Delta.”

Ignoring her for the moment, I answered my own fucking question. “Amherst will kill you slowly with drugs, alcohol and fame while profiting from it. I’ll kill you by inflicting every act of violence you’ve perpetrated against her until you beg me to sever your carotid artery.” Releasing his throat, I sunk his knife into the back of the chair directly next to said artery. “Quit the band and disappear, or answer to me. Your choice.” I glanced at Amherst. “You have twenty-four hours. If there isn’t a press release, I’m taking matters into my own hands.”

Amherst looked like he’d won the fucking lottery. “A press release? After you’ve just admitted to premeditated murder with witnesses?” He snorted. “You’re out of your fucking mind.”

I stepped into the short fuck’s personal space. “I’m also a lethally trained SEAL.” I lowered my voice. “Neither of you will know what hit you.” Retreating, I gave him only enough

room to walk past me on his way out. “Twenty-four hours starts now. Leave.”

Saunders yanked his knife out and pushed his chair back before he stood up and threw her a megawatt smile. “Well, I guess it’s ashes after all.” Crumpling up the sheet of paper he’d written *PEDOPHILE* on, the asshole winked at her as he shoved it into his pocket. “See ya, sis. Or not.” He walked out of the conference room.

Glaring at me, Amherst followed.

I watched them get on the elevator with the rest of their fucking team before I turned to her.

Fear and panic coating every inch of her face, her detached expression was history.

Taking a measured stride toward her, I lowered my voice. “*Matákia mu.*”

Stumbling back a step, she hugged herself. Then her frantic gaze cut past me.

Alpha strode into the conference room.

SEVENTY

Hanna

Pictures. *Everywhere.*

I couldn't breathe.

X-rays.

I couldn't think.

The welts.... *Photographs* of my welts.

My heart stopped.

This wasn't betrayal.

This was total decimation.

Then I saw the paper.

Yellow, stabbed by his knife, written with his permanent black marker.

I saw the big word.

And I saw the little ones.

The important ones.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Miami Beach Parking Garage. After dark. Third level.

The scribbled message in deliberately messy handwriting that was intended for me had been penned under the huge block letters that spelled out *PEDOPHILE*.

I knew Demetrius had seen the block letters.

Styx would have made sure he saw them. He also would've done it to purposely make Demetrius angry and to make sure he didn't look again at what else he was writing, because Styx was that calculating.

Vindictive and calculating.

Oh God.

This wasn't happening.

A giant, lethal, merciless SEAL took a calculated step toward me as he lowered his voice to a new level of betrayal. "*Matákia mu.*"

Frantic, panicked, I stepped back, and a man from my father's funeral walked into the conference room.

"Miss Traylor, I'm Adam Trefor." He held his hand out. "You may not remember me, but I had the privilege and honor of serving with your father."

Shaking, my arms crossed, I didn't move. "I remember you."

The man's cold, ice-blue gaze stayed locked on mine as he dropped his hand. "I'm deeply sorry for your loss and the circumstances of our first meeting. I'm also profoundly regretful for the circumstances of our second meeting. If you'll allow, I would like to personally apologize for everything you've been through."

I couldn't be here.

I couldn't have this conversation.

I couldn't look at the shame of my life strewn about the table like the littered debris of a trash person living a trash life.

Ashes to ashes.

I had to leave.

I couldn't look at *him*. My heart shattered, my world collapsing, hope dead, I couldn't stand next to the SEAL who had taken away my tide.

Barely finding my voice, I tried to stop the conversation before it went any further. “There’s no need, sir.”

“Please, call me Adam or Alpha, and I do believe there is a need. I made a grave error in judgment following your father’s passing. Taking my lead from your stepmother’s directive, I not only kept my distance when I never should have, but I ordered my Team to as well.”

Words.

They were just words.

Let them go.

Let them go.

“The past is the past,” my voice rasped.

Silent fury that wasn’t mine emanated off of a six-and-half-foot warrior of destruction and landed on my shoulders with more weight than my crippled determination could hold.

The man with detached composure who was the first to pound on my father’s casket kept talking. “It’s still an inexcusable mistake that I regret more than I can possibly express. In lieu of being unable to undo the past, if you’ll allow, I would like to move forward from here. At a minimum, I’ll be a resource for you.”

Move forward.

I had to move forward.

But my knees faltered.

My legs shook.

My chest crushed in. “I-I need to leave.”

“Understood. Delta will escort you out. If you ever need anything, please let me or Delta know. Several of the men your father served with are at AES, and we consider you family. We’re all here for you, under any circumstances.”

A huge hand landed between my shoulder blades.

In a coordinated attack, one SEAL opened the door and another ushered me out.

I endured a silent elevator ride down.

I was put into a black SUV that smelled like everything I had lost.

You touch her again, I kill you.

I was buckled in like a child.

You contact her, I kill you.

I was driven to a high-rise.

You fucking breathe in her direction, I kill you.

I survived a silent elevator ride up.

I'll kill you by inflicting every act of violence you've perpetrated against her until you beg me to sever your carotid artery.

I watched the doors open on the thirtieth floor.

A lethally trained SEAL spoke. "I have some things I need to handle. Then we're going to talk."

Talk couldn't fix this.

Miami Beach Parking Garage. After dark. Third level.

A grass-green-eyed Greek warrior couldn't help me.

He stole my heart. He took back my only home. He robbed me of choice. I loved him anyway. "I don't want to talk." I pushed him away with the only means I had. "You betrayed me."

He said nothing.

Not knowing which card key I'd taken earlier opened which penthouse, I frantically swiped both against a security pad of deception.

The door opened.

I stepped inside.

His deep, dominant voice cut into me. "I will never apologize for protecting you, little one."

Shutting the door, I threw the lock.

Then my legs buckled.

SEVENTY-ONE

Delta

Sitting in the dark, staring at the damn ocean, I took a swallow of my drink as I made a call.

November answered on the first ring. “FYI, you’re still unencrypted.”

Goddamn it. Something I should’ve remembered when I called him over six hours ago. “Fix it.”

“Hang up.”

I hung up.

November called back in ten seconds. “You’re a go.”

“Was our earlier conversation traced?” After she’d fucking eviscerated me in the corridor, I’d called November and told him to do a serious deep dive on both her and Saunders’s backgrounds. Especially Saunders. I wanted to know where he’d go, who he would take with him, and if those fucking bodyguards were worth their weight.

“No, I scrambled it from my end.”

“Thanks. Sitrep?”

“Still running down a few things.”

“On her?”

“No.”

Saunders, then. “Do me a favor.” I’d thought about this for fucking hours. If I didn’t say it now, I never would. “When she leaves, if she’s alone, don’t fucking tell me where she goes.”

November didn't reply.

"You copy?"

"I heard what you said."

Gamó. "Meaning you heard me, you're choosing to ignore me, and when I inevitably ask, you're not going to do me any favors."

"High probability," November stated before he pulled a Christensen on me. "If the situation were reversed, you wouldn't withhold intel for the sake of pride over protection."

Christós. I didn't touch that because he was right. "Where's Saunders now?"

"Working on it, but I can tell you he didn't go back to the Palm Island estate with his bodyguards."

Fuck. "What about the plane he flew into Executive on?"

"It was a charter. Same company currently has two planes parked on the apron at Executive, but neither have filed flight plans or taken off since this afternoon's meeting."

"Anything on Amherst?" I glanced at my watch.

"Radio silence from his camp."

Radio silence from the penthouse across the hall as well. "Keep digging. Let me know as soon as you find anything." I wanted to know what the hell she was doing over there. No, I wanted to go get her, pick her the fuck up, and carry her to my bed.

"Copy." November hung up.

I was taking another swallow of my drink when the lock on my front door was finally fucking disengaged from the outside.

I glanced at my watch again.

Six hours and thirty-seven minutes after she'd told me I'd betrayed her.

Six hours and thirty-two minutes longer than I thought it would take her to show up.

My M45 on the side table next to me, the lights purposely off, I sat SEAL still as the front door was slowly pushed open to avoid making any sound.

Half a second later, her white-blond hair came into view.

Head down, watching her step, so fucking conditioned to not look up, she quietly stepped into my place.

Making her way to the kitchen island, she reached to put something on it.

“Violet.”

She drew in a sharp breath and froze. Two days ago, she would’ve held position. Tonight she only remained still for a beat, then she put her card keys on the counter. “I-I didn’t know you were back.”

“I never left.” Swirling the ice and tsipouro in my glass before taking another swallow, I glanced at her keys. “You’re leaving.”

She looked out at the ocean. “I... can’t stay.”

She was choosing not to stay.

She was both caged and wild. Like stalks of lavender blowing in the wind in that field of purple blooms sixteen years ago. She’d stood out, she’d stood proud, but then she’d been bent. First by war, then by my selfish weakness, then by that son of a bitch Saunders.

I hadn’t protected her.

I’d never forgive myself, and she’d never understand.

I told her anyway. “I coveted you.”

“You...? I’m sorry?”

I took another sip of the Greek alcohol I’d brought back with me on my last trip. “Your father talked about you nonstop.”

“Sir,” she whispered.

“Demetrius,” I corrected. “If you’re going to walk out, use my name.”

“I...” Folding her hands in front of her, she trailed off without finishing her thought.

I fucking plowed ahead. “Do you know how many times your father showed me your picture?”

“No,” she quietly replied.

“At least once a day. He kept it in his front pocket. Every time he told me one of your stories, he pulled your picture out, stared at it, then made me look.” I took another swallow. “Except he wasn’t making me do a damn thing.” I watched the breeze from the open slider catch her hair. “From the first time I saw you, something clicked into place.”

“Demetrius.”

Ignoring the blatant goodbye, I gave her the full depth of my depravity. “At first, I told myself it was a latent paternal instinct kicking in. I knew everything about you. I knew you had spirit. I knew ocular albinism caused the unusual color of your eyes. I knew you meant the world to your father. I began to think of you as mine, telling myself I was like an absentee uncle you hadn’t met yet.” I took a large swallow of the hard alcohol.

She didn’t speak. She didn’t move.

She couldn’t.

I knew why she was here. It was in my safe, and if she wanted it, she’d have to either get past me or hear me out.

Fucking merciless, I went on. “I told myself I was only taking an interest in my teammate’s kid because he was my brother. That’s what you did on the Teams. You protected your brothers. You held the line, and you stayed in your three-foot world.” I looked directly at her. “I didn’t stay in my three-foot world, and I sure as fuck didn’t think about any other SEAL’s kids when we spun up.”

Averting her gaze, she looked at the view. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Fucking ruining me? Planting a twisted seed in my head? “Being beautiful and breakable?”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. Whatever fucked-up shit is in your head because of that asshole, I don’t want to hear it.” I’d already seen this playing out a hundred fucking times. Predict the unpredictable. That was my specialty. Except I didn’t need my intellect or a goddamn roadmap to see how this one was going to unfold. She was going to walk out that door and go back to him.

She was going to let him abuse her.

She wasn’t a sub. She was a fucking victim, and I couldn’t save her any more than I could’ve saved my mother.

My *mátia levántas* was right. I was fucking broken.

I’d also betrayed her. But I’d be damned if that was how I was going down if this was our last conversation. If nothing else, this woman would remember what I was.

I was her shelter.

I was her protector.

Even if that meant betraying her to safeguard her, I’d do it again and again.

“I’m sorry,” she quietly repeated.

“If you were sorry, you’d pick those keys back up and tell me what he has on you.” I stood. “But you won’t.” And it no longer mattered. This had to play out, and we each had a part. She’d run, and I’d give Amherst his twenty-four hours only so she couldn’t fucking blame me for one more betrayal when Saunders wound up dead.

Watching my movements like a caged animal, she took a step back.

I took a stride forward. “I made you a promise.” More than one.

Her eyes on me, her voice shook as I took another stride. “I-I know.”

She didn’t. “You don’t. You don’t understand that I don’t make promises. Before signing my name on my enlistment

papers, before your father, I never gave my word. Know why?"

She shook her head.

Taking another step, I halted at the kitchen island. "Because every promise ever made to me when I was a kid had been broken." Tossing back the last of my drink, I set the glass down with intentional force.

She jumped. "I'm sor—"

"I don't need your apologies. I'm explaining why I never made promises, especially ones I was in no position to keep, so that you understand exactly where I'm coming from before you walk out my door."

"I'm thankful for everything you've done for me." Defeat coated her tone.

Weak enough to want to see her fear and regret, I didn't touch or reassure her. I did the opposite. "I don't want or need gratitude. I made your father a promise when I never fucking made promises because my word was my honor, and a dead SEAL can't keep his word. But for you, I fucking did it. I told Quentin I would look after you. Then he was hit, and I was punching my Trident into his casket while getting kicked in the chest every time I looked at his daughter. You were a child suffering trauma, and do you know what I wanted to do?"

"No," she barely whispered.

"I wanted to pick you up, walk the fuck away, and never look back. I wanted to walk away from all of it—my brothers, my Team, my honor, my commitment—I wanted to leave every goddamn thing behind except you. But I didn't."

Her sharp inhale pierced the sterile penthouse, and she gave me her haunted violet-eyed gaze. "Why?"

Stepping around the island, ruthlessly using my height and size, dangerously close to losing all self-control, I backed her against the counter. "Because I witnessed your son of a bitch stepbrother yank you by the arm, and I almost killed him on the spot. A better man would have, but I wasn't better. I was the fucking coward who didn't defend you when you needed it

most because I already knew I was going back. I was the newest member on the Teams and I had something to prove. I was a twenty-six-year-old SEAL who swore he'd never be so goddamn weak that he'd tie himself to any kind of emotional attachment."

"Demetrius," she rasped.

I wasn't fucking finished. "You deserved better. You deserved more than a fucked-up SEAL who was returning to the same war that killed your father. That's what I told myself. That's how I justified it. Every damn day, I ate the lie. I wrote the checks. I stayed in my lane, and I kept my fucking distance because despite every bullshit thing I internalized, I knew exactly what I would've done if I left that life and came back for good. I would've taken you, and I would've kept you. But you were never mine to take, Violet. Not sixteen years ago, not five years ago, not two days ago." I gripped the side of her face. "I choose you, *matákia mu*. My soul chose you a long damn time ago. But you never had the freedom to choose me." I slammed my mouth over hers anyway, and I took.

I took until her body leaned into mine and her moans were swallowed by my greed.

Then I pulled back and gave her my last promise. "The second he puts one more mark on your body, I'm going to kill him."

Her sharp inhale of fear struck me in the chest and echoed through the goddamn penthouse.

Forcing myself, I let go of her. "You were *never* an obligation to me. I release you, little one. Go." Issuing the order, I didn't wait to see if she followed it.

I strode down the hall and slammed my office door.

A moment later, I heard her go to my walk-in closet. Then my safe door clanked shut, her steps retreated down the hallway, and my front door opened and closed.

Deafening silence followed.

SEVENTY-TWO

Hanna

The ghost of his kiss still tingling on my lips, the heat of his body gone, my heart a fatality of this dark war of hurt, my soul walked down the hallway of the penthouse and slammed his office door.

My mind whispered the new word for hurt he had given me. The one where you were too broken to cry. The one where everything was too lost to ever come back.

Decimate.

I was decimated.

But my traitorous mind wasn't finished with me as it whispered my own words back in a cruel reminder.

You betrayed me.

It wasn't an untruth. Demetrius had betrayed me. But I'd done it to him first. Maybe if I had tapped my two fingers all those years ago, maybe I wouldn't be here now. Maybe none of this would have happened.

Or maybe it would've only made it happen sooner.

I had no way of knowing, and I couldn't dwell on it as I walked down his hallway, into his bedroom and went to his safe in his closet.

I couldn't think about what-ifs.

I couldn't look at his clothes.

I couldn't inhale his scent.

I couldn't look at his bed.

I couldn't think about his bathroom or our time in his shower. I couldn't think about his deep voice or the way his rough hands caressed my body as he'd slid inside me.

I couldn't think about any of it.

Barely able to focus on the numbers on his safe, I opened it with shaking hands and reached for a backpack that had once been my only hope.

Now the weight of it felt as painful as this crushing moment, but I picked it up anyway.

Keeping my head down, I shoved the safe closed and rushed out of his closet and his bedroom before I changed my mind about leaving.

Because I wanted to.

God, I wanted to.

And waiting for over six hours in a look-alike penthouse with nothing except my mistakes that played on repeat in a special kind of punishment that added more hurt with every passing reflection, I was closer to breaking than I had ever been in my life.

And that scared me.

Rushing toward his front door, no longer caring that he had shown those pictures of me to all those people, not blaming him for what he'd done, what he'd said in that conference room—it all scared me.

But none of that mattered now. There was only one way out of this, and it wasn't the way I had planned, but Leo Amherst was right. There were witnesses to what Demetrius had said. Even if it was only Leo himself who came forward, that was one witness too many, and I couldn't risk it.

I couldn't make someone disappear.

I had to handle this the only other way I knew how.

I had to.

Trembling, I turned toward the door and grasped the handle, but I didn't open it.

My heart and conscious warring, the voice I'd been pushing down for six hours came back.

Tell him.

The whisper swirled around my legs and crept into my thoughts like rising fog, and for a single moment, I gave it roots. But just as quickly, the image of an imposing SEAL with brute strength and fearless battle tactics mingled with the conniving evilness of an evasive and insane Styx.

There was no choice.

I opened Demetrius's door, and the whoosh of air chased the last of the thought away, but I selfishly wanted it back. Trembling, panicked, having to let it all go, let Demetrius go, I shouldered my worn backpack, but then I paused.

Swinging my bag around, I unzipped the main compartment and reached into the bottom. My fingers closed around the small box, and I pulled it out. Opening the lid, I took out the only thing of true value that I had.

Gently, carefully, I placed it on his counter by the card keys.

Then I quickly closed the box, zipped my backpack and shouldered it before going to the elevator.

"Here and now," I whispered, pushing the call button, half expecting Demetrius to come after me when I knew he wouldn't.

Delta the Navy SEAL didn't chase women.

Demetrius Ridge Demos wouldn't chase me.

I should have been grateful, but all I felt was hopeless resignation as the elevator doors opened.

With one last glance at the six-and-a-half-foot Navy SEAL's door, I stepped onto the elevator.

Pressing the button for the garage, unable to watch the floors slip away, I dropped my head, but then I was looking at

beautiful new ballet flats, softer-than-a-cloud leggings, and a silky top that floated around me like air.

Demetrius had done exactly what he'd said he would do, but he hadn't stopped at the clothes. Every little thing he had done for me in a few short days—the brown sugar, brushing my hair, soda for breakfast, the soft scent of lavender coating my skin—it was more than anyone had ever done for me in my entire life.

The realization was so devastating that for a single moment, I wished for the elevator cables to snap and crush me.

It would hurt less.

But my hurt didn't matter.

Not anymore.

Life mocking me, the elevator stopped without incident, and the doors slid open, giving me a framed view of a shiny new Jeep.

Ignoring it and the twist in my stomach, I dropped my head further and skirted the security cameras as best I could as I walked out of the garage through a fire exit. Twenty minutes later, I got on a bus. Eleven stops after that, I was dodging traffic as I crossed the street and slipped into another parking garage. Using the stairwell, I walked up three floors.

Stealing myself, I pushed open the door.

As expected, a tinted-out SUV was waiting.

A driver I had never seen before got out and nodded as he opened the back passenger door.

Inhaling my last breath of freedom, I got in.

The driver shut the door, and it took me a minute to adjust to the darkness.

Adjust to him.

Glassy-eyed, smirking, he dragged his gaze from the junction of my thighs to my breasts, and then to my eyes. "Hello, freak."

I died inside. “Styx.”

The SUV started to move.

Leaning back in his seat, a drink already in hand, he looked at my breasts again. “Been a minute. You miss me, *sis*?”

No. Never. I hate you. Shoving down the little girl who was defenseless, ignoring the terrified eighteen-year-old who couldn’t scream for help, I fought from dropping my head and clasping my hands, but I did move my backpack to my lap. “Does my answer matter?”

Styx laughed. “No.”

With only the three of us in the vehicle, I asked the question. “Where is he?”

Ignoring me, licking his bottom lip before he bit it, Styx fingered a lock of my hair. “So. No touching, huh?”

I didn’t think for a second that he would take Demetrius’s threats seriously, but I grasped at the illusion anyway. “No.”

“Funny thing,” he mused before leaning toward me. Reeking of alcohol, cigarettes and rancid cologne, he lowered his voice with sinister intent. “I don’t need my hands to get you to do what I want, do I, freak?” My stepbrother licked my neck.

Bile rose, and it was automatic. I reached for my door.

His tumbler hit the floor, vodka splashed on my legs, and arms I used to think were stronger than anything in the world wrapped around me from behind.

Shoving me to the bench seat, he came down on top of me with a grunt, and the switch happened. Bleeding anger as fast as he could play his drum kit, his voice turned vicious. “Where *the fuck* do you think you’re going?” He palmed his switchblade and flicked it open in one swift, practiced move before running the tip of the blade down my throat to the neckline of my silk shirt. “Did the pedophile buy you these fancy clothes, you fucking whore?”

He sliced through the collar of my shirt.

Unable to hide my shaking limbs or voice, I did what I hadn't done since before Daddy died.

I fought back.

Twisting how Victor taught me, my elbow swung out and connected with his jaw. "You're *not*"—my other elbow struck him in the chest—"ALLOWED"—I dropped my weight—"to touch me!"

My world flipped to slow motion, and the thought came without emotion.

Faster than me.

The back of my hair was gripped in a tight fist.

Styx had always been faster than me.

My face was slammed into the window.

Glass shattered.

Blood filled my mouth.

A distant memory of a British-accented voice filled my head.

It doesn't matter who's bigger, stronger or quicker, pet. Take any advantage. Use any leverage.

My head was yanked back.

Use any leverage.

Crazed eyes filled my vision.

His mouth opened, he yelled, but the words came slowly. "I can do *whatever the fuck* I want to you!"

Take any advantage.

My hand moved.

The heel of my palm connected with his nose.

My face was slammed into something hard.

Wet heat splattered.

I left the here and now.

SEVENTY-THREE

Delta

I couldn't fucking stop myself.

I watched the security cameras as she left.

Wearing the outfit I'd put her in this morning and the ballet shoes that actually fit, her fucking backpack no fuller than when she'd first come into my place, she walked onto the elevator with her head down.

She rode the entire thirty floors down with her gaze locked on her feet.

She exited through the garage level with her head still down.

Then she'd disappeared from my line of sight.

Stalking back to the kitchen and the alcohol, I made it as far as the island before her scent hit me.

Fucking weak, the same goddamn coward I was sixteen years ago, I picked up the tumbler and threw it.

The crystal hit the wall, glass shattered across the kitchen floor and I stood there.

For ten fucking minutes, gripping the counter so I didn't destroy every last dish in the kitchen, I stood there and I counted.

I counted every goddamn way I'd failed her.

Then I recalled every minute I'd been inside her.

I swore to myself when I was five-fucking-years-old that I would never hit a woman. I also swore I would never chase a woman. I would never be a fucking coward like my father. I would never be goddamn weak like my mother, and I would never, *ever*, get fucking attached.

Yet, here I was, three of those goddamn things.

“*GAMÓ.*”

Stalking to the laundry room and grabbing a fucking broom and dustpan the cleaning service kept there, I went back to the kitchen and swept my mess up.

Then I saw it.

Sitting on the counter by her keys.

A single dried Royal Purple lavender bloom.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

I knew where this was from and what it would mean to her. Which meant I’d fucking fucked up. *GODDAMN IT.*

Grabbing my cell, I dialed.

November answered immediately. “I see.”

She wasn’t a fucking victim. She was a sub who’d left me a gift. One only she and I would understand. *Gamó.* “Where the hell did she go?”

“You told me not to tell you.”

“November,” I warned.

“I’m tracking her now. She got on a bus.”

Isoús fucking Christós. “I bought her a Jeep, and she’s taking the goddamn bus.” I headed to my walk-in closet.

“Affirmative,” November answered, even though it wasn’t a fucking question.

“Just tell me where the hell she’s heading, because Saunders is going to intercept her.” I could guarantee it.

November typed. “Copy. She got off the bus after eleven stops. She’s crossing A1A by Loews, heading east toward the

Miami Beach Parking Garage. Switching to the garage's security cams now."

She'd fucking planned this. "She never had a cell phone. She didn't want one. If she was out of my sight, she was with you or Conlon. How the hell did she get in touch with Saunders to coordinate a meet?" I grabbed a couple extra magazines from my safe.

"He could've gotten in touch with her."

Shit. That goddamn piece of paper Saunders had been drawing on. He must've written something to tip her off. "Is Conlon still planting those security cams in the offices and conference rooms at headquarters?" I wanted to see what the hell else Saunders had written on that paper.

"I disabled them," November replied. "She took the stairs to the third floor of the garage and got into a waiting SUV. Escalade, black, tinted-out windows, no plates."

Gamó. "Any goddamn hope it's one of Luna's vehicles?" It wasn't. But I had to ask.

"Running GPS tracking on his fleet now. No. Not of one of Luna's Escalades."

Fuck, fuck, FUCK. "Watch that SUV as long as you can." I never should've let her go. "I'm hitting the road now." I grabbed my keys.

"Delta."

"What?"

"Come in."

What the fuck? "I'm not coming into command. You're already there. Keep tracking her."

"I will. Come in."

"Be less cryptic or stop wasting my time."

"I have something you need to see before you go after her." November hung up.

SEVENTY-FOUR

Hanna

My head pounding, my lip throbbing, even my hair hurt.

Everything hurt.

Hanna?

Oh, that voice. I missed that voice. Was I dreaming? I smiled.

Pain hit, and I tasted blood.

No.

I didn't want that.

I wanted him.

I wanted his sweet angel voice.

Trying to blink open my uncooperative eyes, I gave up and tried to speak. "Ash?"

"Hanna!" The sweet smell of everything good—grass, dirt, laundry soap, boy—it wrapped around my neck with tight exuberance. "You're awake!"

Relief flooded me, and I reached up to wrap my arms around him. Pain radiated like fire from my shoulder, but I ignored it. "*Ash.*"

His voice bubbled up, and the exuberance quickly morphed to fear and guilt. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Tears that weren't mine dripped onto my cheek. "He-he found me. I don't know how, but Styx found me here. He showed up and like, he kept calling out. But I ignored him, Hanna, I did, just

like you told me to ignore anyone who showed up before you. But then he said you needed me. He said you'd gotten hurt and that was why he was here, to bring me to you. I should've known it was a trick. *I should've known.*"

My body rocked with the weight of an anguished fifteen-year-old hugging me too hard, and nausea struck as my head spun. "It's okay, Ash. You didn't do anything wrong." I still couldn't open my eyes. "We're okay. We're together now." Why couldn't I open my eyes?

Grief pitched his voice. "I did everything wrong. I couldn't even get all the blood off your face. It's in your eyes." Anger distorted his angelic voice. "*And there's glass in your hair.*"

Like a tidal wave, the moment in the SUV right as my face was slammed into the window came back, and my own fear crested. "It's okay. I'm okay." I was breathing. Ash was breathing. "Can you get me something to wipe my face? Where are we?" I was lying on something soft. A bed. A hotel. Hotels had staff. I exhaled. We'd be okay. Styx never left us in a room with a phone, but I could get to one in the lobby. "Which hotel are we at?"

"Hotel?" Ash's voice pitched higher. "What are you talking about?"

All of sudden, I realized I was only remembering Styx bashing my head in that SUV, not how I got into the vehicle. Struggling to make connections I knew my brain should be able to make, I tried to think harder. "Are we at a hotel?" Wait, that wasn't right. I knew it wasn't. We hadn't been at hotels together since the tour ended. Since... since... that last night on tour. That night when—

"Hanna, stop it," Ash whisper-yelled, sounding more terrified by the second. "What are you talking about? You know there are no hotels up here."

"Right, of course," I tried to reassure him as my mind played tricks. "No hotel." No hotel...

"That's what I said." The panic didn't leave Ash's voice. "How hard did he hit you in the head? This is the cabin. You

came here with him. But he was here before he left to go get you. He's been here. For like, days, or weeks—I don't know. I lost count." His voice broke. "He put bars on the windows, Hanna. *Bars*. He made me help him."

"Shh, shh, it's okay." The cabin. Cabin, cabin, cabin. Styx had been here for weeks. *Oh God*, why couldn't I remember? "You didn't do anything wrong, Ash."

"Yes, I did," Ash argued before succumbing to total panic and whispering. "He's wired the whole place, Hanna, the *whole* property. Just like those pyrotechnics." His voice became pure anguish. "*And I helped him.*"

It all came back at once.

When I first tried to leave the tour. The beating that followed. Then the private flight to Texas. Sitting in the SUV as a bodyguard approached a teenager leaving football practice. The flash of white-blond hair as the teen jogged over to the SUV. That moment when Styx rolled down the window and Ash's and my eyes met for the very first time. Me being shocked. Ash being confused. Styx leaning forward, smiling. Ash recognizing Styx from the band. Styx telling him he won tickets. Ash getting into the SUV. Styx asking Ash if he knew he was adopted and showing him a birth certificate. Styx telling Ash what I'd already figured out.

Then the rest of the tour.

Hiding me and Ash in hotel rooms. Holding both of us against our will. Styx telling Ash he would kill me if Ash attempted to leave. Styx telling me he would kill Ash if I attempted to leave. The beatings, the mind games, the explosives "accidents" in rehearsals, the rules—all the rules. No cell phones, no computers, no talking to any crew. The laundry, the hair dye, the colored contacts for me. That last night on tour when Styx had gone too far with his drumsticks on the backs of my legs and Ash had lost it. The dead bodyguards. The video. Styx's maniacal laughter. The money secretly shoved at me from the tour manager before I passed out. Waking up in a stolen van with Ash silently crying and driving us to his adoptive parents' cabin. Leaving Ash at the

cabin. Thinking he would be safe there. Making my way to Florida. Going to Mr. Luna's office but having to wait for an appointment to see him.

I remembered all of it.

And I remembered him.

An emerald-eyed SEAL.

But I couldn't think about him now.

I had to save Ash.

Forcing my blood-caked eyes to open, I gently pushed Ash back. "Let me up."

"Okay, okay. I'll help." He tugged on my arm.

Everything was blurry, and the room was a little dark from closed curtains, but I could still see my half brother's white-blond hair and sweet face come into view as I sat up.

Tearstained and blotchy, his soft cheeks having turned more into a young man's angled features since the last time I saw him, Ash looked down at me with utter despair and guilt. "I messed up, Hanna. Really bad."

"No, you didn't." I grasped his hand and smiled as much as I could. "We're going to be okay."

"How? We don't even have the van anymore. Styx took it."

"It's okay. We'll figure it out. I prom—"

The door kicked open, banging hard on its hinges.

Ash jumped up from the bed and stepped in front of me.

Styx's drunken voice snarled with disdain. "Look at that. Two fucking freaks." He shoved off the doorframe and stepped into the room. "Welcome home, *family*."

SEVENTY-FIVE

Delta

Staring at November's monitors, I almost couldn't believe what I was looking at.

A fucking fifteen-year-old kid. With white-blond hair.

Ash Wilder.

She had a half brother.

Born six months after Quentin was KIA, the kid was the spitting image of his father, except he had white-blond hair like his half sister instead of Quentin's dirty blond. And the kid's eyes. *Iisoús Christós*. They weren't violet or lavender like his half sister's, but they weren't a usual shade of blue either.

More than how the kid looked, I was fucking kicking myself for not picking up on Saunders mentioning the word *ash* twice to Violet. That fucker had the kid. That's why she was never going to stay. "Saunders has Ash." She was going after the kid. "How the hell did I miss all this?"

"Agree," November replied, typing as his third monitor populated with the images of two documents. "Original birth certificate and the modified one stating the child was deceased. The original record was hacked eleven months ago, making the change from live birth to stillborn. That's why you missed it."

"Hacked right around the time the tour manager told Amherst she tried to leave the tour."

“Yes.” November typed again, and his second screen filled with lines of code. “Same time the missing person’s report was filed on the minor.”

“Where the fuck is Saunders hiding the kid?” I wasn’t going to entertain the notion that the kid was dead, not yet. It didn’t fit Saunders’s MO. He needed the kid to lure her back, which was putting the Luna connection in a new light. But it didn’t explain why she’d risked all she had to get to Luna and not tell me what the fuck was going on.

“I’ve narrowed it down to two potential locations, but I’m waiting for satellite imagery to come through.”

“What are the locations?”

“Traylor’s house in Virginia Beach.”

“No, he won’t go there. He knows that would be the first place I’d look for him.”

“Which is why it makes sense.” November looked up from his keyboard to glance at me. “He wants you to come after him.”

“Don’t disagree on the latter point.” That fuck wanted to kill me as much as I wanted to kill him. “But the VA Beach house is too public, too noticeable. Also, not a challenge. Saunders thinks he smart. What’s the second option?”

November focused back on his keyboard. “Remote cabin in New Hampshire in the White Mountains. Adoptive family on the mother’s side has an unused cabin up there in Jackson.”

“That’s where he’ll take her. I’m betting the kid is already there. That’s what you’re waiting for sat imagery on? Heat signatures?”

“Yes. Couple more minutes, and I’ll have them.”

“Copy. How did you find the kid?” I hadn’t found the modified or the original birth certificate. “I ran searches on the widow, looking for this exact scenario, but there was nothing.”

“Both Traylor’s widow and the minor’s records were intentionally buried. I found the widow’s intel on my initial search, including records on several preterm and full-term

births. None of the children survived except Steven Saunders. I also found the stillborn birth record for the minor that postdated Traylor's death. Originally, I dismissed it, since it fit her history. Then I came across new intel and went back to do a deeper dive into the sealed records."

"Sealed," I stated, picking up on the term he hadn't originally used as I stared at the kid's images from the missing persons report.

"Yes. Long story short, the newborn had fetal alcohol syndrome, was removed from the mother's custody, and DNA swabbed. This was at the VA hospital, and a match came back through the DEERS data base. Once they realized the newborn was Traylor's and he was a deceased SEAL, all records were sealed, including the foster-to-adopt records for the infant."

Isoús Christós. "Who adopted the kid?"

"A Force RECON Marine and his wife. They were already in the foster system and willing to take a newborn with FAS."

The hits kept fucking coming. "Is the kid okay neurologically?"

"I didn't find any reported learning disabilities or other health conditions in the minor's records."

No small miracle considering the amount of alcohol we witnessed the widow consume at Quentin's funeral. "What was the new intel?"

November didn't comment.

Instead, he brought up a video, hit play, and glanced at me as he leaned back in his chair.

His screen populated with a shaky image as male voices yelled, then it focused up, and I fucking stared.

My little one. Naked. Being held facedown by two bodyguards as Styx waled on the back of her legs with his drumsticks. Then the source of the male voice yelling came into the shot as Ash charged the closest bodyguard, and with one strike to the throat, took the guy out. Then he lunged over Violet as he was throwing his next punch and missed Styx but

hit the second bodyguard square in the face. The guy flew back, his head hit an amp, and you could see his neck snap before he hit the ground.

Laughing, Styx jumped back as the first bodyguard rallied and grabbed Ash from behind.

The kid was quick.

His elbow strike hit the bodyguard's face, his backward kick landed in the guy's groin and the bodyguard went down. Then Styx stomped repeatedly on the fucker's head until he was clearly dead.

A second later, Styx's face filled the screen, and he grinned. "Did you catch that? Ash Wilder, ladies and gentlemen. Bodyguards? Dead. Ash? Guilty."

"I'm gonna kill you next!" Ash roared. Then the video cut out.

November typed. "Next video."

His monitor filled with another video, this one from a security camera focused on a parking area as Ash came into the field of view. Double-timing it, he was carrying a limp Violet. Dodging between tour buses and a couple semis, he ran to a panel van and fumbled with a set of keys before getting the back open. Then he carefully set a blanket-wrapped Violet in the back, threw her backpack in after her, and slammed the door. Rushing to the driver's side, looking over his shoulder, he got behind the wheel. A few seconds later, he was peeling out of the parking area, then the video ended.

Fucking enraged, it took me two goddamn seconds to focus up to ask what I needed to know. "Where did you get these videos?"

"Saunders. He has a second cell phone. He turned it on briefly a few hours after the meeting, and I grabbed the data off it."

"Where did the van go?"

"North." November focused back on his keyboard. "After leaving the venue and getting out of the city, he avoided

highways and anywhere else that had traffic cams. I lost the trail after an hour.”

Smart fucking kid, but *Iisoús fucking Christós*. “Was the van reported stolen or has it shown up since?”

“No and no. And before you ask, I’m still running it down, but I haven’t found IDs on the dead bodyguards yet.”

For another two goddamn seconds, I stood there. Simultaneously making all the connections and putting it together, I was also trying to fucking process why she didn’t tell me any of this. It kept coming back to one thing.

“I need Kilo,” I told November.

“Copy.”

I thought out loud. “Saunders is going to hole up, set a trap and wait.” And she was voluntarily walking into it for those videos, the kid, or both. Maybe she’d been hiding the kid at that cabin until she could get to Luna for help. Luna had promised her extraction, any time, any place. Maybe she was going to have Luna get her and the kid out, but Saunders got to the kid before she got to Luna. Hell, I didn’t know, and I wouldn’t until I spoke with her.

But I did know one goddamn thing.

I hadn’t offered her an extraction and an anonymous new life.

I’d fucking put her up in a penthouse in the middle of Miami Beach, then told her she wasn’t hiding anymore. Fuck. FUCK.

November glanced at me. “Whatever Saunders is up to, he isn’t going to voluntarily let this go.”

No fucking shit. And all I’d done today was stoke the flame of his obsession.

Conlon walked into the command room. “Didn’t know you two were having a *tête-à-tête*. What I’d miss? Operation take down incestuous drummer?” Conlon dropped the pretense and handed me my ass with a single look. “You should’ve told me. I never would’ve brought her in.”

In that moment, I was so fucking enraged at everyone and everything, I wanted to level Conlon, but he was right.

November spoke up as he glanced toward the wall of monitors. “Satellite images came through on the New Hampshire property. One heat signature inside the cabin.” He typed, and half the monitors became an image of the terrain. “Two-lane road up the mountain, then one access lane to the cabin.” He zoomed out. “No vehicle, no neighbors for five clicks, heavy tree line, drop-off ridge on the west side of the property, and no LZ for a bird.” He typed again. “Nearest airstrip is thirty clicks out, but it’s private, and there’s a residence on-site.”

Which meant no rental vehicle availability. “Length of the runaway at that airstrip?” If it was feasible, I’d use it if I had to.

“It’ll handle one of our Gulfstreams,” November replied.

Conlon stated the obvious. “Thirty clicks is a haul in that terrain if you’re carrying casualties.”

I would carry my little one a hundred fucking clicks through any goddamn terrain, but I got his point. “Nearest executive airport with rental vehicles?” I asked November.

“Eastern Slope Regional airport in Fryeburg, Maine. Twenty-three miles out. I can arrange for a rental.”

“Copy, but first check the charter service Saunders used to fly into Executive. See if you can track where that plane came from and if they’ve logged any flights in or around Jackson, New Hampshire, or anywhere in the White Mountains in the past few weeks.”

A step ahead of me, November had the intel. “Already traced the flight Saunders came in on, and it originated in Boston, touched down in New York, where he supposedly boarded, then flew to Executive here in Miami.”

Bullshit. That fucker got on the charter in Boston. “Boston is, what, a three-hour drive to that cabin in Jackson?” New York would’ve been double that. Saunders didn’t do patience.

“Approximately, yes,” November replied as he typed. “Okay, here we go. No charter flights in and out of New Hampshire or Maine in the past few weeks with that company, but there was one to a Caledonia County airport in Vermont. It’s a one-and-a-half-hour drive from there to the cabin in Jackson.”

“That’s Saunders.” I had no doubt. “He’s using an airstrip in Vermont, thinking he’s covering his tracks. Are those two planes still on the ground at Executive?”

“Yes.” November brought up flight logs on his third monitor. “But one of their fleet just filed a flight plan from Fort Lauderdale to Burlington, Vermont.”

“Run the tail number on that plane. See if it’s actually at Lauderdale or if it’s already in the air.” Saunders wouldn’t risk the drive to Fort Lauderdale. He’d want to get her in the air as soon as possible.

November ran it. “Affirmative. Plane’s already in the air, logged as repositioning to Lauderdale, then on to Vermont.”

Gamó. I glanced at Conlon. “You busy?”

Conlon smiled. “Do I get to fly the G650?”

“Potentially.” If my little one was injured or I was triaging, I wasn’t fucking taking first or second chair, but that wasn’t what I needed Conlon for. “Gear up. You’re going to be behind your scope. We’re heading out in five.” Little known fact, and something Conlon never advertised, but he was both a spotter and a sniper in the Marines.

“Roger that,” he replied without his usual bullshit hazing or humor. “Meet you in the garage in five.”

As Conlon headed out, I called Kilo and glanced at the heat signature still up on the sat image. If it was the kid, he hadn’t moved. “November, can you refresh that sat image?”

“Copy.”

Kilo’s phone rang six times as I watched the sat image reload, but there still wasn’t any change.

I was about to hang up and redial when the command room door opened, and Kilo walked in. “November already texted. Hostage recovery. Pyrotechnics drummer fuck from this afternoon. Potential minefield. I’m read in.” He glanced at the wall of monitors. “November, get me cabin specs, blueprints if available, air temp, ground temp, terrain conditions, road specs, and run a search on these materials in conjunction with the drummer’s financials.” Kilo rattled off a list of supplies that would put anyone on a terrorist watch list. Then he looked back at me as November typed and asked the right question. “How long has the drummer had access to the location?”

“Potentially three months.” That’s when the tour ended and what the date stamp on those videos showed.

“Then let’s get up there.”

SEVENTY-SIX

Hanna

“Let him go,” I demanded, my voice cracking from dehydration. “It’s me you want anyway.”

Ash instantly and foolishly came to my defense. “I’m not leaving without her!”

Styx smirked. “What makes you think either of you two freaks are leaving?” He took another step into the bedroom, and I saw the switch happen. Demonic hatred seeped into his gaze with vicious intent, and his features hardened. Then he looked directly at me. “You think you can fucking ruin my life?”

I stood up on shaky legs and slowly put my hand on my half brother’s shoulder. “This has nothing to do with Ash.” I squeezed hard in an attempt to keep Ash from saying anything before I spoke my next words. “Let Ash go. I’ll stay.”

Styx reached inside his jacket.

I braced for the switchblade I thought he would pull out, but he instead drew a gun and pointed it at Ash.

Ash reflexively took a step back and inadvertently pushed me down onto the bed.

Styx sneered. “You think I give a fuck about this freak?” He waved the gun between us. “He was only a tool. He’s useless to me now.”

“Hanna,” Ash barely whispered. “*Duck.*”

Before I could say no or grab him, Ash bent and rushed Styx like he was going in for a football tackle.

Then my world turned to a slow-motion reel of horror.

Ash hit Styx.

The gun went off.

Both of them fell to the ground.

Ash let out a war cry.

Gun in hand, Styx swung his arm hard.

The sickening sound of metal hitting flesh carried, and Ash crumpled to the floor.

Before my mind told my body to run, Styx was on me.

Then the slow-motion reel turned to real time.

His knee landed on my chest. His slap hit my face. My head whipped to the side. Blood pooled in my mouth. Pain radiated, and cold metal pushed into my temple.

Panting, his rancid alcohol-and-drug breath falling on my face, Styx grabbed his switchblade with his left hand as his right held the gun to my head.

Flicking it open and spinning it in his hand, he held it above me for one suspended moment.

Then he slammed his fist down and drove the knife into my forearm.

My scream filled the entire cabin.

“I always knew you were a screamer, you fucking whore.” Without warning, Styx punched me in stomach, yanked the knife out and brought the blood-dripping blade to my throat.

All the air left my lungs a split second before unimaginable pain radiated to every nerve in my body.

“Now that I have your attention, freak.” Styx dropped his voice in a poor imitation of an emerald-eyed Navy SEAL. “*This is how the conversation is going to unfold.*”

My vision started to tunnel.

My ears started to ring.

But I heard it.

I heard *him*.

“You’re going to beg me for your life. You’re going to do everything I say. You’re going to thank me for every *fucking year* that I let you freeload off me. Then we’re going to wait until the pedophile comes for you. And when he does, you’re going walk your freak-ass self onto the front porch and look right at him with your crazy fucking eyes as I blow him to hell.”

SEVENTY-SEVEN

Delta

I'd brought the G650 down at the empty regional airport a couple hours before dawn, and as promised, November had a rental SUV waiting with the keys in it.

Me, Kilo and Conlon had silently loaded up the older Yukon with our gear, drove halfway up the mountain, then ditched the vehicle after concealing it in the tree line. Three hours later, we were two clicks out from the cabin, watching.

The sun rose and we were still fucking watching.

No Saunders. No Violet. No movement.

But there were a fuck ton of trip wires surrounding the cabin and the dirt lane leading up to it. Tracking them, Kilo systematically scanned the terrain with binoculars for the twentieth time.

I double-checked the latest text update from November. An hour ago, the heat signature had gotten up and was moving around inside the cabin.

I glanced at Conlon as he looked through his scope. "Anything?"

"Not unless you count a shadow moving behind the curtains."

Gamó. I called November.

He answered immediately. "Anything?"

"Not yet. Check the access road again, and rescan the security cam footage from when Saunders got off that charter."

Something wasn't adding up.

"Copy, hold."

Kilo pivoted and scanned south of our position. "Victor, redirect."

Conlon followed Kilo's order and turned.

November came back on the line. "Nothing new on the security footage. The charter left the Vermont airport immediately after the drop-off and a refuel. The black Bronco left the airport before the charter. With the angle of the security cameras, I didn't catch who deplaned with Saunders. All I can see is Saunders behind the wheel as he pulled out, heading southeast. No one in the front passenger seat. Scanning sat images now, but I'm not finding the Bronco on either the country road or the direct access road up to the cabin."

"You see that?" Kilo asked Conlon.

"Copy." I hung up with November and turned. "See what?"

"*Motherfucker*," Conlon muttered. "I've got a clean shot."

"No," Kilo and I clipped at the same time.

"Binos, now," I ordered Kilo.

He handed them over. "Watch his gait and where he steps."

I focused on where Conlon was spotting.

Isoús fucking Christós.

Saunders, on foot, carrying an unconscious Violet over his shoulder as he stepped in a deliberate pattern.

"What the fuck is he doing?" Conlon asked.

"Avoiding pressure plates," Kilo answered.

"Don't fucking shoot," I warned Conlon. "If he drops her ___"

"Right, right," Conlon said absently as he adjusted his scope. "But hear me out. I'm watching where he steps, and

he's only avoiding the east side of the road. I can angle the shot."

"NO." I grabbed my Sniper M4 and shouldered my pack. "I'm circling back and catching Saunders's six to follow him in. Conlon, eyes on the cabin. Move into the forward position Kilo found, but stay twenty meters out. Watch for trip wires. Kilo, track his pattern. As soon as Saunders hits the cabin, bring the Yukon up. Get as close as you can." She wasn't only unconscious. I saw blood in her hair. No fucking way was I carrying her down the mountain with a head injury. "Switching to comms. Sitrep in ten." I took off.

Seven minutes later, I was tracking Saunders as I kept to his footsteps.

The fuck had to pause when he got close to the cabin to step over his own trip wires.

Sighting him, I watched as he scanned left to right, barely cleared two of the lines, then hit the steps to the cabin before walking in without unlocking the door.

My scope trained on him, I got a single glance inside the cabin before he kicked the door shut behind him.

Conlon spoke through the comms. "I didn't spot any movement inside. Delta?"

"Negative." Where the fuck was the kid? "Moving in. Conlon, hold position. Kilo, sitrep."

"Copy," Conlon confirmed.

"In the vehicle, rounding the last turn," Kilo replied. "West shoulder of the road is clear. Anti-personnel mines along the east side, spaced every five meters. Passed the Bronco half a klick back from the cabin. Coming up on your six now. Give me three minutes and I'll have the trip wires in front of the cabin disabled."

"Good copy," I answered.

"I've got visual," Conlon interjected. "Kitchen window."

Kilo silently moved past me on foot as I redirected my scope in time to see Saunders shove the curtains aside and take

a cursory glance out as he drank from a bottle of whiskey. Fucking drunk or zoned out, he didn't see me or Kilo before he tipped his head back for another swallow and let go of the curtain.

The material fell back down, but a corner got hung up, leaving a small opening that gave us an inside visual.

"Conlon, how's your sightline on that curtain opening?" I scanned the other windows, looking for movement.

"If you're asking if I can take out a motherfucking trip wire-happy asshole drummer, then yes, I've got the shot. I'd say just tell me when, but I have a feeling you've got something else in mind for that prick."

"Hold position," I ordered, ignoring Conlon's commentary as I glanced at Kilo, who was still working the trip wires in front. "Kilo, what are we looking at, explosives-wise?"

"C-4, mines, frags. Looks like he used whatever he could get his hands on."

"Great," Conlon clipped. "Black market, fire sale special. Let's end this—"

A shot was fired inside the cabin, a male voice let out a roar, then I heard her scream.

I was fucking moving.

Kilo immediately stood up. "HALT. Don't take that next step."

I froze midstep, but I was scanning every fucking window with my scope. "Out of my way, Kilo."

"You breach now, I can't guarantee nothing will detonate. Anyone runs out, same problem," he warned.

Fucking scanning, not seeing movement, losing my shit, I barked at Kilo. "Get me fucking clearance, goddamn it. I need a path to that front door."

"Thirty seconds," Kilo replied. "Landmine two feet in front of you on your right."

“You’ve got twenty seconds.” Glancing down, I noted the mine’s position. “Conlon, anything?”

“I’ve got movement,” Conlon replied. “It’s Saunders. He’s pulling out his cell. *Shit*. No clear shot. Wait. *Wait*. I’ve got a potential chest shot, definite shoulder hit. Window closing. Decide.”

“Take the shoulder shot,” I ordered.

Conlon fired.

A single pane of the kitchen window shattered.

“He’s down,” Conlon confirmed. “I have a clean head shot now. Advise.”

“Conlon, hold,” I ordered.

Kilo stood up and glanced at me. “Cleared. Straight path from the Yukon to the front step only. Don’t stray. Moving to east side of cabin.” He turned, and I made it one step.

The front door of the cabin burst open.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Delta

A head taller than her, broad shoulders, underfed and sporting a hematoma on his left temple—the kid held on to his half sister with both arms as he stepped onto the porch and glared at me. “Who are you?”

I lowered my M4. “I’m hers. I heard a weapon discharge. Anyone hit?”

“No. Her what?” he demanded, holding his own for a fifteen-year-old kid whose voice hadn’t completely dropped yet.

Trembling, her arm bleeding, she placed her hand on the kid’s chest. “Th-th-that’s Ridge.” In shock, she still managed to look pointedly at me before she gave me intel I already knew. “H-he served with our father.”

My gaze locked in on the kid and the familiar switchblade he was holding, I returned her glance for only a tenth of a second to acknowledge that I understood what she was telling me. I also took in the contusions, head wound, and swollen cheek that was too fucking similar to five years ago. My rage escalated.

“I never heard of him. That’s not one of the names you told me,” the kid argued.

“Delta,” she corrected.

The kid eyed me. “You’re a SEAL?”

“I was.”

“You were on our father’s Team?”

“Yes.”

“Were you there when he died?”

Gamó, this kid was brazen like his father and surprising like his sister. I didn’t deny him the truth, but I wanted to get to her STAT. “I was.”

He asked what I knew he would, what she never had. “Did he die quickly?”

“Yes.”

The kid pushed. “How?”

With a couple dozen fifty cal rounds in him. “With honor.”

He stared at me for a beat. Then he nodded and extracted a word from the SEAL Ethos. “A warrior.”

“Special breed,” I agreed.

“I’m going to be a SEAL,” he boasted, holding the blood-soaked knife dangerously close to her neck.

“You have to pass BUD/S first, then SQT,” I warned, sharpening my tone to move this along.

“I know,” he answered defiantly. “And I know what SEAL Qualification Training is. I’m gonna pass both.”

“Then they’d be lucky to have you. Release Violet now. She needs her injuries attended to.”

His arms stiffened around her. “She doesn’t like to be called that.”

“I call her that. Saunders is handled. The situation is de-escalated. Stand down.”

“How handled?” he demanded.

I stared at the kid.

He caught on quick. “She tell you not to kill him? Is that why you’re not saying anything? Because I heard the shot come through the window. That’s why I grabbed her and came out here.”

“I like this kid,” Conlon said through comms.

“Ash,” she rasped.

I ignored Conlon.

The kid ignored her. “But unless he’s dead, nothing is handled, and I’m not letting go of her. He set those wires all over the place, and she can’t walk straight. You better stay the hell where you are, too, because I also saw him digging. He coulda buried anything out here.”

“I’m aware, and we’re working on it. Your position’s clear. Bring her to me, or I’m coming for her.” Her blood was already soaking his shirt. This kid had two more seconds of my patience.

“How do you know it’s clear?”

She patted his chest. “It’s okay, Ash. If he says it’s clear, he means it.”

The kid looked down. Then he saw his shirt, his voice broke, and he lost his shit. “No, it’s not!” He pointed at her with the knife. “Look what he did to you, Hanna. Look what he did *again*. This is my fault. *This is all my fault.*”

Palming my M45, I moved in.

She dropped her hand and frantically tapped two fingers against her thigh. “It’s not your fault, Ash. It never was. It’s his. It was always his.”

“No, it wasn’t!” he yelled, raising his arm.

“Drop the knife,” I ordered. “NOW.”

The kid looked at me, and for a split second, it was like I was staring at a young version of Quentin on the battlefield. Then both the kid’s expression and arm fell. “She only came back because of me.”

“I know.” Still palming my M45, I reached for her. “Hand her over.”

He didn’t fucking let go of her. “I told her not to.”

I gave him my last warning. “I’m not repeating myself.”

“Sorry.” The kid started nodding. “Sorry. I wasn’t doing anything to her.” He held the switchblade out to me.

Taking the knife and folding it closed, I pocketed it.

“It’s okay,” she soothed, like the kid was the one who was bleeding. “It’s going to be okay, Ash.”

Unsure where the hell else she was injured, I grasped the back of her neck, and she swayed.

The kid reluctantly let go of her. Then he started info dumping. “Whatever happens, she shouldn’t be in trouble. I was the one who stole the van. She was only protecting me. I told her she didn’t have to. I told her I could take care of myself, but she insisted after I killed those bodyguards and Styx got it on video. He was holding it over her head.”

Taking her face in my hands, quickly scanning the length of her, I gave the kid an order. “Keep talking.” I already knew what he’d say, but he needed to get it out to absolve his guilt.

“I knew it was bad when I woke up a couple days ago and couldn’t remember falling asleep. I tried to leave, but there were those wires everywhere. And Styx had taken the van anyway, but I was still looking for a way to get around those wires. Then Styx came back with Hanna.”

I dropped my voice. “Picking you up, *matákia mu*.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, leaning into me. “I-I have a brother. I was trying to protect him. I thought—”

“Shh. I know. No more apologies. I’ve got you now.” Gently sliding an arm under her legs and behind her back, I watched her face for signs of duress as I brought her to my chest, but she only closed her eyes. Turning, I addressed the kid. “Follow my exact steps to the SUV.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Delta’s fine.” I glanced at her bleeding arm. The wound was deep. “What did Saunders give you, Ash?”

“I don’t know, but he was whacked out on all kinds of stuff. Taking pills, smoking shit, drinking. Is she going to be okay?”

“Yes. Move into forward position and open the liftgate.”

The kid skirted around me but stopped a pace ahead and glanced at the dirt lane that'd turned to mud from rain earlier this morning. “You sure there're no wires or nothing buried back here?”

“Hold.” I spoke into my comm. “Kilo, you copy?”

“Yeah.”

“Rear of the SUV. Am I clear?” I only saw boot prints outside the tire tracks on the west side.

“You should be good,” Kilo answered, distracted.

“I don't do should.” Not with her in my arms and her brother a step ahead of me. “I need an all-clear.”

“Check the ground,” Kilo replied. “Smooth or disturbed dirt?”

“No dirt. Mud.”

“Uneven or patterned from the rain?”

“Uneven and patterned,” I answered.

“You're good.”

“Copy.” I looked at the kid. “You strong enough to hold her carefully for a minute?”

He stood taller. “I'm strong.”

“Come here.”

No hesitation, the kid came at me, holding his arms out.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at me with alarm. “Delta, I can—”

“Not a discussion, *matákia mu*.” I handed her to her brother, then I gave him another order. “Retrace our exact steps back toward the cabin.”

Giving me the same alarmed look his sister had but not questioning me, he retreated.

I waited until he was at a safe distance, then I stepped up to the rear of the SUV.

No pressure plates. No explosions.

Opening the lift gate, I set down my M4 and grabbed my pack before glancing toward the cabin.

The kid was already bringing her back to me. “You went first because you weren’t sure.”

I didn’t address his comment. Noting how her eyes were closed again, I took her from him, then gently set her down in the back and issued him an order. “Get in beside her.”

He scrambled into the SUV as I pulled supplies from my bag. “How’d you get the head wound?”

The kid snorted as I applied a QuikClot dressing to her arm. “Styx.”

I quizzed him as I looked at the wound on her head. “Loss of consciousness, dizziness, or any confusion?”

“No, I’m good. Are you a doctor too?”

“No.” I grabbed antiseptic. “Hold the dressing on her arm. Apply pressure.” I didn’t need him to. I’d wrap her arm in a second, then stitch her up on the plane. But I wanted her arm held down when I poured the antiseptic on her head wound, in case she flinched.

The kid’s hand replaced mine. “Got it.”

I quickly sterilized the wound on her head.

She sucked in a sharp breath of pain, and her eyes opened again. “*Delta.*”

“Right here, *mátia levántas.*” I cupped the side of her face that wasn’t swollen. “Almost done. Close your eyes for me.”

Reaching up with her good arm, she grasped my wrist. “I-I left you something. On the counter. To let you know—”

“I got the message, *matákia mu.* I’m here, and you’re safe. Close your eyes.”

A tear slid down her cheek, but she complied.

I grabbed a fresh QuikClot, then glanced at the kid as I held the antiseptic over her arm and nodded.

Reading me, he lifted the bandage.

I sterilized the knife wound on her arm.

She cried out and tried to sit up, but Ash held her arm, and I put the new dressing on her.

“Hard part’s over, *matákia mu*,” I assured as I quickly wrapped tape around her arm. I’d give her an IV and pain meds on the flight, then get the glass out of her head wound.

“What language are you speaking?” the kid asked.

“Greek. Stay with her. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Styx has a gun,” he warned.

“So do I.” I moved toward the cabin.

“He wired everything together,” he blurted.

Missing something, I glanced back at the kid. “We know.”

Still holding his sister’s arm, his face twisted with guilt. “If one thing blows, it’ll be like a chain reaction. They’ll all explode.”

“Confirming chain reaction,” Kilo’s voice came through the comms. “Still tracing and disabling leads.”

“Take care of your sister,” I ordered the kid. “I’ll be back in a minute.” I turned toward the cabin and lowered my voice. “Kilo, how much munitions are we talking about?”

“More than enough to level this place and everything around it,” Kilo replied.

“Start a stockpile on the front porch. Any detonation triggers inside the cabin?”

“Copy on stockpile. Negative on detonation triggers inside,” Kilo replied.

That didn’t sound like Saunders’s MO, but I’d never accuse the fuck of being smart enough to think shit through. “No remote trigger?”

“Haven’t found a receiver. All pressure plates and wire triggers out here.”

“Copy. Conlon, eyes still on the target?”

“If you mean, am I’m watching him bleed out as he crawls for his cell phone at a pathetically slow rate, then yep. Eyes on the prize.”

Fucking *Christós*. “Copy. Kilo, stockpile and retreat. Then get behind the wheel of the Yukon. Conlon, watch my six until I get inside. If he reaches that cell, shoot his hand, but miss the phone.” I trusted Kilo, but Saunders was going for that phone for a reason. Either to send out those videos or to blow us all to hell. I wasn’t taking a chance either way.

“Roger that, boss,” Conlon replied.

“Copy,” Kilo added.

“Meet at the SUV in two minutes,” I ordered as I stepped onto the cabin’s porch.

SEVENTY-NINE

Delta

Reeking of alcohol, his shoulder blown out, Saunders streaked blood across the kitchen floor as he inched toward his cell phone.

Stepping around him, I brought the heel of my boot down on the device.

Rolling to his back with effort, he looked up at me and laughed. “You think that’s the only phone I got, pedophile?”

“I think I have a 45 ACP round with your name on it.”

“Is that supposed to scare me?”

“No. Impress you.” I hadn’t fucking killed him yet.

He chuckled, then grunted in pain. “I’m impressed you can still get your dick up, old man.”

I pulled out his switchblade and flicked it open. “I’m about to impress you more.” Without warning, I drove the blade into his forearm.

The fuck screamed like a woman.

“Are you impressed yet?” Twisting the knife before I pulled it out, I immediately drove it into his other arm. Then I slammed my fist into his face, shattering his cheekbone. “How about now?” I yanked the knife out.

Sputtering through a cry of pain, he turned onto his side.

“That was a mistake.” I brought my heel down on his ankle and held the crushed bones under my boot as I kicked

his fucking knee.

This time, he yelled. Loudly.

“You know what’s most impressive about me?”

Coughing up blood, he didn’t answer.

“I keep my fucking promises.” I kicked him onto his back. Then I crushed his fucking clavicle with the driving force of a single stomp of my boot.

His mouth opened, his eyes rolled back and he fucking jerked.

I drove his knife into his thigh.

His eyes refocused, and the fuck looked at me for the last goddamn time.

“This one’s for Violet.” I kicked him in the groin.

He fucking wailed.

Palming my M45, I put a round between his eyes.

Silence descended.

Holstering my gun, I walked back to the now-idling Yukon and sat in the open liftgate next to a wide-eyed mini-Quentin who was holding my barely conscious *matákia mu*. “Kilo, move out to the first turn in the road, then hold.”

“Copy.”

Kilo drove the short distance, and I picked up my M4.

As soon as Kilo stopped, I aimed.

Then I unloaded my magazine into the stockpile on the porch.

The cabin exploded into flames, I pulled the liftgate closed and Kilo drove off as I took my little one from the arms of her half brother.

“Holy shit,” Ash whispered.

EIGHTY

Hanna

Sore, hurting from more than my injuries, I stood on the tarmac of a private airport somewhere in Texas and looked up at eyes that were almost like mine. “I need to say something.”

Ash scrubbed the back of his neck nervously. “That doesn’t sound good.” He glanced past me and lowered his voice. “And I think he’s still mad that you took out your IV and came down those flight stairs to say goodbye to me.”

“He’s not mad at me.” Maybe Demetrius was, a little. But I couldn’t not walk off the plane with Ash. I barely remembered the flight here from New Hampshire. I must’ve fallen asleep, but now I needed to talk to Ash, just me and him. “And it’s not bad.” I grasped his hand. “I know I’ve told you this before, but I need to say it again, and I hope you hear me. You did nothing wrong that last night on tour. I don’t want you to live with that for the rest of your life. I don’t want you to think you’re a bad person or feel guilty for what happened. I would do anything to take that entire night away so you didn’t have to carry any burden from it. I’m so sorry I can’t. Our father always used to say, though, that the past is the past. No sense dwelling on it. That’s my hope for you. That you don’t dwell on it.”

My brother’s expression immediately turned to anger. “I don’t have any guilt over that. Those two asshole bodyguards got what was coming to them.” His nostrils flared, but his voice lowered. “*They were holding you down so Styx could beat you.*” His jaw clenched. “And he wasn’t fucking stopping that night, Hanna. *He wasn’t.*” Defiance bled into his tone. “I’m only sorry I didn’t get to Styx and that he got video of me

beating the shit out of those two assholes. But I'd do it again. I would."

Oh God. "Ash, don't say that. Violence isn't the answer. You are *not* Styx."

He snorted. "You got that right. And I'm not sorry he's dead either. He deserved what he got and more."

"Ash!" I quickly glanced behind me.

His defiant teenage tone held. "Don't worry, no one can hear us, but I wouldn't care if any of those guys did."

Oh my God. I couldn't have failed him worse if I had tried. "Ash, please, *please* listen to me. I know you've seen—"

"Hanna, stop. You know my dad's a Marine. Well, my adoptive dad. You know what I mean. He was Force RECON like that Victor guy who talks funny, like he's English or something. Anyway, my dad did sixteen tours when he served, and Mom said he came home from most all of them messed up. Sometimes *real* messed up. I remember a lot of them. Me and Mom would put him back together, and he'd go right back. Trust me, I've seen all kinds of stuff. I'm not some stupid kid."

My heart. "I know you're not." Tears welled. "You're much smarter than me."

"No crying," Ash blurted, waving his hands with a sudden look of panic on his face.

A half smile touched my lips. "Okay."

Narrowing his eyes, he dropped his hands. "Promise?"

I smiled in full. "No."

He smiled back. "You got leaky eyes."

"I've got a great brother."

"Yeah, you do," he replied with a grin.

Dropping my smile, I squeezed his hand. "Promise me you'll stay this way."

“I will.” He nodded earnestly. “But hopefully, I’ll get bigger. I want to get back on the football team and crush it.”

Glad that he was thinking about sports and not the lost year of his life, I was sorry I had to bring up one more thing. “Please remember, you can’t ever tell anyone about New York or the cabin.” Or any of it.

“I know. I got it. I won’t. And just so you know, that guy Victor said the video is gone forever. He said it’s erased from everywhere, and he said there’s some kinda police report in New York that says the two bodyguards beat each other and caused each other’s deaths, or something like that. But anyway, I’m in the clear. You don’t have to worry about that.”

I tried not to chastise myself again for not telling Demetrius sooner about all of this. “Thank you for letting me know.” I really had missed a lot on the plane ride here.

“No problem. And um, I just wanna say, I’m sorry for everything bad, but like, I’m not sorry for the parts where I got to hang out with you, and you know, hear about my real dad.”

“I’m not sorry for those parts either.” I would endure it all again just to meet him. “But I do wish I could come in with you when you see your parents and at least apologize.” I knew I couldn’t. We couldn’t ever tell anyone where we’d been or what had happened, but I still wished I could be there for him in that moment.

“Yeah, I get it, but it’s better this way. Delta is right. He explained it all while you were sleeping on the plane.”

“I’m sorry I fell asleep.” I’m sorry I had lost that time with him.

Ash snorted. “Not like you had a choice.”

I frowned. “What?”

Instantly dropping his head, he shuffled his feet. “They, ah, you know. Gave you something as soon as we got on the plane.” He looked back up, but his expression was holding on to guilt. “You know, medicine? In the IV? I asked Delta not to do it, not to drug you up. I know you don’t like anything like that, but he said it was best. He said it was so you wouldn’t be

in pain. He also said you were afraid of heights, or closed-in spaces, or something like that, and he had to, like, stitch your arm and take care of your head. So I... you know. I kinda let him do it.”

“Thank you.” Swallowing down so much I wanted to say, so many things I wanted to apologize for, things I knew he would never accept an apology for because somehow, despite being raised by another man, he was like our father. He was protective and kind like him, but Ash also held the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“I didn’t do anything,” he argued.

He did everything. He got me away from Styx. But he didn’t like praise any more than Demetrius or our father did. Squeezing his hand again, I instead asked what I was worried most about. “Where are you going to say you were?”

Ash smiled with half his mouth how Daddy used to. “I talked to some guy called November. He made up this whole-ass story for me about helping a runaway girl escape a bad situation. Then November put that SEAL named Alpha on the call who served with our real dad, and I talked to him too. I got it covered.”

“So you won’t be in trouble with your parents?” It felt strange to say his parents when I had never met them and he had never met our father.

Ash frowned. “For what?”

“Being gone?” Worrying his adoptive parents? Coming home a different person?

“Nah, Mom and Dad are just going to be happy to see me. They might ground me until I graduate high school though.” He chuckled. “But whatever, I’m good with that. I’ve had enough of being on the road.” His frown suddenly returned, but this time it was deeper. “Hey, I didn’t ask. Where are you going to live? With that Delta guy? Are you gonna be okay with him?” He glanced past my shoulder again, then lowered his voice. “He’s staring you down right now.” He lowered his

head. “He’s kinda intense. He never like, moves more than a few feet away from you.”

“I know.” I smiled. “I’ll be okay.”

Ash didn’t return the smile, but he nodded. “Okay, well, if you need a place to crash, I’m sure Mom and Dad will let you stay. I used to have friends stay over all the time. They’re cool like that.”

“I promise, I’ll be okay, and I’m glad they’ve been good parents to you.” Much, much more than glad.

“Yeah, they’re great.” He dropped his gaze to his feet. “But I wish I’d met my real dad, you know?”

“I do.”

He inhaled sharply and looked back up. “Anyway, Delta said he’s going to smooth things over with Mom and Dad after I’ve been home for a few weeks. Then he said I could come out to see you in Florida. He said he’d take care of it and everything. Like, I think he means another ride on a private jet.”

“If Delta said he would do it, then he will.”

Ash nodded. “Okay.” He glanced at his feet again. “Cuz that’s what I want, you know? To see you.” His voice became quiet. “You’re my only sister.”

“That’s what I want too.” I hugged him. “You’re my only brother.”

He hugged me back fiercely. “That’s right. *I’m* your brother.”

I smiled through tears. “Yes, you are.”

Ash abruptly pulled back and swiped quickly at his face. “Okay, enough mushy shit. I gotta go. November said he warned Mom and Dad I’m coming home, and I don’t want to be too late. I, ah, love you. You know, because you’re my blood, and we’re family. Forever.” He turned to walk away but glanced back over his shoulder. “And oh yeah, November said we can text, and Delta said he would get you a phone. So I’ll text you.”

“Okay. And Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you too.”

My brother smiled wide. “I know.” He cocked his head at the worn backpack on his shoulder. “You *really* love me.” His smile dropped as he glanced past my shoulder and tipped his chin at Demetrius. Then he took off.

A moment later, a warm hand landed on the back of my neck. “Are you all right, little one?”

I looked up a grass-green-eyed SEAL, and for the first time in my life, I knew I would be more than all right. “Yes.”

“Ready to go home?”

“Please.”

My Greek god picked me up and carried me back onto the plane.

EIGHTY-ONE

Hanna

With the same stern expression he'd been wearing for two weeks, Demetrius rubbed cream on the back of my thighs in silent determination as we both lay naked on his bed.

For two weeks, each night before bed, I had let him.

For two weeks, I had said nothing.

I knew what he was doing.

But tonight, I spoke up. "I'm fine, Demetrius." The welts looked better than they ever had. My arm was almost healed, and all the sore parts of my body that used to ache no longer bothered me. I wasn't speaking an untruth. I was fine.

"Don't, *matákia mu.*"

I inhaled for courage. "I know what you're doing."

His hand paused, and his beautiful eyes met mine, but he didn't say anything.

I was learning that he said many things when he didn't speak. Sometimes, his silence was louder than any words he could've spoken, including his dark poetry in Greek.

This was one of those times.

He had seen the video. "You saw the video." I knew it as soon as Ash had told me on the tarmac of that Texas airport that the video was taken care of. Demetrius had seen it all, and this was his way of atoning, but he was not the perpetrator of Styx's sins. "You have nothing to apologize to me for."

“Do not deny me this, *mátia levántas*.”

I tried to divert his stern expression and dark mood. “I would rather you touch me elsewhere.”

He removed his hand completely. Then he went to the very place I didn’t want to ever go to again. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

My own shame and regret came flooding back. “We’ve talked about this.” I had tried to explain to him that I was going to André Luna because Styx didn’t remember him. “If Mr. Luna could get both me and Ash new identities, then I thought Ash would be free. If Styx tried to look for him, he wouldn’t know where to start. But if I had come to you, you would have been the first person Styx would have looked into. He was always paranoid. I just—I thought I was protecting you and Ash this way. If Styx would have found anything that made him suspect you had helped me, he would have tried to kill you. You saw what he did at that cabin.”

“He tried anyway, *matákia mu*. I’m here, he’s not.”

“I know.” Just like Ash, I wasn’t sorry Styx was gone. I knew that didn’t make me a good person, but Demetrius had reassured me over and over these past weeks that it made me human. He’d also said I was perfect how I was, but every night, he was still rubbing cream onto my scars as if he needed them to go away, and that didn’t make me feel perfect.

“I’m still hearing your thoughts. Speak.”

It wasn’t the first time Demetrius had spoken this same sentiment to me. He was more than attentive, and I knew whatever I said to him, he would listen, but on this, I was hesitant.

“I said speak, little one.”

“The past is the past,” I blurted.

His inhale was deep. “Our experiences form and teach us. I was asking again to make sure I understand.”

“I don’t think that’s why you were asking,” I barely whispered.

He said nothing.

I said what I should have weeks ago. “I think you feel guilt and are trying to make up for something I do not blame you for.”

“Don’t mistake who I am and how I care for you as guilt.”

“I don’t.” I had not showered alone once in two weeks. I hadn’t dressed myself or made my own meals. Demetrius had expertly and tenderly taken care of me the same way he had made love to me every day—with dominance, but also with gentleness. “I love how you take care of me.” But I didn’t mistake any of that for what he was doing now.

The expressionless mask that was the SEAL part of him fell over his features. “But?”

I saw the guardedness now for what it was. Demetrius wanted every one of my thoughts. He took them and he played them through his brilliant mind as he analyzed them until he could fix them, assuage them, or turn them around. He wanted me to feel safe. That was how he truly protected and sheltered me.

But he did not like to give me any of his own thoughts in return. Not the heavy feelings, not the hard and uncomfortable emotions, not the very ones that he so diligently tried to erase from me. At first, I wasn’t sure if he even harbored any. He was a man of action. His practicality rivaled his dominance. But after two weeks of his careful attention to my welts, I saw him.

I saw him, and I knew what he was doing.

I looked into a Greek warrior’s eyes. “You want to rub my scars away so you don’t feel guilt. And I want my scars to go away so you don’t see my past and try to own that guilt.” I put my hand against his heart. “But neither of those things are ever going to happen.”

“*Mátia*—”

I touched my fingers to his lips. “Weeks ago, I said I deserved to be chosen. Then you told me you chose me. But you also deserve the same in return. I choose you, Demetrius

Ridge Demos. I choose you every time. No matter what. And I know the past forms us, but I am the tide. I am *your* tide.”

His large palm flattened against my bare back, and he gave me his words of love. “I’m your protection and shelter.”

Yes, he was. “Home,” I whispered.

“Home,” he agreed, sliding his hand to my hip and rolling me onto my back before grasping my thigh and pushing my leg until I was spread wide open for him.

The single dominant gesture made desire surge and need clench deep in my core. But more than that, as he angled his huge muscular body between my legs and pressed his hard length against my entrance, I knew that tomorrow would be different.

Tomorrow would finally be the start of our future.

Grasping the other half of my soul around the back of his neck, I gave him all of my heart. “I love you.”

With one merciless and dominant thrust, he drove into me. “*S’agapó.*”

Then my love did what he had not done in two weeks.

He took me hard and rough. He fucked me without holding back. He took my body and my mind to the very edge of madness until I cried out his name in desperate need.

Then he let me have my release as he filled me with his seed.

EPILOGUE

Delta

“Demetrius Ridge Demos,” she whispered in a stunned voice as she stared at the view.

Standing behind her on the outdoor terrace with an arm around her chest and my palm on her throat, I kissed her bare shoulder. “Yes?”

“This is *not* a surprise.”

“No?” I touched my lips to the soft skin on the side of her neck.

“No.” She angled her head to give me more room.

I pressed my hard cock against her sweet ass. “Do you need a better surprise?”

Her body attuned to mine, her hips pushed back into me. “I need a better word for surprise.” Grasping my wrist with both hands, she looked up at me. “You *own* this?”

“Yes.”

“A brand-new oceanfront *mansion*? In *Greece*?”

“A five-bedroom villa in Zakynthos with ocean views that I had built three years ago,” I corrected. And technically, we weren’t on the ocean. We had to walk fifty meters down the cliffside to get to the Ionian Sea.

She stared at me.

Tipping the side of my mouth up, I raised an eyebrow. “Happy?”

She didn't smile. She looked back out at the view. "You are rich."

"We are comfortable." What was mine was hers.

"This is more than comfortable."

I smiled in full. "Should we downsize?" I liked that I could spar with my little one now.

"I think it may be a little too late for that. You already told Neil to combine the two penthouses into one. You said the construction was starting as soon as we got on the plane. And I can feel your smile. You're teasing me."

"I'm enjoying you, *matákia mu*." I kissed her temple. "I'm also proud of you. You did well on the flight." We'd hitched a ride here with Alpha and Zulu on one of the G650s. By mid-flight, she'd been comfortable enough for me to swap with Alpha and take second chair for a couple of hours while Trefor told her a few stories about Quentin.

"I'm not afraid of heights or closed-in spaces anymore if I'm with you. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to hear about my father from Alpha, but I still can't believe you didn't tell me that you're also a pilot. Is there anything you can't do?"

Yes. I couldn't undo the past. "Many things."

"I don't believe that," she said with her own special pureness of heart. "Do you live here?"

"I come here." When I could. "Would you like to live here?" I'd only planned on being here a month while the remodel on the penthouses took place, but if my little one wanted this to be our home base, I'd make it happen.

She looked back up at me with a new version of shock. "You would live here full time?"

"*Eísai i psychí mou*. I'll live wherever you want, *mátia levántas*."

Her voice turned soft. "You are my soul too."

“*Eísai i kardiá mou.*” She was more than just my soul.
“You are my heart as well, *matákia mu.*”

Color flushed her cheeks, and I got the shy smile she reserved for only me. “I love you.”

“*S’agapó.*”

“You are my home. Always.” She held my gaze for a beat, then she looked out across the wide expanse of the multi-leveled terraces and the hundred-square-meter infinity pool before taking in the view of the sea. “It’s very beautiful here.” She glanced toward the orchard. “Are those trees part of your property?”

“Yes.”

“They bear fruit?”

“Olives. And there are some fig trees.” She hadn’t noticed what else was growing yet.

She looked back up at me, and humor touched her voice. “I can’t envision you picking fruit off your trees.”

My cell vibrated in my pocket. “We have gardeners and house staff. One moment, little one.” I pulled out my phone and glanced at the screen. “I believe this will be for you.” Swiping to answer the video call, I held the phone in front of both of us.

“Ash!” she exclaimed.

The kid smiled wide at her. “Hi, Hanna Banana.” Then he looked nervously at me. “Ah, hey, hi, Delta. Sorry about calling you, man. But, like, she wasn’t answering her phone. And I was just, you know, wondering if she was okay, because of the flight and all.”

“You can call me anytime, Ash.” I’d told him as much several times, but he was still finding his ground with me. After what he’d been through with her, I didn’t blame him for his reticence.

“Okay, thanks, because she, like, *never* answers her phone.” He rolled his eyes, then smiled at her. “No offense.”

“I do too answer it,” she defended.

I smiled, and Ash laughed outright before teasing her. “You don’t even carry it with you anywhere. I have to call fifty times before you even realize it’s ringing.”

“That is not true!”

Ash looked at me deadpan. “Am I right, or am I right?”

“She isn’t fond of her phone, but this one’s on me.” I’d taken to carrying it for her, but I’d left it inside with the luggage before we’d stepped out onto the terrace. “It’s inside the villa.”

“Villa?” the kid asked.

My *mátia levántas* took the phone from my hands. “Oh, Ash, you have to see.” She turned the phone to scan the property. “Isn’t it beautiful?” She brought the phone back around so we were both in the frame. “You would love it here.” She glanced up at me. “Can he come next time?”

I looked at the kid. “You’re always welcome here, Ash.”

Like her, the kid was prone to showing his emotions. His face flushed, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, okay, awesome. And thanks.” He chuckled embarrassedly. “I’ve never been out of the country.”

“Have your parents start the application for your passport.” I made a mental note to follow through with his adoptive father.

“Okay, cool. I’ll ask them.” He frowned. “How long does that take?”

Already seeing how this conversation was going to play out, I gave him the intel he needed. “You can have one expedited in a few days.”

“Oh, okay. Good to know.”

She asked what I knew she would. “Ash, when is your next break from school?”

“Ah, like, in three weeks, then I have a whole week off.”

The kid had no sooner finished his sentence before she was looking up at me with a tentative smile.

I took the phone from her hand. “Would you like to come join us during your break?”

Her hands wrapped around my forearms, and she squeezed tight.

“For real? In Greece?” he asked excitedly.

“Yes.”

The kid smiled wide. “That’d be *awesome*.” His expression sobered. “But I gotta ask Mom and Dad first. You know, make sure they’re cool with it. And, um, are you sure I wouldn’t be, like, intruding?”

“You’re never an intrusion.” He made my *mátia levántas* happy. “I’ll speak with your father tomorrow. If he gives his permission, I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Oh, wow. Okay, cool. Thanks!” He smiled directly at me for the first time.

“You’re welcome. Here’s your sister.” I started to hand the phone back to my little one.

“Hey, um, Delta?”

I paused. “Yes?”

“Can I, like, talk?” He lowered his voice. “You know, *openly*?”

I’d made sure November had encrypted the new cell phone he’d gotten after he’d gone home. “You may.” I also knew what this was about. “You saw the press release.” Violet and I had spoken about it last night.

“Yeah.” The kid rubbed the back of his neck as his expression took a dive. “So, like, they’re saying Styx took his own life, and they already got a new drummer for the band. Does that mean that everything’s, you know... done, *done*?”

“It is.”

He nodded, and his gaze drifted as he exhaled. “Okay, cool, cool. Thanks.”

“Ash.”

He looked back at me. “Yeah?”

“You’re good.”

The kid inhaled. Then his shoulders squared, his expression locked down and he became a vision of Quentin. “Copy that.”

Tipping my chin, I handed the phone to my little one.

“I love you, Ash,” she quietly told him.

“Love you too.” He smiled, this time more reserved. “And I guess I’m gonna see you soon.”

“You are,” she reassured.

His wide smile came back. “Awesome. Bye, Hanna Banana.” He glanced at me. “See ya, Delta.”

She waved, and the kid ended the call.

Taking my phone back, I turned it off and pocketed it before picking her up.

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to ever thank me, *matákia mu.*”

“I am anyway.” I got her reserved smile.

“Would you like to learn to swim now or later?”

Her face softened, but her eyes widened. “You remembered.”

“I did.” I remembered everything about her. “Swim?”

Heat flushed her face. “That depends.”

“On?”

“Why did you pick me up in the first place?”

Because I could. Because I always would. Because that was who I was. “To carry you inside.” To show her what I’d had planted outside the master suite. To show her that even

three years ago when I'd built this place, I'd always had her on my mind.

“Then inside, please.”

I didn't hesitate.

I strode into the house and took her to the master suite, where the doors to the balcony had already been opened by the staff prior to our arrival, per my request.

Reluctant to let go of her, wanting to immediately sink inside her sweet cunt after nine torturous hours on a flight where she wore nothing except the summer dress I'd put her in, I forced myself to put her down instead.

Like I knew she would, she walked toward the view of the ocean.

“Oh, Demetrius.” She fingered the sheer curtains drifting in the warm breeze. “This is beautiful. This is—” Halting mid-sentence, she stared down at the garden of lavender. Then she looked back at me. “Is that...?”

“Royal Purple. Yes.”

Her eyes welled. “When did you plant them?”

Closing the distance between us, I palmed her throat. “When I had the villa built.”

“You....” Tears fell down her cheeks. “You planted them for me?”

“I did.”

“But you didn't know.... If I didn't show up at....” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “*Demetrius.*”

“*Mia léxi mas apeleftheróni apó ólo to város ke ton póno sti zoí. Ke aftí i léxi íne: agápi.*” I gave her the Sophocles quote in English. “One word sets us free from all the weight and the pain in life. And that word is love.” I took the ring from my pocket. “*Eísai dikós mou.* You are mine.” Kissing her once, I released her throat and took her hand. “I was always yours.” I slid the large amethyst surrounded by diamonds onto her finger. “*Pantrépsou me.* Marry me, Violet Hanna Traylor.”

My little one gave me her special smile as pure, innocent joy filled her eyes. “Yes, Demetrius, *yes*.” She threw her arms around my neck.

I slammed my mouth over hers, and I didn’t hold back.

Not this time.

Not ever again.

Sinking my tongue into her sweet heat, pushing the straps of her dress down over her shoulders, I picked her up and carried her to the bed. Driven by need, unzipping my pants, unleashing my dominance, I laid her on her back and shoved her legs wide.

The Greek came as I yanked my shirt off and kicked out of my shoes. “*I’m going to fuck you, and I’m going to make you beg, little one.*” I crawled over her. “*Then I’m going to fill your cunt with my seed, over and over, until I breed you.*”

I drove into my *mátia levántas* with a single hard thrust.

Her back arched, her fingers dug into my hair, and she let out a deep groan I had never heard from her.

Rough, possessive, dominant, I fucked my little one.

I fucked her until she was crying my name and begging.

“Demetrius, please, *please*.”

“*Mou aníkeis.*” I circled her clit with my thumb. “You belong to me.” I thrust deep. “Come, little one.”

Her body jerked, her breath hitched, and her cunt gripped me with the first wave of her orgasm as her cry filled the entire suite.

I fucking let go.

“*S’agapó.*” I pumped my little one full of my seed. “*Eísai dikós mou.* All mine.”

Striding across the main deck, keeping my 9mm holstered, I scanned the helicopter for other passengers. Lucky for him, it

was empty.

“Where did you depart from?” I demanded.

“Good to see you too,” he stated flatly before taking off his aviators and eyeing the stern side of the bridge deck where one of my crew was in sniper position. “You going to take me out before you ask why I’m here?”

“I already know why you’re here.” It was the last mistake he was going to make.

His gaze tracked port side. “I can guarantee you don’t know why I’m here.” He focused on me. “You going to ask how I found you?”

“No.”

“You think your crew is secure?”

I knew they weren’t. Nothing was ever one hundred percent. That was why I trusted no one. “My crew isn’t your concern, and our last conversation already happened. Request a refuel or get back on your helo.”

Cagey, evasive, his locked expression a reflection of what we did, he didn’t move. “It’s your helo, and we need to talk.”

“Not happening.” I turned toward the main salon.

“I know where she is.”

“Not interested.”

“You would be if you’d bothered to ask how I found you.”

Halting, I glanced back.

He said what he came here to say. “She knows where you are.”

“I know.” It was the only way he could’ve tracked me here. “Leave.” Without a second glance, I headed to the bridge.

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Navy SEAL.

Mercenary.

Being a breacher on the Teams wasn't a job, it was my drug of choice. Detonating charges, the blast waves going through me, I lived for the rush of tactical explosive breaching. As long as I kept my brothers safe and didn't eat a piece of frag, I never looked past my next mission... until I screwed up.

Miscalculating a blast zone, I took a hit. Then I was benched from active duty, told I'd taken one too many subconcussive blows, and forced into medical retirement.

Except the Navy wasn't the only home for an explosives expert. Alpha Elite Security took me in, and I got to keep my addiction—right until a mysterious redhead walked into my blast zone, and suddenly, I needed a new fix.

Code name: Kilo.

Mission: Detonate.

GHOST

Navy SEAL.

Tier One Operator.

Pawn.

It started as an order from the Vice Admiral. A Black Ops mission for a woman from a government acronym I'd never heard of. The brunette slid me a smile and said the parameters were simple. One high-value target, a HALO jump, my sniper skills, and a coordinated exfil. Double-tap the HVT, then I'd be back with my Team in time to spin up.

Except seconds into the jump, everything went FUBAR.

My parachute didn't open, my backup was tampered with, I was taking enemy fire before I hit the ground, and there was no exfil.

I should've been dead. But I was a SEAL. Thirteen bodies later, I made my own way home. The brunette was waiting. With a suggestive wink, she said I'd passed the test and now belonged to her. Enraged, I made a silent vow. This woman wasn't going to own me.

Codename: Ghost.

Mission: Retaliate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing the final paragraph of any book now comes with both a feeling of accomplishment and profound sorrow. Letting go of characters that you live with for months on end is one thing. But for me, each new book I finish now marks a passage of time that takes me one more step away from the time here on Earth that I had with my son. And that step, that final paragraph, that last sentence, it sometimes becomes so monumental, so painful, that it's overwhelming. But I know, just like the heroine in this story knows, that you can't only live in the moments of pain. You have to reach further. So tonight, for my son, for me, for you, I'm reaching. I'm going to quietly say goodnight to these characters. I'm going to pray that I did my job. I'm going to hope that this story gave you a smile or a cry, a moment of escape, a hug of hope, or a few hours of enjoyment. That's the step I hope for.

I also want to take a step towards sharing.

My son ate steak with brown sugar. When Oliver was six years old, we were at my parents' for dinner, and my father had grilled steaks. Knowing my son had never tried steak—Oliver was always hesitant about new foods—my father placed a filet on Oliver's plate anyway. When Oliver didn't touch the steak, my father went to the kitchen and came back with a dish of brown sugar. He set it, and a twenty dollar bill, next to Oliver's plate. He told Oliver that steak dipped in brown sugar was better than ice cream and that if he tried it, he could have the twenty dollars. My son tried it. Then he ate the entire steak, dipping every single bite in brown sugar. He earned his twenty dollars. But more, he loved steak after that, and for the

rest of his life, he always ate it with brown sugar. The night my son passed, I had made him steak for dinner... with brown sugar. It was his last meal. I am forever grateful I cooked that night.

Lastly, I'm also going to take my passage of time step.

Thirty-four months ago (as I write this), my Sweet Boy, at the tender age of fifteen, passed away tragically and unexpectedly in his sleep from an undiagnosed birth defect in his heart that is so rare, less than one percent of the population has it.

I cannot help but think about the correlation between that rarity and my beloved son.

Oliver was a rare and extraordinarily intelligent, compassionate, and gentle soul. Born with an autoimmune disease, he not only overcame the obstacles life threw at him, he thrived. Oliver was a straight-A student with a 4.45 GPA. He was an incredibly talented cello and piano player, a black belt in Karate and Jiu Jitsu, and a compassionate friend to everyone he met. Oliver had so much perseverance and determination that I was, and still am, in awe of him.

There are no adequate words for the grief of this ruthless separation or the profound loss. I am, however, consoled by two humbling and incredible events that have taken place.

By the hand of God, and facilitated by Oliver's orchestra director, along with the generous donations given in his name, the music Oliver was writing before he passed was turned into a full orchestral piece called *Oliverian Fantasy*, by the amazing composer Brian Balmages. I hope everyone hears Oliver's melody, and I hope orchestras and symphonies around

the world play this incredible, haunting, and absolutely beautiful piece.

You can listen to *Oliverian Fantasy* [here](#).

Another outcome of Oliver's passing is that there is now the *Oliver S. Bartel Memorial Scholarship Trust*. Each year, this trust will award a Vero Beach High School Orchestra graduating senior a scholarship to help continue their musical pursuit in college. This is the only scholarship of its kind for orchestra students at Vero Beach High School. You can read about the scholarship [here](#).

As I write my closing thoughts, while I cannot begin to describe the level of grief or put into words the all-encompassing pain of this kind of loss, I want to say this: I love you, Oliver Shane Bartel. There is not a waking moment that I do not miss everything about you. Thank you for being the greatest gift of my life. I am *beyond* proud of you.

You would have started college this month. Your friends got together before they scattered across the globe and left for their next adventures in life. They talked about their favorite stories of you. Did you hear them? They laughed, they talked about how much they miss you, they shared their excitement (and a little nervousness) about the changing tides of their lives. And then they all talked about where they thought you would have gone to college. It was unanimous. They all said the name of the same university. I think you know which one, Sweet Boy. I hope you do. And I hope you heard your friends. I hope you feel our love for you. We all miss you, Oliver, SO very much. So does Domino. He still goes up to your room every night at bedtime and lies down by your door. Ever faithful, he talks to you each night. He "whispers", just like you taught him. I hope you can hear him.

And I know I have said this before, but I need to say it again. I will endeavor to live my moments here on Earth with the same compassion, love, fortitude and perseverance you so humbly possessed. I know I didn't put your love of music in this book, but I tried to capture at least a small fraction of your purity of heart, your determination, and your steadfast loyalty. I hope I succeeded.

I miss time with you, Oliver Shane, and I love you, my Sweet Boy, here, now, always, forever. I love you more than anything.

XOXO,

Mom

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sybil Bartel is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of unapologetic alpha heroes. Whether you're reading her deliciously dominant Alpha Elite mercenaries or her protector hero Alpha Bodyguards, her page-turning romantic suspense and heart-stopping military romance all have unwavering alpha heroes.

Sybil resides in South Florida, and she is forever Oliver's mom.

To find out more about Sybil Bartel or her books, please visit her at:

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