

FLIRTING

BLACKGUARD  SECURITY: PHANTOM

WITH TEMPTATION

ELIZABELLA BAKER

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For all the people out there waiting for karma to handle their problems. Make friends with an author. We'll put your problem into a book and kill them off.

FLIRTING WITH TEMPTATION BLURB

Teasing Chance Williams was supposed to be fun. A way for Maddox to show him she wasn't who he initially thought. And maybe even loosen him up some.

It was definitely not supposed to end with him dragging her to the laundry room and showing her what all those stiff suits he liked to wear were really covering up.

Maddox was a one-and-done kind of woman. For ten years, she lived her life on the run with no one knowing her true identity. Until Chance came along and screwed everything up. Now her past was rearing its ugly head, and she had to decide whether to run or stay and fight. She'll soon find she chose wrong, and Chance wasn't willing to let her go that easily. Not until he proves she's not behind his team's recent problems.

Life was supposed to have order, a plan, or at least that was how Chance assumed he would live. That is until Maddox came on the scene. Leather pants, vintage band tees, and purple hair didn't fit the mold Chance envisioned. She was everything he wasn't supposed to want. Now, with a traitor in their midst, the only way to flush them out was by using Maddox.

When things go horribly wrong, Chance will stop at nothing to find her and end the person who dared take her away from him.

If you love:

- Opposites Attract
- Banter
- Protector Romance
- Hidden Identity
- Touch Her and Die
- That Laundry Room Scene
- No Third Act Breakup

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CHAPTER ONE



“You’re going to drive that man to drink.” Emma snorted as Maddox described her latest attempt to coerce Chance into a night of debauchery. “You keep throwing yourself at him like that and it’s going to be the straw that breaks his back.”

Maddox wanted to drive Chance to do *something*. Drinking wasn’t her first choice, but if it helped, then she was all for it. She wouldn’t complain if she was the one to finally break him.

“Nah,” she said instead. “It’s just all in good fun. He needs to loosen up, and I’ve made it my mission to get him there. Besides, it’s not like I don’t already know his answer will always be no. I’m the complete opposite of his type.”

Which was fine with her. Anything more than fun would be against her no-dating, no-love rule. She saw how that shit could destroy a person. *No fucking thank you*. She much preferred her carefree, don’t-give-a-fuck attitude that allowed her to screw whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Although her options were very limited now that she took a job that put her in the middle of a damn desert.

“I’m not sure he’s having fun—just wait. One of these days, he is going to surprise you.”

Not likely.

They were talking about Chance Williams. Mr. Uptight and the current bane of her existence. All stiff suits and slicked-back hair; the man refused to relax. At any other time, Maddox wouldn’t have cared in the slightest, but there was

something about Chance that made her want to push his buttons, to see what he was covering up with his proper attire. It certainly wasn't because it was required. No one else on the team was buttoned up the same way. Hell, the majority lived in tactical pants and tight T-shirts that showed off their muscles. But not Chance. He looked ready to attend a board meeting, not kick someone's ass.

She tried not to think too hard about why it bothered her. If she did, she would be forced to examine the deeper meaning that continued to drive her closer to him—that wasn't going to happen. Nope, it was better just to keep telling herself it was a challenge, and she lived for those.

Liar, liar, pants on fire!

Emma bumped her shoulder and nodded farther down the hall. Speak of the devil. Walking their way, in all his glory, was the man himself. Just like every other day she saw him not on an assignment, he wore perfectly pressed pants and a nice collared shirt with a tie. She could think of a few things she would like to do with that particular piece of silk. The only thing missing was a suit jacket. Some days he wore them and others not. She had yet to figure out his strategy for that, and it bothered her more than she cared to admit.

He bothered her more than she cared to admit.

On more than one occasion since taking the job with Blackguard Security, she contemplated sneaking into his room just to burn every article of clothing. The thought made her snicker. Imagine what Mr. Uptight would do if she destroyed every one of his perfect suits.

“Good morning, ladies.”

Maddox didn't miss the snide way Chance greeted them, or the fact that he did his best not to make eye contact with her. It had been the same response ever since she first propositioned him. One would think she had learned her lesson and would stop mentioning it. But that wasn't her style.

“It would be a better morning if you started it with sex.” She winked. “My offer still stands.”

Maddox didn't take offense when, instead of answering her, Chance simply walked away with a huff. At least, that's what she told herself when her pulse threatened to speed up.

"Have you lost your mind?" Emma threw her hands up.

"Not at all," she answered with a smile. "Why would you ask?"

"Black is still in the building. You know our boss!" Emma said *boss* like it should mean something to her. "You keep propositioning Chance like that and you're going to have a sexual harassment suit on your hands."

Maddox tried to hold back, she really did, but it was no use. Instead, she let the laughter bubble out of her so hard she doubled over.

"Oh, please. Chance isn't going to complain to Black. Your husband, maybe, but we both know Daniel won't give a fuck."

Chance might stomp around and give her the cold shoulder, but he wasn't a baby. He would claim he could handle the situation on his own. What he didn't realize was the best way to get rid of her was to give in. She would stop pursuing him after one roll in the hay. One and done. That's all she had the attention span for. And really it was all she needed. One simple conquest to appease her curiosity. *You know, to see if under all those fancy clothes he's really a freak in the sheets.*

"Why do you do it?"

She looked at Emma. She was genuinely confused as to what her friend was asking since her mind was on other things. Namely, Chance's sex drive.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Maddox. You're hot as fuck. I would kill for a body like that even though you cover it up with oversized vintage tees. You could have any guy you wanted with a crook of your finger, and yet you continue to terrorize Chance."

She took a beat to think about what Emma said. It was true. She could get any guy she wanted. Men were simple

creatures most of the time. They liked big boobs and a nice ass, both of which she was blessed with. They also liked sex, and she liked the ones who couldn't dart away fast enough after the deed was done. It made for a mutual benefit for both parties.

She didn't chase after men. If they weren't interested, then she walked away. But there was something different about Chance. She realized it when he picked her up from the airport, when he was ready to toss the silly cardboard sign with her name on it to the ground.

Chance was anything but simple. He held the weight of the world on his shoulders. His control was pinned up nice and tight under those three-piece suits. But for just a second, when he thought no one was looking, she witnessed the mask slip. That was the Chance she wanted to see.

But she wouldn't tell Emma any of that. So, instead, she shrugged.

“Because it's fun.”

It was better if these people thought she was a no-fucks-given rebel who liked to screw around. It was much better than them discovering her deep, dark secrets.

“If you say so. We better get moving, Black will be pissed if we hold up his meeting.”

Maddox couldn't afford to do that. As far as she knew, Black had no idea who she really was, but if there was anyone who could figure it out, it was her new boss.

CHAPTER TWO



Maddox was going to be the death of him. Death by blue balls, actually. A problem Chance knew she would be more than happy to rectify if given the opportunity, but that was the issue. Maddox was too eager to get him into bed so she could say she won and then forget he existed.

He knew women like her. He'd fucked his way through those same kinds of women early in his life before it dawned on him that he was repeating the same cycle as his parents. That couldn't happen.

Several times, he was tempted to take her up on the offer so she would leave him alone, but he wasn't an idiot. One time with her would never be enough. The damn woman called to a primal side of him that he had long ago buried. He wasn't the same man as he was growing up, or even in his twenties—he *refused* to be that man again. The Chance he was now was nothing like the people from his small hometown thought he would grow up to be. He'd made himself a better person.

That's what he told himself for the millionth time when *she* walked in with Emma a few minutes later.

A vintage rock band tee shouldn't look so damn good. Piercings and tattoos weren't supposed to be his kryptonite. And the fucking purple adorning the bottom of her dark hair shouldn't make him want to see what it looked like wrapped around his fists.

All those urges he spent years putting a leash on? Yeah, well, today they were seconds away from breaking the chains

holding them. It was why, despite how much he hated to be rude, he had to walk away from Maddox in the hallway moments earlier. The images that flashed through his mind when she mentioned sex in the morning were too much.

Maddox only made it worse by throwing him a wink as she passed. He had to forcefully keep his face from reacting, even as Emma pushed her along and gave him an apologetic smile. At least he had someone on his side. Emma appeared to want to keep Maddox in line.

“Now that everyone has deemed it time to finally grace us with their presence, we can begin,” Black announced. The owner of Blackguard Security was no slacker. As former Special Forces, David Black kept himself in peak shape. Just as he expected those employed by him to be.

“Has something changed since the last time we met?”

The concerned question came from Steel, and understandably so. Steel recently discovered he had a one-month-old daughter. Their last mission was the reason for the mess they were currently in. Although, it wasn't Karlie's fault she was kidnapped by her psychotic, murdering brother. Or that the Don of the Italian Mafia wanted her as his mistress. Actually, Karlie was lucky they found her. They had been on an assignment to capture Emma when they discovered Karlie and her baby, Anna, locked in a basement.

“Only that the bounty on your heads has gone up significantly.”

The entire room broke out in various forms of profanities and grumbles, and Chance turned to Steel. As expected, Steel looked ready to commit murder. Vito Accardo, the asshole who put the hits out because he wanted to clear the way to Karlie, had gone underground. Not a single one of their contacts could figure out his location. Hell, they didn't even know which country to start with. It was beyond frustrating.

“Define significantly? Can I take the job on one of my co-workers here and then retire to my own island?”

Chance wasn't sure who threw the pen at Blayd for his preposterous question, but he was pissed they beat him to it.

"I think if anyone deserves the opportunity to kill off a teammate, it should be me. And you would be my first target," Daniel grumbled.

Blayd turned around in his seat and met Daniel head-on. "Is it because your wife loves me more than she loves you?" his teammate antagonized. He then turned to the woman in question and dug the knife even deeper. "I would gladly take the contract if it meant you came with me to a deserted island."

Blayd added a little eyebrow wiggle for good measure. It was no secret that Blayd loved to torture their team leader by hitting on Emma in front of everyone.

"Knock it off, Blayd." Black stopped the argument that was sure to explode any minute. Daniel's face was beet red and their team leader looked to be three seconds away from wrapping his hands around Blayd's throat.

"Yeah, Blayd. Stop being a dickasaurus."

Maddox didn't bother to look up as she hurled the insult at their teammate. She continued to twist the purple strands of her hair through her fingertips.

"A dickasaurus?" Blayd sputtered.

This time Maddox did look up. "You heard me. Or do you prefer twatwaffle?" She looked to be seriously considering which one she preferred to call him. He knew he was right when she snapped her finger and pointed at Blayd. "Actually, now that I think about it, I like that one better. Stop being a twatwaffle. We all know Emma has no desire to see how small your dick is."

Chance wasn't sure she was attempting to break up some of the tension or not, but it had that desired effect.

Everyone burst out laughing except Blayd, who looked ready to argue, and Black. Their boss shook his head and held up his hand—a wasted attempt to control the room.

“I’ll show you a small dick,” Blayd grumbled.

“I prefer if you didn’t,” Black snapped. “Maddox, stop riling up my men. I didn’t bring you here to stir the pot.”

“Pity,” she sighed. “It’s what I do best.”

Chance didn’t need to turn his head to know she was blatantly staring at him. He could feel it. Everything about her personality was larger than life. It would be an excellent quality to admire if it wasn’t such a pain in the ass for him.

“No one is accepting any of the hits on their teammates. Not unless it hands us our target on a silver fucking platter.”

Chance could’ve sworn Daniel grumbled something about how he could make that work if it was the last thing he did. Blayd managed to get his composure back enough to smirk at Emma. This meeting was turning out to be a shit show.

“Is that an option?” Jaxson asked in all seriousness. “It’s what we do normally anyway, so why not this time?”

“It’s an option, and the reason we’re here.” Black shoved his hands in his dress pants pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Maddox has already started to lay the groundwork.”

He allowed himself to cave, and like the rest of his team, he looked over to where the woman in question was rocking back on two legs of her chair. He was divided in how he felt about the movement. A small part of him wanted to go over there and kick the legs out just to teach her a lesson for constantly being a pain in his ass. But the larger and more civilized part of him wanted to tell her to stop so she wouldn’t get hurt. It was no wonder he was constantly stressed. She had him divided down the middle, and both sides were warring with each other.

Hating her would be easier. The need to protect her did nothing but infuriate him.

“I’m working on a fresh identity, but it’s a little tricky. It needs to be solid. There is no room for error in the background details. Vito is going to expect us to come for him. Unfortunately, he knows what the team does, so we don’t have that element of surprise.”

Sweet Jesus.

The whole point of their team was to stay hidden. Ghosts. Shadows.

Phantoms.

Exactly as their name stated.

Vito Accardo knowing what their team did wasn't good for business. It was imperative now more than ever that they ended his miserable life.

“How sure are we that Vito knows what our team does?”

Black appeared to be thinking over Liam's question carefully. He also looked to be in silent communication with Maddox; their carefully neutral expressions put him on edge. It was common practice for Black, but never for the overly eccentric woman who wore every feeling openly.

It was Maddox who finally answered.

“About seventy-five percent sure.”

No one in the room liked those odds. Every scowl said as much.

“We can't use any of your old aliases. A few of them also have hits out on them or are listed as part of the aliases under your real names. It tells me he knows some of our identities, but not all.”

“How the hell did they even get our real names?” Jaxson snapped. “The whole point of the team was to keep our *real* names hidden. It's why we each have a permanent alias.”

When they took the job with Black, they didn't exactly scrub their old identities. They had all agreed they didn't want to do that, but Jaxson was right. They were each given new names, and those were the names listed under Blackguard Security, and the only names they used when traveling. They did use their real names when traveling for personal reasons, but as far as he knew, none of them had traveled personally since they started working for Black.

Black didn't look like he wanted to answer that question, and that immediately put him on edge. Did they have a traitor among them? Chance wanted to trust his team, but the truth was, he hadn't known most of these guys longer than a few months.

Was it Maddox? How much did they really know about her? She wouldn't even tell them her full name. Every time the subject came up, she carefully deflected. But wait, why would Black have her in on the meeting if he thought she had something to do with it?

"Data breach or an inside man." Black held up his hand when the room started to explode with anger. "Emma and Maddox are looking into it. I don't believe the leak came from this location or group. I fear it came from the headquarters in Boston."

Chance expected Steel to be the first one to lose his shit. He had a family now, and the man took protection to the extreme. Instead, it was the person he least expected.

"Are you fucking *kidding me*?" Daniel stood up fast, shoving the table forward and sending the chair he was sitting on crashing to the floor with a bang. "You told me, when I started this team, we could trust the people who worked for you, and that our true identities would never be a problem. I passed those promises on to the men that I chose. *Me*"—he pointed to himself—"not *you*. Now you tell me there's a rat and my fucking *wife*, who by the way didn't have the fucking decency to tell me there was a leak, is looking into it?"

"Daniel ..." Emma started, but was cut off by her husband.

"We will handle our issues later," Daniel spat.

Surprisingly, Emma didn't argue back. But if the crease in her brows was any indication, she didn't appreciate being cut off. Chance didn't want to be a fly on the wall for that particular conversation. He had enough of his own drama to deal with, and it was no secret those two were explosive when they fought.

"It was my call," Black said, coming to Emma's defense.

“Yeah, we all know how close you are to my wife.”

That was a low blow, and Chance thought Daniel was over all that. Plus, the context made it sound worse than it actually was. Their whole team was started because Daniel wanted revenge against Emma for what he thought was her working for the enemy, the man who murdered their daughter. When, in reality, she had been undercover for Black, trying to discover the identity of the man who hired Armando. It's how they found out about Vito and ultimately found Karlie. Black had manipulated Daniel into rescuing Emma when he learned her cover was blown. Daniel hated that Black had kept Emma's secret all those years.

“I'm not going to apologize for lying to you or keeping her safe,” Black said slowly. “The reality is that Emma works for me, just like the rest of you, and there will be times I need her to keep things under wraps. And that includes from you.”

“I don't have to fucking like it.”

With that, Daniel stormed out of the room, Emma hot on his heels after assuring Black she would handle it.

“He's right, you know.” Gage tipped back on his chair as he spoke. “We took this job because we knew our identities would be protected. That's no longer the case.”

No one else agreed or disagreed. Gage had been acting differently since they learned about Emma and getting shot protecting Karlie didn't seem to help. Something was off with their teammate.

“That's why I put Emma and Maddox on it. I also don't want anyone leaving here without an escort. Daniel won't take his eyes off Emma. The same with Karlie and Steel. Chance, I want you glued to Maddox. Where she goes, you go.”

A lightning bolt could've struck him and it would've had less impact than what Black just said. He must have heard his boss incorrectly.

“I'm sorry.” He cleared his throat. “Did you say *me*?”

There was no way he could spend all his time with her and not have something happen. She was already getting under his

skin. What he needed was distance.

“Yes. Do you have a problem protecting the one person who can figure out who is leaking information?”

Well, shit. Not when he put it like that.

Unable to speak because he was so furious, Chance merely shook his head and waited for Black to dismiss his team. The words were barely out of his boss’s mouth before he was shooting out of the chair. This couldn’t be happening. Chance stomped out of the room, but didn’t make it far before Maddox was right on his heels, chirping in his ear.

“So I guess you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

He whipped around and was tempted to wipe the smirk off her face. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her toward the closest door and smashed it open, ready to give her a piece of his mind.

Fuck, it was a laundry room.

CHAPTER THREE



Oh, shit!

She'd really pushed Chance too far this time. He never allowed them to be alone together.

Maddox looked around the semi-lit room and realized Chance had dragged her into the spacious laundry room. The soft sound of one of the washing machines running was no match for Chance's heavy breathing. If dragons were real, Maddox would be worried Chance was a distant relative.

Smoke puffed from his nostrils with every exhale. Steam rolled out of his ears, and when he opened his mouth, she was pretty sure she caught a glimpse of fire.

Pissed was an understatement. This was the reaction she had been looking for and the one he refused to let loose in front of his team.

“Do you enjoy pushing me? Or is it the thrill of watching someone squirm that gets your rocks off?”

Why yes, as a matter of fact, to both. She was going to tell him as much, but something about the way he was looking at her made her throw caution to the wind. It wasn't just the anger she witnessed. There was heat in his eyes. And not the kind that shot flames, either. He was attracted to her, despite what his mouth liked to say. She could see it, and because she was the type of person who said fuck it, she planned to do something about it.

In one swift movement, she cupped the back of his neck and lifted onto her toes until she was crashing their lips

together.

Maddox half expected Chance to push her away. Actually, she was pretty damn sure that was exactly what he planned to do as his hands circled her waist and his fingers dug into her hips.

Except that wasn't what happened at all.

Somehow, he managed to drag her closer so there wasn't an inch of space between their bodies. There was no hiding the massive bulge that poked her stomach and rubbed seductively against her belly ring. Her vagina wept in satisfaction; it was finally going to get what it wanted.

Holy fuck, could the man kiss. His lips were much softer than she would've imagined, considering they spent all their time scowling. His tongue was a work of art and deserved a fucking gold medal for bringing her to her knees.

Literally.

The only thing holding her up were the strong hands currently leaving bruises on her pale skin. And she didn't give a fuck what it said about her, she liked knowing those marks would adorn her body for a few days. It was proof that she was the one to finally get Chance to let down his guard, to let out the fire-breathing dragon she knew simmered just below the surface.

"You drive me so insane I just want to pound something ..." Chance moved his lips to feast on her neck.

"You can pound me."

There was no way that breathy voice was hers. It couldn't be. She was no inexperienced maiden who swooned over a man. No, she was a sex addict who enjoyed every male form imaginable, but sex was just that. Sex. It didn't cause her to get all girly.

"I'm going to screw you just so you stop bothering me about it."

She should've been offended by his words, but all logical thought left her brain when he picked her up and slammed her

“Like this?” She teased the tip of her middle finger in slowly, never taking her half-lidded eyes off him.

She liked that he watched her so closely, like he was afraid to miss a move. The hunger in his eyes only spurred her on. With her eyes cast down, she peered through her lashes as he unbuckled his pants. Her first finger slipped inside her heat at the same time the sound of the zipper teeth echoed throughout the room.

The combination of the washing machine vibrating under her ass and the slow tickle of her finger gliding through her wet folds was bringing her to the brink much faster than she liked. It had been too long since the act of touching herself was so enjoyable.

“Fuck, I can’t wait.”

Chance’s eyes were zeroed in on where her finger entered her cunt. With his dress pants hanging off his hips and his engorged cock pulled just out the top of his silk boxers, he marched over and pushed her hand out of the way, and entered her in one fast stroke.

The sudden intrusion had her throwing her head back and crying out his name. He was so damn big, and despite how wet she was, it took a few seconds for her body to get accustomed to his size. She was mid-scream when Chance clamped his large palm across her lips.

“Those screams are only for me,” he growled in her ear as he drove in again. “Can you keep quiet, or do I need to stuff my tie in your mouth?”

Holy! Shit!

Why did he have to sound so hot with that threat?

When she didn’t answer him fast enough, he yanked the knot of the tie down and ripped the whole thing over his head. His palm was quickly replaced by the knot and she bit down hard when his hands wrapped around her thighs and tugged her farther down the washing machine. With each punishing thrust, her chest heaved with the lack of oxygen.

“Don’t stop touching yourself. Feel my cock as it pounds into you.” Her fingers flitted across her swollen clit.

Maddox could get used to this side of Chance. The dirty talk and commanding nature were a complete turn-on. It had her racing towards a climax in record time.

The sound of the door creaking open caught her attention, but she was too far gone to care that someone had stumbled in and caught her mid ecstasy. She faintly heard Chance bark *get the fuck out* just before her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she experienced the most intense orgasm of her life.

Her body was still quivering, shaking right along with the washing machine as Chance grunted out his own climax. The twitch of his cock against her sensitive lips brought her to the brink all over again. Or maybe it was just a continuation from the first one. Either way, she had never felt something so intense in her life.

She pushed the tie out of her mouth with her tongue and dropped her head back. Her entire body felt like a wet noodle. The elbow she had been resting on suddenly gave out. Pain shot down her back where her spine connected with the metal. But nothing could ruin her happy glow. Well, maybe the loss of Chance as his semi-hard dick slipped out of her.

“Motherfucker.”

Nope. Never mind. Nothing except that, apparently.

Chance’s tone had her eyes snapping open to see what the problem was. She searched his face for any hint, but his eyes were cast down to the fly of his pants. Maddox had no idea what he was looking at, but then a strange thought popped into her head.

Did the man have something against blood? Her period wasn’t due for a few more days but maybe he was a little more rough with her than she expected and that made her bleed a little. Actually, now that she had her senses about her, things did feel extra wet down there.

“Seriously,” she huffed as she pushed herself to a sitting position, never taking her eyes off his scowl. “You kill people

for a living, but a little blood during sex freaks you out?”

If looks could kill.

So much for sex loosening him up.

“I don’t have a problem with blood,” he growled. “I *do* have a problem with unprotected sex.”

This time she did look down, and sure enough, Chance’s bare cock was covered in their combined juices. As if that wasn’t enough proof, she glanced between her legs where Chance’s cum was dripping down her thigh.

It wasn’t blood she felt, it was the remnants of his climax.

Not an ideal situation, but she shrugged it off.

“I’m on birth control and I’ve never had unprotected sex before. Plus, it’s not like Black doesn’t require physicals from us, so I know you didn’t pass me anything.”

Maddox was trying to keep her own freakout to a minimum since Chance was doing enough of it for the both of them. Again, not an ideal situation, but that’s why she was adamant she stayed on birth control.

“Why the fuck didn’t you remind me about a condom?”

OH. NO. HE. FUCKING. DIDN’T.

“Excuse me?” She hopped off the washer and got right up into his face, as much as she could, considering he was over a foot taller than her. “How the hell is this *my* fault? I make sure I’m responsible by taking birth control. The least your stupid ass could’ve done was remember a damn condom. Or better yet? Take responsibility for your own mistakes. It took two of us, so don’t put the blame on me.”

The more she spoke, the redder his face got. Well, that was just fine. Maybe his blood pressure would rise enough and he would have a come-to-Jesus moment. The man was well overdue for one if he thought he could put the blame solely on her shoulders.

“I never wanted this,” he continued to shout at her. “I tried avoiding you but you just kept pushing and pushing until I lost

control. If you had just left me alone, we wouldn't be in this damn predicament. I keep a tight rein on my emotions for a reason, and I don't appreciate you screwing with me."

She was too stunned to respond. Giving Chance enough time to grab his tie and storm out of the room.

Well, fuck him. If he thought it was okay to blame her, then he could go fuck himself. It took two to tango, and he was nowhere near innocent in this situation. Sure, she kissed him first, but he could've walked away at any time.

Maddox looked around the room for her pants and shoes. Chance was right about one thing. She got what she set out for. Too bad his big mouth had to ruin the best sex of her life.

CHAPTER FOUR



Chance stuffed his semi-hard dick back into his trousers. The fucking thing was well on his way to being ready to go again just moments after the longest orgasm of his life. Maddox and her damn magical pussy did that to him. Made him lose his mind and apparently all sense. How had he forgotten his number one rule? He never had sex without a condom. And especially not with a woman he knew would never carry his children.

It was an asshole move, but he didn't bother to wait around to make sure Maddox was okay. She probably wasn't, after the things he said. He needed to get the hell out of that room and as far away from the only woman who managed to break the tight control he required in his life.

Stumbling into the hallway, he nearly ran over Emma. The Cheshire smile only further pissed him off.

“Not a fucking word from you.” He pushed his way past, not bothering to apologize when he used a little too much shoulder to get through. Chance figured Emma didn't mind when her soft chuckle followed him farther down the hall.

So that was who caught them mid-act. He should've known, but he had been too lost in Maddox to give a shit. He instantly regretted his carelessness.

Great. Now everyone would know what happened. Emma would tell Karlie and Kendra because, of course with the lockdown, she was living here as well. Which meant Steel, Jaxson, and Daniel would hear about it because their women

liked to talk. Then it would just spiral from there until everyone knew what he had done.

He needed to get outside. Maybe some fresh air would erase the smell of Maddox that was clinging to the inside of his nose. Or was her scent on his clothes? Maybe a detour to change and a shower was in order to wash her juices from his softening cock. He knew neither was in his future when Blayd rounded the corner.

“Oh good, Daniel sent me to find you.”

“For what?” he snapped.

It wasn't Blayd's fault he was in a shitty mood but his teammate was too perky at the moment and it did nothing but piss him off.

“Whoa, man. What crawled up your ass? I know we're on lockdown and all, but maybe you need to sneak away and get laid. A good woman would help you right out, loosen you up a bit. I could watch Maddox for you. It wouldn't be a hardship.” His teammate waggled his eyebrows.

Chance wanted to punch him in the face, and that pissed him off even more.

Ha! If only Blayd knew how wrong he was. It would wipe the smirk off his friend's face if he knew that not only had he just come from mind-blowing sex, but it was the reason for his shitty mood. And there was no fucking way he wanted Blayd within ten feet of Maddox.

Wait, what?

Where had that thought come from?

“Speak of the devil. Now there's a woman who would show a man a good time. One round of fucking with that hot ass and you'd be cured of that bad mood. I'd fuck her in a heartbeat, and just might if we can't leave soon.”

Chance didn't need to turn around to know who Blayd was talking about. There was only one single female among them, and even though Blayd loved to bust some of the other guys, he would never openly hit on their women when they weren't

around. He much preferred to keep that to when he could annoy the shit out of them.

“Don’t talk about her like that.” The words were out of his mouth before he thought better of it.

He really needed to stop with that shit. Maddox was nothing to him but a co-worker. It was best he remembered that.

“Jeez, dude, lighten up. If I didn’t know better, I would think you were into her or something.”

Chance bit down on his back molars and ground his teeth until he was sure he was removing some enamel. Of course, Blayd wouldn’t think anything of his outburst other than him being a stand-up gentleman because that was exactly the image he portrayed to everyone, the one he spent years perfecting to rid himself of the chains that tied him down as a child.

He needed to change the subject. Also, he didn’t care what it said about him, but he was going against the grain and taking that shower. “Tell Black to give me ten minutes.”

He didn’t wait around for his teammate to agree. There was no way he would survive the rest of the day if he didn’t take a shower and rid himself of Maddox’s scent. Was it cinnamon and vanilla? The feminine mixture contradicted everything he expected from her. He would’ve thought she would bathe in something more masculine just to screw with him. A leather or musk. Each new thing he learned about her surprised him more. And made him wish he hadn’t learned those things.

Distance. That was what he had to keep reminding himself.

It didn’t take him long to get to his room, and the door was barely shut before he was quickly stripping out of his dress shirt and balling it up.

Normally, he took much more care and precision, but he wanted the offending garment as far away from him as possible. Pulling out the rest of his dirty laundry from the basket, Chance stuffed the ball all the way to the bottom and

promptly tossed everything back on top. Just the thought of laundry had him remembering the way Maddox moaned out his name as he repeatedly slammed into her.

Dammit, he wasn't going to ever look at the laundry room the same.

Flustered that Maddox was occupying his mind when all he wanted to do was forget, Chance stripped the rest of the way down. Practically running to the shower, he turned the water as hot as it would go.

Without waiting for the shower to warm up, Chance dove in and let the icy droplets cool his overheated skin. Reaching for the loofah, he scrubbed his body until it was bright red and he was sure the smell of cinnamon and vanilla was nowhere to be found.

Ten minutes later, when he finally walked back out of his suite, Chance felt like himself again. His new suit was perfectly pressed and didn't smell like a woman. Just as he liked. The new tie around his neck had never been stuffed in a woman's mouth, and his normally neutral expression once again adorned his face.

With each step he took, another brick was added to the towering wall that kept out his feelings and urges. For a moment, he had feared Maddox had managed to strip it down, but all she did was create a small opening. One he was sure to patch up and reinforce. The facade he wore like a second skin was firmly back in place when he knocked on Black's office door.

"Come in."

The office was the same size as every other office within the building since Black never intended to spend more than a day with them. It lacked all personal touches and the only thing on the desk was a laptop. It was currently open and Black was feverishly typing away, not even bothering to look up when Chance closed the door.

"You sent Blayd to find me."

It was several minutes before his boss finally looked up from the screen. If Black noticed his change of attire, he didn't mention it, nor did he look like he cared.

"I did. You didn't exactly seem thrilled with the idea of sticking close to Maddox. I wanted to give you the opportunity to explain."

Of course, his boss wanted to speak about the one person Chance wanted to forget. That meeting felt like a lifetime ago when, in reality, barely thirty minutes had passed.

"There's nothing to explain. We're just opposites. I prefer order and I'm not sure if you've seen her work area, but I don't think she understands the meaning of organization."

It wasn't that the woman was messy. There wasn't a speck of dust or any food wrappers to be found. But there were a million sticky notes in every bright color imaginable. More than half of them didn't make a lick of sense, but the one time Blayd tried to take one of the notes away, Maddox bit his head off, so it was safe to assume they were important.

"Some say opposites attract."

Chance didn't even try to keep in the disgusted snort. There was no way he was attracted to Maddox. Okay, physically maybe, but that was a hate fuck and something he could overlook. There was no way he was attracted to her personality.

"I didn't say that was the case for the two of you, but you will need to at least pretend to get along."

"Why me?"

He truly couldn't fathom why Black was insistent that it needed to be him.

"I can't trust Blayd to keep his dick in his pants. Gage is already feeling guilty about what happened to Karlie, and I don't think this would benefit him. And Liam is handling something else for me, so that leaves you."

He wondered what Black would think if he confessed that barely thirty minutes ago, he was the one who couldn't keep

his dick in his pants. How would his boss feel, knowing he trusted the wrong man?

One confession and he could be free of his responsibility. Yet for some reason, he couldn't force the words out of his mouth. No matter how much easier it would make things for him, he couldn't just abandon Maddox like that. Besides, it was a hate fuck. Now it was out of their system and he could move on with his life. Maddox would do the same. There was no reason for her to want him now that she'd won.

That's what he was going to keep telling himself at least.

CHAPTER FIVE



Maddox shoved her legs back into her tight pants and cursed when the leather stuck to her thighs.

Idiot!

How the hell had she forgotten to make sure Chance wore a damn condom? Of course, she was on birth control. She would never leave the fate of her future up to a man, she wasn't that stupid. She didn't want kids, not right now, but who the hell knew how she would feel in five years? At the rate she was going, she would never have children. That would require her to spend more than one night with the same individual. So far, she had successfully avoided that, and planned to continue to do so.

Maddox let out a frustrated squeal and gave up. Comfort was not her friend at the moment. Chance's cum was dripping down her leg, trapped between her wet thigh and the cool leather.

Stupid crotch-less panties. Damn leather pants that made her ass look nice. Neither was worth the walk of shame she was about to do. With one last resigned sigh, Maddox yanked her oversized shirt down so it covered her ass and held her head high.

Unfortunately, she didn't even make it two steps out the door before Emma grabbed her arm and dragged her down the hall to their office. Good thing since she could hear Chance and Blayd at the other end of the hallway. The last thing she wanted was to run into Chance right now, or any of their other

teammates for that matter. She was too pissed and embarrassed to talk to anyone that wasn't Emma.

“Spill,” her friend demanded.

“In my room,” she hissed back. She couldn't spend any more time with Chance's cum dripping out of her. Not after what he said.

Maddox didn't bother to wait to see if Emma followed her. With heavy footsteps, she stomped the entire way up the stairs and down the hallway. As if things didn't already suck, her door decided now would be a great time not to open.

“Helps if you use your room key rather than the one for our office.”

Twisting her key ring until she found the proper key, Maddox wished Black had taken her suggestion and updated the security around the place. Keys were old-fashioned and could be duplicated. Or someone could come along and beat a person down for it. Black said the same about keycards or any other system that was based on technology. He felt it could easily be hacked. The last time she brought it up ended in a stalemate, but right now she was determined to speak to him again about it.

When she finally managed to get the door open, she pushed inside her small apartment and left it open for Emma to follow. There was no use arguing. Her friend would barge in either way.

“Now, are you going to explain what the hell I walked in on?” Emma quietly clicked the door shut and leaned back against it.

“If the act itself didn't explain it to you, then clearly Daniel's doing something wrong.”

Yes, it was snarky, but sarcasm was her default, and had been since her parents tried so hard to beat it out of her.

“Oh, believe me, Daniel does things just fine. And based on the noises I heard when I walked in, so does Chance. I want to know how the hell you two went from arguing so much I

thought one of you would quit, to hot sex in the laundry room.”

The how was still a mystery to her as well. Never did she actually think he would cave, or so soon. She was so sure the kiss wouldn't be reciprocated.

“I believe he mentioned screwing me just so I would leave him alone.”

She tried not to let it bother her now that they weren't in the heat of the moment, but that comment, paired with the way he spoke to her as he was leaving, wouldn't stop playing on repeat in her mind as she stripped out of her clothes.

“Midday wardrobe change?”

“Chance made a mess of my clothes,” she said without thought, but immediately regretted it when Emma froze.

“He made a mess of your clothes? I don't see any rips but there was no missing the wet sound your pants just made.” Maddox could see when it finally clicked for Emma. “Holy shit, did you guys not use protection?”

She wasn't ready to answer that, but Emma wasn't letting her off so easy as her friend followed her into the bathroom.

“A little privacy, please.”

“Says the woman who has peed and showered in front of me more times than I care to count considering how short of a time we've known each other.”

Well, hell. Emma was right. She wasn't shy and hated closed spaces. The tiny bathroom in her apartment made her feel claustrophobic, so even when Emma stopped by, she never bothered to shut the door when she had to use the bathroom. But usually, Emma had the decency to look away or not follow her.

“Fine, suit yourself.”

Maddox grabbed a washcloth and ran it under warm water so she could clean herself up. For good measure, she made sure to actually pee. She learned a long time ago that if she

didn't want a UTI—because hello she was prone to them—it was best to use the bathroom after sex.

“So are you telling me Chance, Mr. Prim and Proper, forgot to use protection?”

Dropping her head back and letting out a slow exhale, Maddox confessed. “Yes, and believe me he made sure to let me know it was all my fault.”

“Like hell it was!” It felt good to hear the anger in Emma's tone. “Last time I checked, he's the one with the cock. If he wants his dick wrapped, then he should make sure he has a condom, not *you*.”

That brought a small upturn to her lips. Wasn't that exactly what she had said? Right after she informed him that she did her part by making sure she was on birth control. She normally carried condoms as well, but she never thought she would ever need them at work.

“He didn't like when I told him that. Actually, he stormed off.”

“Yeah, I saw him come out, but he yelled at me before I could say anything.”

That sounded about right. The deed itself was hot and heavy, but Chance's mood quickly soured. Oh well. It would never happen again, so what did she care if he continued to ignore her?

“So, does this mean you're going to stop dropping hints to him about sex?”

Maddox snorted and walked back into the bedroom to grab a new pair of panties, then reached into her closet for a pair of leggings. It might be hot as Hades outside, but since she had no intention of leaving her office, she chose comfort over practicality.

“Pretty sure I was never dropping hints, I was outright propositioning the man. But to answer your question, yes, I will stop. I'm a one-and-done kind of girl.”

“Wait, you only have sex with a man once?”

“Yup.” She wiggled her ass into the leggings. They weren’t nearly as tight as her leather pants, but they still took a little shimmy to get into.

“Like, never? You’ve never had sex with a man twice?”

Her high school boyfriend’s face flashed through her mind, but she quickly pushed it away. She didn’t want to think about the country club asshole her parents had wanted her to marry.

“Not since high school. Made that mistake once and won’t do it again.”

“What happened in high school?”

Maddox should’ve known that would be Emma’s next question. The more she avoided talking about her past, the more her friend wanted to know. Emma didn’t realize that some secrets were better left buried. For everyone’s safety.

“My parents wanted me to marry my high school sweetheart. I didn’t. End of story. I moved away and decided that I wanted to spread my love around and it was easier to do that if I didn’t repeat men.”

She left out the part about never staying in one place long enough for the men to come looking for her. Before moving to New Mexico, she lived solely out of hotel rooms or cheap rent-by-the-month apartments. Most times she never even made it the full month before she was on the road again. Settling down just wasn’t in her blood. Maybe that’s why she was starting to feel anxious here. This was the longest she had ever stayed in one place.

“So, you hate-fucked Chance. He’s mad you guys didn’t use a condom and now you’re going to do what? Pretend like nothing happened and go on with your day?”

Maddox shrugged. “Pretty much. He wanted me to leave him alone and now I can. I worked him out of my system. I won. I got him to lose his shit long enough to fuck me in the laundry room. No need to interact with each other again.”

She knew even while she was saying the words they weren’t true. There was no way one-time sex with Chance would ever be enough. But it would have to be. She didn’t go

back for seconds. It didn't matter how great he was at giving her an orgasm, and boy was he great. Chance was everything she expected him to be underneath all that polish.

“I don't buy it.”

Maddox simply raised her eyebrows.

“There's too much sexual tension between the two of you not to explode again. I would even be willing to bet on it. One week. I give you one week before the two of you are back to hate-fucking.”

She thought about it, thought back to the sex and then the way Chance looked at her just before he tucked himself back into his pants.

Revulsion.

There was no way Chance would let himself anywhere near her. No matter what Black said about the two of them being glued together. She would even go so far as to say he was probably begging their boss right now to assign her to someone else. He would get his way, she would avoid him, and that would be it.

“You're on.” With a smirk on her face, she shook Emma's hand.

One week. Piece of cake.

CHAPTER SIX



Chance kept his head down as he left Black's office. When push came to shove, he hadn't been able to confess to his boss that he already had sex with Maddox, and was no better than Blayd. He would just have to do his best to forget that it happened and move on. He was good at that. He'd mastered hiding who he really was, so this shouldn't be any different.

Well, maybe it wouldn't be different if he didn't crash right into the source of his problem two seconds later.

He forced himself to keep his gaze on her face and her piercing green eyes. He refused to look down to see if she too had changed after what they did.

"Begging Black to make me someone else's problem?"

Why did every word out of her mouth have to grate on his nerves? It would be so much easier if he could just brush what she said off like he did most other people he met.

"No," he lied. Chance didn't want her to know how much she got under his skin. "In fact, our discussion had nothing to do with you."

Everything that came out of his mouth seemed to be a lie lately. He was turning out to be more like his father with every passing day.

"Good. There's no reason we can't stay out of each other's way while also following Black's orders. I have no intention of leaving the building while I'm busy digging into the person behind the leak. Therefore, no need to babysit me."

“Excellent. See that you don’t.”

He pushed his way past Maddox and made the mistake of brushing his arm against hers. The electric shock gave him a momentary pause before he shook it off and continued at a fast pace down the hall. He needed to get away from her and release some of the tension their little interaction stirred.

Going down to the gym, Chance slipped into the locker room and headed towards his locker to change. He preferred to work out early in the mornings, before most of his teammates woke up, when he could be his true self but without an audience. Now, he didn’t have much of a choice. It was too hot to run outside, and besides, Black pretty much put a stop to that. He had no desire to sit in his room and watch mindless TV. Living out in the middle of nowhere sounded great when he was determined to leave his past in the past, but now he was having second thoughts. There wasn’t enough to do when he wasn’t on an assignment.

“Well, look who finally decided to join the common folk and work out at a reasonable time.” Blayd smirked from his spot on the bench where he’d just set down the bar full of weights.

His teammate was everywhere today.

“I wouldn’t want to work out with you either,” Gage grumbled from the treadmill. “All you do is talk instead of lift.”

“That’s not true. Have you seen these biceps?” Blayd kissed them like a fucking douchebag. “The ladies fully enjoy the work I put into keeping these babies nice and big.”

“What ladies? I’ve never seen you with anyone other than the ones who work here. All of which are taken,” Liam joined in on the harassment.

Chance walked over to the treadmills and hopped on one next to Gage. His teammate gave him a little nod, but otherwise didn’t bother to speak. Unlike Blayd, who was still talking.

“I got plenty of action before this damn lockdown. Now Black is cramping my style. The only available piece of ass is Maddox.”

Chance’s fists balled up on the handrail and he stopped himself from saying something that would tip off the rest of his team. Maddox *was* still available. Even if he hated hearing it.

“Ignore him,” Gage whispered. “He’s just doing it to get a rise out of you. Everyone sees the way Maddox looks at you.”

He didn’t want everyone to see how she looked at him. He didn’t want to be the topic of discussion at all. Was it too much to ask that he just be left alone?

He ignored Gage and started the treadmill, setting it to a grueling pace. Five minutes in, he was able to focus on his breathing and tune out his teammates around him.

Instead, he thought about the reasons he took this job. After leaving the Navy, he had been lost. It was much harder to adapt to civilian life than he thought. His father’s words echoed in his mind. *Mark my words, son. You’ll never escape this life. You’ll come crawling back just like I did.*

He almost had. Those first six months out were tough. With no college education, most jobs didn’t want to hire him, except those offering manual labor. Which he wouldn’t have minded, but every day he put on those work boots, his father’s continued bitching from his childhood would penetrate his thoughts.

Worthless.

Good for nothing.

Always looking down on us.

It was always the same. After his father left the Army, he joined a construction crew. Almost every day, he would come home covered in sweat and dirt and blame his mother for trapping him in their small town with two kids. A town that barely had opportunities for work except for blue-collar jobs. That was never good enough for the man who drank so much that his family was forced to live paycheck to paycheck.

Nothing his mother did was ever good enough. Working two jobs and running the kids around was never enough. A day didn't go by that his father didn't complain. It made the decision to leave after high school so much easier.

His only regret had been leaving his mother and sister behind to deal with him.

Chance was still thinking about them when he finally stepped off the treadmill covered in sweat.

“You ready to admit something is bothering you?”

Liam was the only one left in the gym; Gage had stepped off the other treadmill a few minutes after Chance got started, and Blayd probably snuck out when he realized no one was paying him any attention.

“Why does there have to be something bothering me? Can't a guy just change up his routine a bit because he's stuck in lockdown?”

Liam took a seat on the weight bench and gestured for him to do the same.

“He could, and if it was anyone else, I would agree, but you forget I've known you a long time.”

Liam was the only person on the team, aside from Black, who knew anything about his past; unfortunately, Liam was from the same small town and happened to know his father well. Liam was only a few years younger than his father's fifty-eight years.

“You have, so you know I'm not a huge fan of talking about my personal life.”

“And if I just thought it was personal, I would mind my own business. But something tells me this has to do with a particular woman who has an affinity for bands way before her time.”

Damn, he really thought he was keeping his emotions hidden better. For years, Chance had perfected the cool exterior he wore, and yet it only took a handful of weeks for Maddox to rip it away.

Chance sighed. “I already told Black I’d watch out for her while we’re locked up here. It just took me by surprise when he mentioned it in the meeting, that’s all.”

“So, this has nothing to do with her hitting on you all the time?” Liam gave him a *don’t bullshit me* look.

Chance dropped his head into his hands. “Does everyone know she does that?” he groaned.

“Not Daniel or Black. Mostly because those two are oblivious to those types of things. Daniel hides every chance he can and Black has too many other things on his mind.”

He remembered their boss mentioning Liam had his own assignment to worry about. Chance wondered what that could be, but considering he didn’t like having his own life questioned, it wasn’t right to do it to someone else.

“I fucked up,” he said finally.

Liam was as close to a father figure as he could get, not that he would ever say that to his teammate. But it was because of Liam he had his current job. When Daniel asked his friend to help him pick out a few more members for their team, Liam had immediately reached out, knowing Chance was going through a rough time with his transition. He didn’t know how the man knew, but he did.

“Admitting it is the first step. Want to tell me about it or would you prefer to leave it at that?”

He wanted to leave it at that, but for some reason, his mouth had other ideas, and before he knew it, he was spilling all his secrets. Liam sat quietly and listened as he explained his run-in with Maddox and their time together in the laundry room. He skipped over some of the freakier details, but that didn’t stop Liam from blowing out a long whistle when he was done talking.

“If the woman doesn’t stay away from you after how you handled that little mishap, then she’s crazier than I thought.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Chance let out a small laugh. Maddox really was crazy, but he was starting to think it was in a good way.

“She did say we could stay out of each other’s way, so my guess is, she wants nothing more to do with me.”

Why did that thought feel like a stab in the heart? It was precisely what he wanted. Wasn’t it?

Yes, it was. His brain, heart, and dick all needed to get on the same page—Stay. Away. From. Maddox. In big bold letters with three underlines. And maybe a few exclamation marks just for safe measure.

“Maybe that’s the right thing, or maybe you should apologize. You don’t need to push women away. You’re not your father.”

Liam was the only person who knew his fear of turning out like the man who sired him.

“I don’t push women away, and I have no problem getting married or having kids. I actually do want to settle down at some point in my life.”

As long as he did so with a woman who understood his need for organization and structure. Not one who lived by the seat of her pants.

“No, you have high expectations due to trauma from growing up with an abusive father who did nothing but criticize you, your mother, and your sister. You want so badly to be nothing like him that you have this perfect life in mind and only that perfect life will do.”

Ouch.

No one had ever been so brutally honest with him before, and Chance wasn’t sure he liked it. He was about to defend himself, but Liam cut him off.

“Take the suits you wear, for example. There’s no reason for you to wear them in this line of work. Black doesn’t require it. Daniel couldn’t care less. The only person putting pressure on you to look that part is you. And for what? Because your father bitched that only a man in a suit mattered.”

That was exactly why, but he didn't want to admit it. Fortunately, Liam didn't make him.

"I already know the answer," Liam continued. "I just hope you realize you've set yourself up for failure. These impossible expectations won't make you happy. And I want to see you happy. That's why I dropped your name when Daniel asked. I'm not going to tell you how to live your life, but maybe just think about it."

With that, Liam walked out of the gym and left Chance alone to do exactly what he wanted: think about what he wanted in life. The problem was he didn't know. The person he created was so ingrained, he wasn't even sure he could be anyone else. Losing control for those few minutes with Maddox scared him.

Was he ready to face those fears?

He honestly didn't know.

CHAPTER SEVEN



It didn't make sense. Nothing about how Vito knew her team's identity made sense. Maddox read the code on her computer over and over again, but nothing changed. She was lost.

"Why the hell are you working so late?"

She almost fell out of her chair at Black's deep rumble behind her.

"Way to give a girl a heart attack." She pressed her palm in an attempt to slow down the racing organ.

"I wouldn't have scared you if you weren't here so late. You don't need to work around the clock. The rest of the team has already gone to bed."

"I found your favorite candy." Emma's voice traveled into the room before the woman herself. "Someone hid it in a top cabinet where you couldn't reach it. Jerks." Her co-worker came to a halt when she saw Black standing in the room with a scowl on his face. "Oh, hey, boss. Didn't realize you were here."

"You two shouldn't be here." He sounded extremely exasperated that he had to repeat himself. "It's after midnight. There's no reason whatever you're doing can't wait until the morning."

It was clear her boss didn't know her very well yet, but he was about to find out.

"Something about all this is bothering me, and there's no way I can sleep until I figure it out."

“So you just plan on staying up all night?”

Hopefully, the duh expression she gave him was enough to get her point across. If not, it would appear her friend had her back.

“Pretty much.” Emma shrugged. “Better to just get used to it already.”

Maddox reached for the package of black licorice her friend was still holding tightly in her hand. She knew most people thought it was disgusting but she happened to be one of those weird people. She also thought candy corn was pretty yummy and would fight anyone who told her it tasted like eating a crayon. Screw those people. She didn’t need that negativity in her life. Halloween was her favorite time of the year because she could stockpile the stuff.

If she planned to work all night, then she needed the sugar boost.

“Fine.” Black closed his eyes and rubbed each eyebrow with a finger. “What’s bothering you?”

“Well, since you asked ... No offense to Trevor because truthfully he’s a pretty good hacker, but I just so happen to be better.” She waved away her words because that wasn’t what was important. Everyone knew she was better. It was why Black hired her. “But there’s no way anyone should’ve been able to discover our identities. I know things were set up before I came into the picture, but there is nothing that points to a breach in his system.”

She grabbed one of the ropes of candy and bit down on the sweet treat as Black just stared at her. Emma had taken a seat at her own desk and was munching on her own candy pile.

The room stayed eerily quiet for several minutes.

“So you don’t think it’s Trevor?”

“Nah. I would’ve been able to find something in his system that said otherwise.”

“Unless he’s handing off the information in person.”

She pointed her licorice rope at Emma. “Unless that.”

“Okay, so if it’s not Trevor, then who?”

“That”—she pointed the piece of candy at him this time like a wand—“is the million-dollar question.”

“More like a couple million since we all have hits out on us and the totals certainly equal way more than a million dollars.”

“Touché.” This time she pointed her licorice back at Emma before she took another bite.

She was going to need to restock her candy supply soon. This was the last package and too many of these late nights would diminish it quickly. She tried not to eat too many in one sitting, but the chewing motion helped jump-start her brain. Well, normally it did. Tonight, not so much. She was stumped. She might need to reconsider her strategy.

“How can I help?”

“Give us full access to your other teams and main headquarters. The works.”

The original goal was to keep Phantom Team completely separate, which was why their home base was New Mexico and not Boston, like the original teams. That was no longer the case. The technical analysts in Boston knew of their existence. However, their location was still private as far as she knew. That was one of the things she wanted to check on.

She chewed on her candy as Black thought it over. They’d had this argument before. The first time a hit popped up on Steel, she’d asked and he had immediately shot her down. She expected it at the time, but now, things have escalated.

“Fine. Full access. I don’t want any stone unturned.”

Black didn’t wait to see what she had to say. He strode back out of the room like the weight of the world was on his shoulders, and maybe it was. It couldn’t be easy knowing ten people’s lives were in danger because of the assignments he’d sent them on.

“Well, that went better than I expected.” Emma let out a whistle.

“Same.” She turned back to her computer and started to dive in. “I thought for sure we would have a bigger fight on our hands.”

“I think he recognizes the urgency of the situation.”

Emma was right. Their boss wasn't stupid and he would never do anything to purposely hurt those who worked for him. Her own deep dive into him before she took the job proved as much. It was how she knew she could trust working for him when she never wanted to work for someone before. Being her own boss had always been vital for her survival.

They worked for another hour before heavy footfalls echoed down the hallway.

“Uh-oh. I think he figured it out.”

Emma had the decency to look sheepish when Daniel stomped into their office less than a minute later.

“Did you seriously sneak the fuck out of bed in the middle of the night and go outside, *by yourself*, when there are *mercenaries* out looking for you?”

“I knew Maddox was here working late and I didn't want her to be alone,” she shot back.

Emma was no shrinking violet. Her friend went toe-to-toe with her husband on the regular. This time was no different.

“No offense, Maddox, but you're Chance's responsibility. Not my wife's.”

Oh, hell no.

“I'm no one's *responsibility*,” she snapped. “I don't care what Black said.”

Maybe it was the fact that she needed some sleep. Or she was aggravated that she couldn't figure out something that, given her skill set, should be so simple. Or hell, maybe it was the fact that despite working like a dog all day, she still couldn't get Chance and his magical dick out of her head.

Either way, she lost it and unfortunately Daniel had to be the unlucky recipient who lit the last fuse.

“Who the hell do you think you are coming in here yelling at Emma like she’s your damn property? If she wants to come back in and help me, that’s on her. Just because you’re a *man* doesn’t mean you control her! I don’t give a shit that you two are married. She’s an independent woman, just like I am, and it will be a cold day in hell before I allow that *dickasaurus* to tell me what to do either!”

“Which dickasaurus is that? Chance or Black?” Daniel didn’t seem the least bit fazed by her outburst as he asked.

Which only further pissed her off. “Both.”

Daniel nodded. “That’s understandable, which is why I’m only going to say this once. I’m well aware my wife is an independent woman. She can handle herself just fine. But she’s still *my wife* and I will always worry about her. Just like she worries about me. If you don’t like it, too fucking bad. I won’t apologize for it. I also don’t care if she’s here with you. I care that there is a *bounty* on her head and she didn’t tell me she was leaving the house. I woke up worried and that pissed me right the fuck off. Again, you don’t like that? Too fucking bad.”

His little speech took the wind right out of her sails. Daniel wasn’t her father. He wasn’t like the men she grew up around. He actually cared about Emma and her feelings. He wanted her opinion. Maddox knew that none of the men who worked for Black thought they were better than women. Well, maybe except Chance. He appeared to have a certain expectation for the women in his life.

“Sorry,” she sighed. “Maybe I need sleep more than I realized.” She rubbed her temples in an attempt to get rid of the memories from her childhood, and even the one from earlier today. Chance did not deserve to live rent-free inside her head.

“I can walk with you up to your room,” Emma offered.

“Thanks, but I got it. I promise I’m leaving.” To prove her point, she shut her laptop and closed out of the programs she had been working on, on a different computer. They weren’t

getting anywhere tonight and maybe time away would be good for her. She could start fresh in the morning.

Stuffing everything into the shoulder bag, she got up and headed for the door. "I'll see you both in a few hours. Sorry I yelled at you, Daniel. You are good for Emma, even if you're grumpy most of the time."

Emma laughed and she was pretty sure Daniel huffed something about stubborn women under his breath, but she didn't have it in her to care. Now that she resigned herself to leaving, exhaustion hit her like a brick. She needed her bed. The shower she would normally take at night would have to wait until the morning. Otherwise, she would probably drown when she fell asleep washing her hair.

As she passed Chance's apartment, she tried not to think about what he was doing on the other side of the door. Did he sleep naked or prefer pajama bottoms? Maddox pictured fancy silk bottoms. It would align with his nice suits and perfectly pressed ties. She wondered what it would take to ruffle his feathers, and then remembered she already knew the answer and had accomplished it earlier today.

The memory followed her into her apartment as she stripped out of her clothes. Quickly brushing her teeth, she crawled into bed and snuggled up under her massive amount of blankets. Anyone who entered her room probably thought she was crazy with how cold she kept it. It just made sleeping that much better.

Maddox expected to fall asleep quickly with how tired she had felt minutes earlier, but the thought of Chance sleeping just one apartment over wouldn't leave her mind. He was back to consuming her thoughts even though he didn't deserve it. Frustrated, she flipped onto her belly and punched the pillow until it was just the way she liked it.

She was going to get sleep if it killed her.

Even if it meant thinking about the most boring topics under the sun. She would win the fight.

SPOILER ALERT: she didn't win.

In fact, she tossed and turned all night long.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Karma was a bitch. If the lack of sleep last night was any indication, he owed Maddox one hell of an apology. Not only couldn't he sleep, but his brain decided it was a great time to overanalyze every single thing he had ever said to her.

Every. Single. Fucking. Thing.

And he came to one conclusion. He was an asshole.

Several times throughout the night, he considered going next door to her apartment and knocking on it just so he could rid himself of the guilt.

He had acted like an ass; he was man enough to admit it. Chance was also man enough to recognize that Liam was right. Every decision he made in life was because of his father; the clothes he wore, the jobs he tried to get after leaving the Navy. Even his vision of the future wife and kids. Liam had been right about it all. It would be annoying as hell if the whole situation didn't suck so badly.

Despite the realization, Chance still pulled one of his three-piece suits out of his closet. He reached for one of the two matching ties he had assigned to the outfit but stopped himself. He would forgo a tie and leave the top button open.

Baby steps.

He couldn't be expected to change his entire persona just because he suddenly realized the reason behind it was bad. Knowing what he did now, he had some self-reflection to do. But it would have to wait. Chance had an apology to deliver.

He managed a single step outside of his room when Maddox's door swung open and he was face-to-face with the source of all his problems.

Guilt plagued him as soon as that thought crossed his mind. Maddox wasn't solely responsible for the way he felt. He needed to take equal ownership of the tension between them.

"Excuse me." She attempted to shoulder her way past him. "I have work to do."

His first instinct was to let her go. If she didn't want to talk to him, then so be it. His second was to grab her arm and demand she speak to him after everything. Since neither of those two options sounded like the right thing to do, he tried a different approach.

"Maddox, wait."

Maybe it was the desperation in his voice, or maybe she was just as tired as he was. It was hard to miss the dark circles under her eyes. Either way, she stopped with her back to him.

"I'm sorry."

Her shoulders sagged.

"Don't worry about it."

She sure knew how to dig the knife even deeper. Chance hadn't thought it was possible to feel like an asshole any more than he already did.

Guess he was wrong.

"I can't *not* worry about it. I owe you an apology and I would like to do it. To your face preferably."

Her back was still to him, and it bothered him. Maddox wasn't the type of woman who hid from her problems; she faced them head-on. Preferably by giving the person the finger in the process.

When she finally did turn to look at him, he was surprised by what he saw. It wasn't just the dark under her eyes that told

him she struggled to sleep. It was the overall lack of joy he usually witnessed.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Chance.” She certainly didn’t sound fine. “You said you wanted to apologize to my face, so here I am.”

He deserved that. He even deserved the attitude. But it stung, and he wasn’t a huge fan of the feeling.

You did it to yourself, asshole.

“Yes, I wanted to apologize. I’m sorry for the way I acted yesterday and what I said. That was a dick move on my part and you didn’t deserve it.” He took a deep breath. “It also wasn’t your fault and I’m sorry I said otherwise. I was pissed at myself and took it out on you. It took a friend to point out that I have a few things I need to work on in my life. It’s not an excuse, but I had a shitty childhood and it shaped who I am today.”

Chance hadn’t meant to say that last part. He didn’t even like talking to Liam about it and here he was, exposing the skeletons in his closet with the one person he didn’t want to get close to.

“I know a thing or two about shitty childhoods. I’m sorry you had to deal with that and I’m glad you recognized some things you want to work on. I’m a firm believer in self-improvement.”

He suddenly wondered if there was someone’s ass he needed to kick. Chance had an urge to beat anyone who ever hurt her.

“So, can you forgive me?”

“Consider yourself forgiven.” She gave him a small smile before turning and heading back down the hallway. “Besides, we already agreed to stay out of each other’s way and I’m a one-and-done girl, so we won’t be repeating our time together,” she casually tossed over her shoulder as he was left standing there watching her walk away.

A one-and-done girl, huh? Just like that, she was tossing him aside. It didn't matter that's what he wanted. Hearing her say it was a stab in the gut.

TWENTY MINUTES later he found Liam in the weapons room, checking inventory. Reaching for the clipboard on the bench, Chance set out to help.

“Did you apologize?”

Leave it to Liam not to beat around the bush.

“I did actually. Just before I came down here. I ran into her outside of our apartments.”

Apartment was a loose term for the rooms they had inside their building. They were bigger than a traditional hotel room but nothing more than a studio with a bedroom, bathroom, small kitchenette, and living area. Not that he needed much more. It made it easier to keep the place clutter-free.

“And how did she take it?”

“Said she forgave me, but we would still stay out of each other's way.” He moved to another cabinet before continuing. “What do we know about Maddox? I mean, it's obviously not her real name, but what do we *really* know about her life before she moved here?”

Her flippant comment about shitty childhoods stuck with him. The more he thought about it, the more it bothered him that he knew next to nothing about who she was.

“No idea. All Black has said is she's the best hacker and we can trust her.”

That wasn't vague at all.

“And you trust *him*?”

Chance took the job with Blackguard Security solely because Liam reached out, and at the time, he was pretty desperate. Plus, it helped that Black had one hell of a

reputation for being fair and the best in the business. But now with the potential leak, he was starting to question entering blindly.

Liam gave him a side glare. “I do. I’ve known Black for a long time, back to our Marine days. I wouldn’t have taken the job any other way, and I certainly wouldn’t have roped you in if I didn’t.”

Well, shit. Offending Liam wasn’t exactly how he wanted to start the morning.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

Fortunately, Liam didn’t sound mad.

“I get it. This shit coming out about a leak at headquarters, and you have your head all screwed up because of Maddox. It would make anyone question what’s going on.”

“I have nothing against her.” Chance defended himself a little too quickly.

Liam stopped what he was doing and threw his head back to laugh.

“Of course you do. You wouldn’t be down here talking to me if you didn’t have something against her.”

Chance really hated it when others were right. He didn’t want to have anything against her. It wasn’t her fault he found her attractive, and that pissed him off. From everything he’d seen, she was a good person.

“Fine. I’m annoyed that I find her attractive.”

“And we have a breakthrough.” Liam slow clapped. It only further aggravated him how well his friend understood him.

“Glad you’re enjoying my torture.”

“No, I’m enjoying the fact that you are finally recognizing your potential. I had high hopes when I asked Daniel to hire you. Don’t think I missed the lack of a tie. Something tells me Maddox is good for you.”

Chance looked down at his perfectly pressed shirt with the top button undone and snickered. Baby steps. He wanted to

deny that it had anything to do with Maddox but it would be a lie. He was even slightly disappointed when she hadn't made some smart-ass comment during their run-in. He thought for sure she would've had something to say.

"I think we've established nothing more will happen there. She literally said she's done with a man after one time."

Again, he wondered what happened in her childhood that made her that way. Or maybe it was adulthood. Someone had clearly hurt her enough to have such a strong stance on men and relationships in general.

He wanted to know what it was.

"Or maybe she just needs someone to prove to her that life can be different. Maybe you aren't the only one who can change."

"When did you decide to go all philosophical?"

There were a whole lot of deep conversations happening lately. He needed to bring things back around to light and carefree. There was only so much soul-searching an individual could do in such a short period of time.

"I've lived a lot longer than you, made my own fair share of mistakes, and sometimes I wish I could go back and have a do-over. You get to a certain point in your life when you look back on the choices you made and have regrets. Take it from me, don't let fear stop you. Don't make rash decisions. And live like tomorrow isn't guaranteed because, honestly, in our line of work, it's not."

For the second day in a row, Liam walked out and left him to think about his life. It wasn't a comforting feeling, but he knew what he had to do.

CHAPTER NINE



Maddox was avoiding Chance. It was childish and not at all like her, but after his heartfelt apology that morning, she felt it was necessary.

He had managed to put a decent-sized chink in her armor and she needed time to fix it. She couldn't do that if she had to see his face, which would remind her that something between them had shifted overnight. She knew it the second she stepped out of her room and saw the missing tie.

She'd done it. Maddox had managed to break through his perfectly poised appearance and loosen him up. Instead of being happy, she wanted to cry. And that was a million times more frustrating.

She was screwed. She had known it when she tossed and turned all night. And it was confirmed when she saw his face. She was in over her head.

"Now you've got Liam asking me about you."

Emma plopped down in her chair and used her feet to scoot it closer. Maddox witnessed this all through her peripheral vision because there was no way she could meet her best friend's accusing gaze.

"Did you tell him I'm busy?"

That was her story, and she was sticking to it. It wasn't like it wasn't true. Now that Black finally gave her full access to his networks, she was elbow-deep in data.

"I did. He didn't really seem to give a shit."

Maddox stopped what she was doing, threw her hands in the air, and finally looked at her best friend.

“Why must everyone act like a thundercunt?”

“Thundercunt?” If Emma was trying to ask about the word with a straight face, then she was failing miserably. There was no hiding the tug of her lips as a smile tried to escape.

“Yes. Our co-workers are now thundercunts because they refuse to leave me alone so I can work. I’m fine. The world’s fine. Everything is fine as long as people leave me alone so I can figure out who is behind the data breach.”

“You know when I first found you on the dark web, I thought you were a freaking awesome person, but it wasn’t until I met you in person that I realized you are so much better than I ever thought. I’m going to go tell everyone to leave you alone, otherwise they’re all thundercunts.”

“That would be greatly appreciated,” she laughed.

See? How could things not be fine when she had friends like Emma who could turn any shitty situation into a positive?

Maddox could only imagine how her team would respond to Emma’s declaration. Black would likely shake his head. There was no way Blayd wouldn’t find it hilarious, Jaxson too since he seemed to have a pretty good sense of humor. The rest of them were hit or miss. Some might laugh, but she was sure at least one person wouldn’t appreciate Emma’s whip-cracking.

She highly doubted Chance had loosened up that much.

With a smile on her face and whistling, Emma practically skipped back out of the room, leaving Maddox to laugh at her friend’s antics.

The momentary break revitalized her. Cracking her knuckles, she dove back into the dozens of programs she had running.

Five minutes in and her world turned upside down. A code she recognized scrolled across the screen and stopped her in her tracks.

He found her.

She had been so careful to cover her tracks, and Black assured her there was nothing linking her to his company. She should've known better.

This wasn't the first time. Not even the second or third time. The whole reason she moved every month or so was to stay ahead of him.

Maddox needed a plan and fast. She couldn't stay here any longer. These people were too important to her, and she didn't want them caught up in the mess she created.

She was still hyperventilating and trying to devise a plan when Emma walked back in and looked at her with a frown.

"Everything okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

If only Emma knew how eerily accurate that expression was.

"Yeah ..." She had to clear her throat. "I'm good. My blood sugar is probably low."

"Shit, are you all out of candy? I can have one of the guys run out for you. They were going tomorrow anyway but maybe they wouldn't mind switching it to today. It's not like they have much else going on."

"No, it's fine," she waved Emma off. "It can wait until tomorrow."

She wouldn't be here tomorrow and there was no reason to have a bunch of food that no one else would eat. It would be a waste of good candy.

"How about I go grab us some food? It's almost dinnertime anyway."

Guilt plagued her. Emma should be spending time with Daniel, not holed up in the office with her. Especially when she had to keep lying. It was safer for her friend not to know what she discovered.

"Go have dinner with your husband." Maddox tried to keep her voice light and fun, but she could hear her stress. She

just hoped Emma didn't notice. "All of these programs are running on auto anyway, so there's nothing for us to do."

Lies. There was a lot for her to do. Mainly covering her tracks and finding a way to slip out in the middle of the night so she could put as much distance between herself and her team.

"What happened to full steam ahead?"

Maddox cursed her go-get-'em attitude from earlier that morning. She had been trying to overcompensate for her run-in with Chance and now it was coming back to bite her in the ass.

She forced out a laugh.

"Pretty sure we've been doing that all day. Maybe a little break will do us some good. You know the old saying, a watched pot never boils. I say we leave these programs running and take a little break. I could use some downtime and Daniel has to be missing you."

She was laying it on thick, and at the rate she was lying, she would be spending eternity in hell. A thought that didn't bother her as much if it meant her newfound friends were safe.

Emma clapped her leg. "Alright, you convinced me. Besides, I owe Daniel a little nookie after sneaking out on him last night."

Maddox tried not to gag. Emma might be her best friend, but she and Daniel were old enough to be her parents. The last thing she wanted to be visualizing was them getting nasty together.

"Have fun with that."

She waited until Emma left the room, and counted an additional sixty seconds to ensure the coast was clear, before pulling up the program she had minimized when she first realized what was happening.

She read over the code again, just in case her mind had played tricks on her the first time, and hoped that was the case.

Unfortunately, nothing had changed. She was still screwed, and her stalker had found her again.

Maddox spent the next few hours doing everything she could to cover her tracks and set up false trails. With any luck, she had created enough of a diversion to ensure he left her team alone long enough for her to set up somewhere else. It was the best she could do.

She knew nothing about her stalker. Only that each time he found her, any man she had gotten close to died. And by close, she meant one-night stands. It didn't matter that she barely knew the men she slept with, or that they only got one opportunity in her bed. If her stalker found out about them, they died.

Thoughts of a dead Chance flashed through her mind. She couldn't let him die because she forced herself on him and that's exactly what would happen if *he* found out what they did. No, it wasn't a rational thought. Yes, Chance and her team could take care of themselves but rational went out the window the second she saw that code. She was running on fear and past experiences. A just maybe the fact that she didn't want to put her new team in the position of handling her problems.

With nothing left to do but run, Maddox packed up her computer and slipped out of the office, looking back at the workspace she shared with Emma, and all of the colorful sticky notes plastered throughout the room. It was the first real place she had felt comfortable enough to be herself, to show her team how she liked to work. It was going to be hard leaving it all behind. She had found a family with these people, one she actually liked.

Maddox was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't hear Chance approach until she turned around and smacked straight into his chiseled chest.

It took her way too long to drag her eyes up his stiff shirt, past the hint of tanned skin the unbuttoned part showed, along the lines of his throat and the bob of his Adam's apple, and

finally up to his chocolate eyes. Every time she looked in them, all she wanted to do was melt.

“Sorry ... I ... I didn’t hear you coming. You shouldn’t scare a lady like that! Did you ... did you need something?”

She was rambling. She also couldn’t stop herself if she tried. Her nerves were shot. She needed to get back to her room and pack.

“Just stopped to see if you wanted to grab something to eat.”

The universe was fucking with her. There was no other explanation for why Chance would suddenly start being nice to her and caring if she ate.

“I ... uh, I actually ate something at my desk.”

The lie slipped out much easier than she expected. She needed to get rid of him before he saw through the mask that was barely hiding her true feelings.

“Oh well, maybe next time.”

Shit! He was melting her cold heart and crumbling the wall she’d built to keep everyone out. Maddox was about to tell him she changed her mind when a memory smacked into her; a picture of the last guy her stalker killed with the words *because of you* scribbled across the frame. That was all she needed.

“Yeah, next time for sure.” She rubbed her temple with her free hand. “Sorry, I feel a headache coming on. I think I’m going to go lie down for a bit.”

She didn’t wait around to see if Chance believed her. Scooting around his massive body, she rushed off down the hall and up the stairs. Maddox didn’t stop until she was in her apartment with the door slammed shut and locked behind her.

Maybe it was overkill. Never had her stalker gotten close to her. At least, not that she was aware of, but she never stuck around long enough to find out. Not after that first time. His first kill. It was the only warning she needed to keep running, to live her life one month at a time.

She rushed to the closet and pulled out the backpack she kept handy for emergencies such as this. She supposed in the back of her mind she always knew this job was too good to be true, that one day she would be back on the run. There was no other reason for her to have kept the bag stocked.

Old habits die hard.

A guy had told her that one night just before he slipped out of her bed. She hadn't even known his name until she saw his picture on the internet the next day. According to the news, he had been killed in a mugging gone wrong after leaving her shitty apartment, but Maddox knew better. Her stalker had struck again. Not even five minutes after seeing the dead guy's picture, she was once again grabbing her backpack and getting out of another city.

The same backpack she held in her hand now. It had gotten her through many tough times and would once again.

Unlike then, she couldn't just walk out the front door. Her team was supposed to be in lockdown. Someone would surely stop her before she made it more than ten feet outside. It was better if she waited until the middle of the night. Hopefully, they would be more concerned with someone getting in than someone sneaking out.

IT WAS TIME.

After several long hours of pacing and winding herself up so much that she was one pull of an overstretched hair tie away from snapping apart, it was finally time.

With her backpack slung over her shoulder, Maddox opened the door and did her best to look casual. If anyone caught her, she would just tell them she couldn't sleep and figured it was best to get some work done.

Maybe it was because she was so wound up or maybe it was just the crash of adrenaline, but when she managed to

make it out of the building and away from the houses with no incident, she started to question her judgment.

Sure, she spent years sneaking away from places. And yeah, it was the dead of the night when everyone was sleeping, but should it really have been that easy? Weren't these guys supposed to be some of the best?

Maddox was considering stomping back and giving Black a piece of her mind when a hand clamped over her mouth.

This was it. Her stalker had finally found her, and she was too busy bitching about how easy it was to sneak away.

CHAPTER TEN



Chance raised his hand to knock, but then stopped. Maybe he was just overreacting. So what if Maddox didn't want to grab dinner with him? It didn't mean something was off with her. It wasn't like they were on the best of terms. She had flat-out told him they could stay away from each other, so that's probably all it was.

Except there was something in her eyes earlier that worried him. He recognized it well. It had been the reason many men wore the same expression.

Fear.

And if there was one thing he knew about Maddox, nothing scared her. She laughed in the face of danger.

Or so he thought.

Chance rapped his knuckles against the wood and waited until he heard *come in* before easing the door open. Black stood at his desk, a tumbler of amber liquid in one hand.

"Drink?"

He looked down at the Tennessee Apple bottle on Black's desk. He took his boss for a whiskey fan but not so much an apple man.

"I'm good, but thanks."

Chance looked around the sparse office. The same one he had visited just the day before when guilt ate him up over not being the man his boss needed. Tonight, different emotions raged through him.

“Something’s off with Maddox.”

He blurted out the statement without any context, so it was no wonder Black merely raised his brow.

“This has nothing to do with my issues yesterday. I ran into her a couple of hours ago as she was leaving her office and she looked spooked. I never thought I’d see the day, but something freaked her out.”

He would never forget the look on her face. It didn’t match her character, and although her “give no shits” attitude drove him insane, seeing her scared pissed him off more; made him care in a way that he didn’t want.

“Fuck.” Black slammed the tumbler on the desk hard enough that some of the amber liquid sloshed over the side. His boss’s reaction only further put him on edge.

“She’s going to run, and we need to stop her.”

Chance turned around to do just that.

“No.” Black’s command gave him pause; his boss had never spoken to him like that.

“What the hell do you mean *no*?” he barked, whipping back around.

Every instinct was screaming that there was more going on. He just didn’t know what. His boss was keeping secrets.

Chance hated secrets.

“No, you’re not stopping her. You’re going to tell the team to stay clear tonight and you are the only one who is going to follow her. But at a safe distance.”

“Is there something about Maddox I need to know?”

There was that hard expression. The one that clearly meant he wasn’t to ask any more questions, not if he wanted to keep his job.

“You will do as ordered.”

“Yes, sir.”

He stormed out of the office before he did something stupid. Like, tell his boss exactly where he could shove that order. But the farther down the hall he moved, the more time he had to think. Yes, there was something up with Maddox, and if he roped in his team, there was a good chance he would never figure out what it was.

Black would pull rank. Maddox would likely be put into isolation so that only their boss knew what was happening and he would be left without any answers. He needed answers.

That left only one option—do as Black ordered. Follow Maddox when she decided to run, and then get the information for himself.

THE WAIT WAS LONG, but Chance's patience finally won out in the early morning hours. From his position just outside their office building, he could see Maddox's small figure slip out of the front door. He had to give her credit. She was good. Light on her feet and only a small backpack to carry all of her possessions. If he hadn't known any better, he would think she was slipping over to Emma's for a girls' night.

But he *did* know better.

And it was two in the damn morning. Who in their right mind would start their night at this ungodly hour?

Chance let Maddox get a decent lead before he set out to follow her. She might be good at sneaking around, but he was better. He had ditched his usual suit for tactical pants and a T-shirt, and it felt good to move across the dirt, brought back memories of his time in the Navy. Unlike a lot of his teammates, he had actually enjoyed when they were deployed and spent a lot of time in the sandy deserts.

He was going to see how far she made it but a sound off in the distance caught his attention. He would recognize that noise anywhere. It was faint but moving quickly. There was no

reason a dune buggy should be this far out in the middle of the night.

Making a snap decision to disobey Black's orders, Chance closed the distance and wrapped his arm around Maddox. Covering her mouth with his palm, he dragged her behind a rock pile not far away.

Her lack of fight surprised him. Then a surprisingly disturbing thought hit him; maybe this was what she wanted all along.

She could've been playing not just him, but his entire team. Hell, she could've pulled one over on Black. They knew nothing about her. She only mentioned her real name once, and it was in passing. Any other time someone brought the topic up, she waved them off.

Shit, he spoke too soon.

Maddox was a hellcat on speed. She bit down on his palm while her nails dug into not only that same hand, but the arm connected to it. She reared back like a mule and kicked everything she could come in contact with. He would've found it a complete turn-on if it weren't for the fact that he needed her quiet and preferred all of his limbs to stay intact.

"Settle down before they hear you," he hissed.

She paused just long enough that he could flip her around and get a good look at her face. He didn't know what to make of her spitting-mad expression.

"If I remove my hand, do you promise to stay quiet?"

The silence dragged on. Chance was sure she wouldn't answer him when he felt the slightest nod under his hand. He also took it as a good sign when she didn't try biting him again after she realized who he was.

"Why did you follow me?"

That was all she had to say to him.

"The better questions are, why did you leave the building and who are you meeting out here?"

There was no other reason for someone to be driving this far out. Their office was literally in the middle of nowhere. They didn't get accidental traffic and not once, in the year since they'd been here, had he ever seen a dune buggy nearby. He only knew the sound because a few of his Navy buddies liked to race them as a way to relax.

"I'm not meeting anyone and it's none of your business why I left. Now let me up!"

Yeah, no way was that going to happen. If she wasn't going to tell him what was going on, then he would find out for himself.

"I guess you don't mind me flagging them down, then ..."

He started to get off her. The dune buggy wasn't that far away now. If he stepped just ten or so feet out from the rock structure they were hidden behind, he should be able to see them enough to get their attention.

"Are you crazy? He'll *kill* you." Maddox yanked on his hand.

Interesting. He thought for sure she didn't care that much about him. So did that mean she knew who was out there, or was she just guessing?

"How do you know he's after me and not you?"

"I'll tell you everything but right now we need to go, get as far away from the team as possible."

Chance wasn't sure if it was the desperation in her tone or the look in her eyes that pleaded with him to listen, but before he could make the conscious effort to decide, he was pulling her up.

They couldn't go back to the compound. Whoever was on that dune buggy was between them and the main building. Going further into the desert was their only option.

"Let's go."

Maddox didn't waste any time following him. She was fast for someone who sat behind a computer desk for the vast

majority of the day. Her short legs did a good job keeping up with his long strides.

“Where are we going?”

The question was barely more than a whisper, and if he wasn't straining to listen so hard, he probably wouldn't have heard it.

“Hopefully somewhere safe.”

And somewhere I can question you more.

There was no need to let her in on that last part. Too much didn't add up, and for now, he was going to go on the assumption he couldn't trust her.

Chance could tell the moment whoever was on the dune buggy spotted them. The vehicle changed direction and was headed directly for them.

“Sorry, but this is going to hurt.”

His team had scouted the area when it was decided this would be their home base. The terrain wasn't the greatest but there were several rock formations that provided excellent cover as well as a few caves. Add in some of the natural vegetation and they had more than one place to hide if needed.

However, getting there meant going through some pretty rough areas.

“What the ...”

He didn't let her finish. Grabbing her hand, he took a sharp left and pulled her to the ground.

“Time to crawl.”

Chance pushed her in front of him through a small clearing. He took a moment to cover the area with a few fallen branches before he followed after her.

Branches and rocks sliced his arms and cut into his belly. He waited for Maddox to start complaining ahead of him, but she never let out a peep.

“Hook a right when you hit the large boulder.”

Still no response. Chance was starting to wonder if she had heard him when she followed his instructions.

“Swing your legs around and sit up a bit. This last drop is going to be a doozy.”

His team had taken advantage of a natural cave and turned it into a shelter. Just to make sure no one could sneak up on them, they dug it out so the only way to enter from this particular area was by sliding down on one’s ass.

“Don’t you think this place was something everyone on the team should’ve known about?” Maddox questioned him when he landed on the bottom right next to her.

“Everyone on the team does know about it.” He shrugged.

“Except me.”

He met her challenging glare.

“Guess I’ve been a little too busy.”

That wasn’t true. It was one of the first things he should’ve shown her, but something kept him from doing it. He didn’t know if it was because she annoyed him or if he hadn’t trusted her.

“So why bring me here now? It’s obvious you think I’m up to something.”

“Sneaking out in the dead of the night tends to have that effect on people. Now you mentioned someone wanting to kill me. Who exactly are you talking about? Vito?”

He really hoped that wasn’t the case. Chance considered himself a decent judge of character, but when it came to Maddox, it would seem he had blinders on.

“Fuck, no. I wouldn’t be caught dead working with that twatopotamus.”

Twatopotamus? Where the hell did she come up with these words?

“Then who?”

He wasn’t prepared for her answer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Maddox let out a loud exhale.

Chance was never supposed to find out. None of her team was. It was safer that way and yet there she was, in the middle of the desert, scratched to shit because Chance forced her to crawl on the ground and slide down rocks. She could feel the blood dripping down her arms and legs, and while it wasn't bad, she would need to clean it up sooner rather than later.

And outside, riding around in the dark, was probably the same stalker that always came looking for her.

"My father," she finally confessed.

"Your father wants to kill me?" Maddox could understand why that would come as a shock to him. "Did you call him and tell him we fucked? Is that what this is all about?"

"No, I didn't tell him we fucked. I don't have that kind of relationship with my family. He lost that right when he tried to marry my ass off to my high school boyfriend. After graduation, I packed my bags and never looked back. It would be a cold day in hell before I told him anything. Why, do you share who you fucked with your family?"

She wasn't the only one who never spoke about their family. Not once had she ever heard him mention visiting anyone or being worried about them.

"Here." Chance handed her gauze and saline from a bag on the floor. "Clean yourself up. And to answer your question, I wouldn't have to tell my sister. She would know with one look."

So he had a sister. Were they close? She didn't think so since he never spoke about her, but they had to be for her to know something so intimate about his life with just one look.

She thought about his life as she did as she was told and used the medical supplies to tend to her scratches. Once she had most of the blood wiped away and realized it wasn't as bad as it originally looked, she went back to the conversation.

“Well, I don't have any siblings who would know intimate things about me like that.”

“Then let's get back to why your father would want to kill me.”

Because he's a psychopath.

Because I ruined all his plans when I left after graduation.

Because he's not exactly the type of man someone says no to.

She didn't tell him any of those reasons, though. Instead, she went with something simpler.

“Because that's what he does. He makes sure I have someone stalking me, and when they find me, they kill someone close to me.”

Chance just looked at her. “You expect me to believe you have a stalker?”

“I don't expect *anything* from you.” Maddox moved around the rather large cave. The place would comfortably fit the entire team and, in addition to the medical supplies, had enough rations for them to stay a few days if needed. The more she moved around, the angrier she became. How dare everyone know about the hideout except her?

“When was the last time you spoke to your father?”

Maddox was tempted to tell him to screw himself. If he didn't trust her, then why should she trust him? The only thing stopping her from doing just that was Emma, Karlie, and Kendra. They didn't deserve to be dragged into her mess. She needed someone to know what they were up against in case something happened to her.

“The day I graduated high school. I told him where he could shove his graduation gift. He slapped me across the face and sent me to bed. I decided that night was the last time I would ever step foot in his house and I snuck out before dawn.”

That was the first time she'd ever snuck out in the middle of the night. She had gotten lucky her father's guards didn't catch her. The longer she was away, the better she got. Until tonight. It was the first time anyone caught her leaving.

“Your father beat you growing up?”

It almost sounded like he cared. Maybe Chance cared about violence against women, but there was no way the anger radiating off him was because of her.

“No,” she scoffed. “He didn't lay a hand on me growing up because that would damage the merchandise and he couldn't have that. He slipped up that night.”

But she wasn't going to stick around to find out if it would get worse. Not after she discovered his plan for her.

“What the fuck do you mean *merchandise*?”

Maybe he was pissed off on her behalf after all. It was strange, considering he spent all of his time trying to ignore she existed. And it wasn't like he didn't remind her on the regular how much she annoyed him.

Then his question registered in her mind and she realized her mistake. Chance didn't know who she really was.

She tried to wave his question off with her hand. “Never mind. What's the plan?”

Maddox walked around the cave again to avoid the intense gaze she could feel him giving her. The anger rolled off him and felt worse than a heat wave in California.

“No, we're discussing this. Tell me what you meant, Maddox.”

Shit. She hated it when he called her that. She hated when any man she slept with used that name. She preferred the no-

name approach; names like sweetie or doll face didn't hurt nearly as bad as using the name she was forced to create.

"Why does it matter?" She threw her hands up. "It's not like you actually *like* me. You've done everything in your power to show me just how much you *don't* like me since the day you picked me up from the airport."

He was nothing but a damn dickasaurus to her every chance he got, so she didn't owe him anything.

"If you really believe that, then you haven't been paying attention."

"*Haven't been paying attention?*" She was two point five seconds away from going nuclear. If he thought her previous attitude was bad, he was about to see her on a whole new level. "You were pissed I was a female. You didn't like the fact that you were tasked with watching me." She ticked each slight off with her fingers. "You were grumpy I propositioned you for sex." Now that she'd said it out loud, she realized how bad that was. "Okay, I'll give you that one, but the rest were simply because I existed and now work here." Maddox stormed into his bubble and emphasized each word with a jab to his chest. "You. Don't. Like. Me."

Chance wasn't having any of her attitude. With a firm grip around her finger, he snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her closer until there was no space between them. Her free hand rested on his chest, and her blood heated for a new reason.

"You haven't been paying close enough attention." His warm breath feathered across the shell of her ear, sending a shiver down her body.

She was paying attention now and his body told her one thing; physically, he didn't hate her at all.

"So ... sex was never the problem you had with me?" she whispered when she finally found her voice.

Their whole situation was a walking contradiction. There was no way she had imagined how much he couldn't stand her.

“No, it wasn’t. It’s why I pushed you away.” But he wasn’t pushing her away now. “I knew sex with you could never be boring or ordinary.”

“Who wants boring and ordinary sex?”

“Me.”

Oh. Well, okay, then. Chance was right. She could never be what he wanted.

“Or so I’d convinced myself. And then you came along and threw a wrench into everything I thought I wanted.”

“I guess a better person would say they’re sorry, but I never claimed to be that kind of person.”

Chance needed to realize she had no intention of changing for anyone. Her parents had tried, and it didn’t end well. She would never again put herself into a position where someone thought it was a possibility.

“Don’t underestimate yourself.” Chance cut her off before she could protest. “That’s a discussion for another day. Right now, I want to know what you meant when you said your father wouldn’t harm the merchandise.”

She might’ve finally met her match. Chance was proving to be even more stubborn than she was. It didn’t bode well for her. Or her secrets.

Dragging the corner of her lip into her mouth, she thought about how best to describe her childhood.

“Things weren’t bad growing up. Not when I was little, at least. Honestly, for the longest time, I thought my life was a fairy tale. Growing up in Hollywood, people always told me how lucky I was, how great I had it because my parents could afford to grant my every whim. And I believed them. I thought it was normal to spend more time with the nanny than my own parents, that every little girl had a princess castle in their bedroom with thousands of stuffed animals scattered about, and a movie theater in their home and a chauffeur to drive me around.”

How wrong I’d been.

“It wasn’t until high school that things changed. My parents suddenly cared more about my image and what I was doing.”

“They didn’t care what you did before that?”

There was nothing ladylike about the snort she gave him. If her mother heard her now, she would die of embarrassment.

“They didn’t even know I existed. Maria, my nanny, was left to raise me. She was the kindest woman. She would read me stories every night. She attended every one of my ballet classes, taught me how to braid my hair and put on makeup. I remember the first time I wanted to color my hair. Maria had surprised me with hair chalk because she said my parents wouldn’t approve of anything permanent.”

“What happened to Maria?”

She hated the pity that accompanied the question.

“She left my sophomore year of high school and never returned.”

Maddox snatched her hand from his grasp, pushed him away, and put some much-needed space between them. If he wanted her back history, then he was going to get it on her terms, without pity or sadness.

“What happened after your sophomore year?”

“My parents showed their true colors and I quickly learned everything about my life was a lie. My long-time boyfriend, who I thought I would spend my life with, was nothing more than a lying cuntcake under my parents’ thumb. They *sold* me in middle school to further their careers but disguised it as marriage. Said an arranged marriage was common in our social circles and that I had no right to get angry when he cheated on me because it was common. As long as he was discreet about it.”

She laughed at the thought. Charles wouldn’t have known what discreetly meant if it slapped him in the head. There was nothing discreet about banging her best friend in the limo, smack-dab in the middle of prom. And certainly not the same limo they all arrived in.

“That’s why you left after graduation?”

“I knew I needed at least a high school education. I’ve always been good with computers, but a high school dropout wasn’t an option. So I waited. Pretended I would go along with their plan, but all the while I was forming one of my own. The night of my graduation he hit me because I told him I wasn’t ready, that I needed more time before I announced my engagement. I knew my time was up and I needed to move fast. And it’s worked out well for me. For the most part anyway. Except every few years, he finds me and people end up dead.”

The first time she had gotten cocky; spent too much time in one place and showed her face far too often. She had thought she covered her tracks enough and it was safe to use social media again. Kevin had suffered for her mistake. She swore to never let it be in vain, and each time another man died because of her actions, she hardened her heart a little more.

“How many people?”

His voice was so soft, so understanding. She didn’t deserve it.

“Five,” she spat. The single word tasted like acid on her tongue.

Five good men who didn’t deserve their fate, who did nothing wrong except think it was okay to spend time with her. Each one had been a reminder that she’d spent too long in one place or gotten too comfortable with her supposed freedom.

“Their deaths weren’t your fault.”

“Like hell they weren’t,” she snapped. “If they’d never met me, they would still be alive right now.”

It was the awful truth she had to live with. Every time she had an itch that needed to be scratched, she took a life into her hands.

Chance didn’t seem to care that she wanted to put space between them. He was using her moves against her and invading her bubble. For every step forward he took, she

stepped back two more until her back slammed into the hard rock wall.

His palms cradled her jaw. The gentleness was such a contrast to the fire burning in his eyes. She couldn't move even if she wanted to, as he spoke the words once again.

“Their deaths weren't your fault.”

His tight tone didn't leave any room for an argument.

“There's only one thing left for you to tell me.”

With Chance this close, her brain was a scrambled mess. She couldn't string two sentences together let alone answer any more questions.

That was her only explanation for confessing the truth when he asked.

“Your real name, Maddox. Who are you and who's the man I need to kill for making you doubt yourself?”

CHAPTER TWELVE



The minutes dragged on as Chance waited for Maddox to answer him. No matter what it took, he was going to figure out who her father was and kill him.

“Bree Harrison.”

He waited for her to explain more, and when she didn't, he tried to recall why the name sounded so familiar. He had a knack for remembering names. Some people easily forget the person they were introduced to, but not him. He only had to hear it or read it once to remember.

Read it.

Bingo. That's why the name was familiar. One of his buddies in the Navy was addicted to gossip magazines. His sister would ship dozens of them inside a care package every month.

“Samuel Harrison's daughter? The Hollywood director with more Golden Globes than anyone else? You're his daughter?”

No wonder she had thought her life was a fairy tale. Her family wasn't just rich, they were Hollywood royalty.

“I see you're a fan,” she answered. “I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Dear old Dad's specialty is action movies after all.”

He wouldn't go as far as saying he was a fan. Impressed, sure, because his movies were good, but that didn't mean he respected the man. Not if what Bree was saying was true.

Bree.

He liked the sound of that much better than Maddox.

“Sure, his movies aren’t bad, but the only thing I know about him is what makes it to the gossip columns. Your disappearance was headline news for months. A lot of people speculated what happened to you.”

Bree huffed. “Yeah, well, if I remember correctly, only one of them even came close to the truth. The rest did nothing but bash me.” Chance was still close enough to see the array of emotions flitter in her eyes.

And then her tone changed. “I didn’t take you as someone who read such nonsense.”

The small upturn of her lips told him she was joking around with him.

“When you’re deployed, you’ll read just about anything that’s available. One of my teammates was obsessed with celebrities. I don’t think he missed a single issue published.”

Until he died during their last deployment. Sadness over the many men and women who never came home snuck up on him. He usually did his best not to think about those times.

Chance cleared his throat.

“You said one of the magazines came close to telling the truth.”

“*Hollywood Down Under*. It was the only magazine that didn’t kiss my father’s ass. The only one you could be sure would give it to you straight. They reported about Charles cheating on me and said it was likely the reason I had taken off, even though it was rumored we were set to marry after high school.”

“Where is Charles now?”

Chance was deciding if he needed to add another person to his hit list. Her father was at the top, followed closely by whoever the stalker was he sent after his daughter. He would add more to that list if needed.

“Happily married to another heiress. Or maybe it’s unhappily married, considering the rumors of his infidelity are

a mile long.”

He would figure out Charles’s last name later and check to see if the gossip columns were true. If so, the cheating bastard would get pushed lower on his list, but only slightly. The man still deserved a beatdown for the pain he put her through.

“Do you know anything about the stalker your father keeps sending after you? Is it always the same person or a different one each time? And how did you know they were close?”

He didn’t know exactly when he started to believe her, but something told him every word coming out of her mouth was fact. There was no faking the friendships she formed with Emma and Karlie. He couldn’t see her just leaving them without any notice unless she truly believed their lives were at risk.

“The same person. At least I think so because whoever it is will attempt to hack into my account. It’s always the same code and they usually strike twenty-four hours later. This time they moved quickly. I saw the code just before you asked me to grab dinner with you.”

So, barely eight hours. That meant whoever was after her was either a lot closer than usual, or was able to charter transportation quickly.

Something else bothered him.

“How does this stalker know about the men you slept with? I’m guessing you didn’t stick around after you recognized the code and have yourself one last romp.”

“I’ve asked myself that same question a million times. There’s no way he should’ve known about them, and yet it’s happened five times.”

There was more going on, but they would have to figure it out later. There were more pressing matters to deal with.

“I’m going out to scout the area and see if your stalker has left yet.”

Bree looked over to where they slid down into the cave. “You plan to climb back up that? No offense, but that doesn’t

seem like a smart idea.”

“There’s another way out of this place.” He threw her a wink and turned. Chance tried not to think about the amount of effort it took to walk away from her.

This wasn’t how things were supposed to go between them. They were opposites. Even more so now that he knew who she really was. Bree was an heiress. Hollywood royalty. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth. He was the boy from the other side of the tracks, the one most people looked down on.

Growing up, luxuries were a foreign concept to him. He knew better than to ask his parents for anything. His father would beat his ass and call him ungrateful, and his mother would try to work extra shifts to make it happen.

Chance didn’t need to fully exit the cave to know that whoever was looking for Bree hadn’t left yet. He could hear the shouting.

“I don’t know how the fuck I lost her! It’s like she disappeared into fucking thin air!”

She sure did.

And whoever was after Bree was about to disappear too. Chance would bury them in a shallow grave out in the middle of the desert and hope the animals dragged his bones all over creation.

This particular opening of the cave wasn’t as steep as the one they entered, but he was still forced to dig his boots into the hard dirt to climb his way out. Chance was four feet away from the other secret entrance when the conversation outside picked up again.

“Don’t worry, he knows his role. He’ll get us the information we need and then you can kill him.”

Chance froze. He continued to listen to the one-sided conversation in hopes of learning the traitor’s identity. Bree was right. Someone within their organization was feeding people information. Just not to the person they all originally thought.

Pulling out his phone, he thumbed a quick text out to Black.

Chance: Have Emma ping cell towers in the area.

The response back from Black was instant. He should've expected that the man wouldn't be sleeping.

Black: Did you follow Maddox?

The question grated on his nerves. He refused to believe it was jealousy over Black's relationship with Bree. It would mean admitting he felt something for her and he wasn't ready to do that.

Chance: I did. Met some trouble along the way. We are currently holding at the secondary location.

He didn't want to give too much away. He doubted whoever was monitoring Bree could access his company cell, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Black: Emma is working on the ping now. Hold tight.

He strained to hear more of the conversation but whoever was out there had either moved farther away or was no longer speaking to anyone.

Chance stuck around for several more minutes but returned to inside the cave when it was clear he wasn't going to get any more information.

"Did they leave?"

He wasn't a fan of this new version of Bree. The trepidation was a huge contrast to the woman he first met. The one with so much fire in her blood that he envied her strength.

"I'm not sure."

The answer wasn't one she liked. He could tell by the way her eyes squinted at him.

"What do you mean you're not sure?"

"I overheard someone talking about losing you and then they mentioned the traitor. I thought it best not to kill him

before we figured out who was behind all this. Sorry if that doesn't meet your needs."

His self-control was commendable. The level of bodily harm he wanted to dish out but forced himself to tamp down was astronomical.

"We need to find out who was on that call."

Bree pushed past him like she was headed to solve the problem all on her own. Chance snagged her before she could get too far.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To trace ..."

That's when it seemed to click for Bree.

"You didn't bring your computer with you."

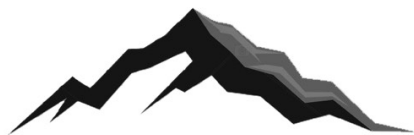
It wasn't a question. The bag she had been carrying when she snuck out didn't weigh enough to be holding it.

"I wiped it clean and left it in pieces back in my room," she sighed.

"I texted Black. He's putting Emma on it. She'll figure out who's out there and hopefully who they were talking to."

It would've been better to have Bree behind the computer looking for the information but he wouldn't put her life at risk. And he didn't want to think about what that meant.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



It was killing her to know she was stuck inside this cave while her friend was looking for her stalker's identity without her.

She should've been helping Emma. She should've never run. It was cowardly and completely unlike the woman she wanted to be. Bree was ashamed of the woman she'd become because of her father.

Now that Chance knew who she really was, she could ditch the code name that had become so much of her personality over the years. It was freeing, actually. For so long, she just wanted to be Bree. Not the heiress either. Just plain old Bree who liked tattoos and oversized shirts. Who occasionally called people weird names. The person she was always meant to be, but was forced to hide.

"I need to get out of here."

Pacing the cave wasn't helping, and if she had to look at the same four stone walls for another minute, she was going to rip her hair out.

"You need to wait for Black to give the all clear."

Fuck Black for all his controlling tendencies. She'd only known him for a month and already he annoyed her.

Fuck Chance for listening to their overbearing ape of a boss.

And fuck her stalker for turning her into a scared bitch who ran the moment a little code scrolled across her screen.

Actually, she was on a roll, so why not one more for the list?

Fuck her father for being a controlling ass that the whole world loved because they didn't know his true nature.

Bree took a deep breath. Her little rant in her head was surprisingly cathartic.

“Did whatever that was work?”

Bree opened her eyes, not even realizing she had closed them while she had her mini meltdown.

“Actually, yes. How did you know I was doing something?”

“You looked ready to kill someone.” He stepped closer and, with barely a touch, ran a finger down along her arm. “I figured that someone was me.” He smirked. “Or at the very least, I was one of several.”

“You weren't the first on the list,” she teased.

“I'm moving up in the world. Imagine that.”

The little smile he gave her threw her off. She wasn't used to this carefree version of the man. She did, however, kind of like it.

“I'm rubbing off on you. I even got a quarter of a smile with that line.”

“A quarter, huh?” he said, with a raised eyebrow.

Who was this man? Tactical pants, a tight shirt, and combat boots. All of which she would expect considering his goal was to follow her into the dead of the night. She had seen it all before, but never like this. Chance had suddenly shed the suit and out popped a very charming personality. It was doing something to her womanly parts.

“Maybe a little more,” she continued teasing. “I've never seen a full smile on your face, so it's hard to judge.”

She wasn't ready. There wasn't a single thing that could prepare her for the panty-melting, heart-swelling, stomach-flipping smile he bestowed upon her. It should've been illegal

to have such a great set of lips. Bree wanted those lips back on her body.

Before she knew it, the words were flying out of her mouth. "It's a good thing you didn't smile when we first met."

"And why's that?" Chance said softly.

Bree got the distinct impression that he was laughing at her. But her stupid hormones didn't seem to care as long as he continued to smile at her like that.

"Because I wouldn't have just propositioned you on the ride home from the airport. I would've taken over the wheel and driven right into the desert so I could jump you on the side of the road."

There was no question now if he was laughing at her or not. The deep rumble echoed throughout the cave.

"I'm not sure I would've responded well to that. I was having a hard enough time reconciling that you weren't a guy."

One of the stipulations she had set when Black hired her was that he couldn't tell his team any information. Especially not her gender. She wanted things a complete surprise. Not just because she was hiding her identity but because it was more fun that way. She knew she would get a kick out of their reaction, and after months of not speaking to anyone in person, she had needed a good laugh. Chance hadn't disappointed her.

"I like to live on the edge. Don't you?"

Bree was sure she had never seen someone shut down so quickly in her life. One second Chance's smile lit up the entire area, and the next, the gates slammed shut and his personality was once again hidden.

"No."

His touch was gone, and Bree hated how much she missed it.

"Why do you do that?" she asked timidly.

Chance represented a caged animal, all sleek and sexy as he paced what she assumed was no longer a big enough area for him.

When it was clear he didn't plan to answer her, she pushed again.

“Was showing me the real you such a bad thing?”

That seemed to spark a reaction.

“You don't know what you're talking about,” he shot back.

“Don't I?” If they were going to be stuck in this rock formation for God knew how long, then she was going to get some damn answers of her own. “You shut down the second anything gets too personal. If I didn't know you any better, I would think you hated to have fun but that's not true, is it? That laugh and smile were too genuine. You just deny yourself the opportunity. You force yourself to be all serious and stuffy.”

Bree could tell she was getting somewhere. Just like when he dragged her into the laundry room, she was getting under his skin and cracking that hard exterior.

“Fun? You mean like purple hair, calling people ridiculous names, and not understanding what a boundary is if it slapped you in the forehead. Is that the definition of fun you mean?”

So he wanted a fight. He was going to be in for a rude awakening when he realized fighting was her fucking love language.

“That's *exactly* what I mean when I say fun. I'm not ashamed of who I am like *someone* I know. I embrace my quirks. I love them rather than try to smother them out. Maybe you should try it. That way, the stick shoved so far up your ass could finally come out.”

“You don't know a damn thing about me!” he shouted from the spot where he was hiding across the dirt floor.

And yes, hiding, because for every step she took in his direction, he took one more away. They were doing some weird sort of dance from the opposite ends of the cave.

Again.

“Well, it sure as hell isn’t for a lack of trying, and I’m not the only one. Every single one of your teammates has tried to get to know you but you push them away.”

“Not Liam.”

Liam was the one teammate she knew the least about. He treated her like a daughter and she hadn’t been sure how to take that considering her sperm donor hadn’t been the greatest example.

Bree wasn’t an idiot. He had given her a small tear and she was going to rip it all the way open.

“What makes Liam so special?”

Ah, she hit a nerve. It shouldn’t be so satisfying to watch him squirm, but it was. And she wasn’t done. With each step in his direction, she pelted him with another question.

“Did you know him before Black hired you?”

Another step.

“Did you serve together?”

She didn’t think so, based on the information she had about the men, but it felt good to knock him off-balance.

“A friend? Maybe a family friend?” A few more steps. “How about an ex-lover’s father? Am I getting warmer? Colder?”

She was close and not just physically. She could feel it. Could see his eye twitching as the pressure got to him.

“Did you know him growing up? When you were an adult? Did he bail you out of jail?”

“Stop!” Chance bellowed.

The one word reverberated throughout the rock walls.

“Do you ever just shut up or does hounding someone get your rocks off?”

“It absolutely gets my rocks off,” she tossed back, “and no, I won’t stop. Not until you tell me.”

“We’re from the same small town, alright?”

It was a step in the right direction, but she knew it wasn’t the whole story.

Bree wanted the whole story.

“And?”

“And, what?”

He threw his hands in the air, clearly frustrated, but he stopped retreating every time she moved closer to him. It was only a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

“And what else? I know that’s not everything.”

“He recommended me to Black. I have the job here because of Liam. There, are you happy now?”

Not even close. Chance was about to realize just how annoying she could get when she wanted information. It was what made her so good at hacking. She was like a dog with its favorite bone. There was no stopping her until she tore through every piece of information available. And even some that were unavailable.

“So you knew him growing up? Did you meet him in your teen years? Or was it after the Navy?”

Every new question deepened the red tinting the tips of his ears.

“Liam knew my father!” he shouted at her. “He’s only a few years younger than the asshole who raised me, so he knows about my life. Knew the shit I went through, and knew I never wanted to go back to that hellhole of a town, so he got me this job.”

It would seem they had something in common after all. They were both spawns of men who didn’t deserve to have reproduced.

“You know about my father, so how about you tell me about yours?”

Chance sighed. All of the fight appeared to drain out of him as he finally opened up.

“He was also military. Army actually. Got injured while deployed and came home with a chip on his shoulder about it. The only jobs available in our small town were blue-collar ones and that was never good enough for him. He felt that only a man who wore a suit was worth a damn.”

So many things started to make sense, but for once she kept her mouth shut and let him continue.

“He drank and gambled. Had no problem blowing through money and complained that it was my mother’s, sister’s, and my fault that we were poor and forced to live in a trailer. My mother worked two jobs just so my sister and I could have clothes, but it was never enough. Nothing was ever good enough for him.”

Bree reached out to comfort him but stopped when his hands shot up.

“I don’t want to be anything like him. He hated his kids. Hated his wife because he was convinced she trapped him by getting knocked up one night at a party. I swore I would never end up like him and that meant not going back to that small town. Or living in the trailer he hated so much. Or letting myself be irresponsible and possibly impregnating a woman that I didn’t plan to marry and spend the rest of my life with.”

His reaction to forgetting the condom suddenly made sense. She wanted to hug the little boy whose childhood view of love was distorted to the point that every decision Chance made was to spite his father. She wanted to shake the man for the very same reason. To allow his father that much power over his life was irrational.

Her last thought stopped her in mid-thought. Wasn’t that exactly what she was doing? Over ten years on the run because she didn’t want to deal with the man? Refused to face the demons that were a reflection of him, not her?

“I’m sorry that happened to you. So many things now make sense, but you’re not your father. I’m sure Liam has told you the same. You don’t have anything to prove to him or yourself. And I hate to say it, but those suits you wear? They don’t make you the man you are. Someone in a suit can be just

as much of an asshole as someone in dirty jeans and boots. Believe me, I know. It's about what's in here." She pointed to her heart.

Bree was about to say more when a rustling from the entrance they first used caught her attention. She spun around to defend herself but didn't get the opportunity.

Before she fully registered what was happening, she was stuffed behind Chance.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



He owed Gage big-time for his teammate's impeccable timing.

At first, Chance had worried that Bree's stalker had discovered their hideout. On instinct, he had dragged her behind him, but then he heard it—the bird call his team used to signal to others upon approach.

“Did Emma identify the caller?”

Chance needed to focus on anything other than the fact that he confessed his entire life history to the one woman who would use it against him. Now that she knew about his past, she would push.

Push him to get past it.

Push him to change.

She'd already started to before Gage arrived, and he didn't want that. Chance wanted nothing more than for her to forget everything he said. Telling her changed nothing. There was no future for them, and he needed to remember that. They were even more different than she realized.

“Not yet, but the phone is no longer pinging in the area, so Black sent us out to retrieve you.”

Chance wasn't going to question his teammate any further.

“We're not done talking about this,” Bree said.

It was like she could read his mind. That didn't exactly bode well for him.

And they were very much done talking about it. She just didn't know it yet.

He directed Bree to follow Gage, as he took up the rear. He focused his eyes on the purple in her hair instead of letting them graze down to other parts of her body. He already knew her ass looked good in the pants she wore, so he didn't need the reminder or to add more mental images to his already growing stack. It would do him no good; a cordial working relationship was the best he could offer.

"Emma's pissed you snuck away without a word." Gage filled in the awkward silence.

"She'll get over it once she hears why I did it."

Bree didn't seem to understand the concept of friendship any more than he did sometimes. Maybe that had to do with the shitty parents they had growing up.

Correction: shitty fathers. His mother was great. He knew nothing about her mother, but considering Bree had yet to say something about her, he figured there were no redeeming qualities.

"Karlie isn't happy either. Kendra appears to be the only one who isn't cursing your name."

"That's because she and I are a lot alike. We understand wanting to protect those we care about."

Chance had to force himself not to break eye contact when that statement was accompanied by an obvious glare his way. She wasn't just talking about her female friends. Yet, he didn't want her to care about him. It complicated an already delicate situation. She needed to move on.

Couldn't she see just how opposite they were in every sense of the word? She came from a life of luxury while he was raised through the dredges of society.

"That's your battle," Gage replied. "I'm just giving you a warning."

Chance kept his mouth shut and let Gage handle Bree. It was the most the man had said in a while. Ever since the

kidnapping of Karlie, his teammate had become a hermit. Even more so than himself.

Sure enough, as soon as they entered the main building, Emma and Karlie started in on Bree.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“How could you? Not even so much as a goodbye!”

It didn't take a genius to figure out which one said what. Karlie was the nicest of the bunch. Emma, on the other hand, didn't hold anything back.

“Do you know how pissed I was to be woken up by Black because your stupid ass thought it would be better to slip away than tell me something was going on?”

“Hey, now ...” Chance stepped in to defend Bree. Yes, her decision was stupid, but that didn't give Emma the right to call her that.

“It's fine.” Bree flattened her palm on his chest. “Emma's right. I should've come to her rather than leaving. I just wanted to protect all of you and getting as far away as possible is how I've always dealt with the problem.”

“Well, you have friends now, so *stop it*,” Emma huffed.

“Can we move this discussion into the conference room?”

It wasn't a question. Black didn't bother asking, even if that was how it was phrased. It was a demand that everyone followed without argument.

Karlie hovered close with a sleeping Anna in her arms. That little baby could sleep through a bomb going off. It only made him love the little lady that much more.

“Can I hold her?” Chance asked quietly.

She gave him a soft smile as she carefully transferred the sleeping bundle into his awaiting arms.

Since his team found the two of them over a month ago, Chance had found every opportunity to babysit when Karlie and Steel allowed him to. He figured while he waited to find

his own wife to have kids with, he would keep borrowing Anna.

The little girl always smelled so good. Leaning down close, he sucked in her sweet aroma and pressed his lips to her fuzzy head.

Chance could tell without even looking up that Bree was watching him. He didn't know when it happened, but could always sense her eyes on him. Without meaning to, he looked up and caught her staring. A normal person would have quickly looked away, but not his spitfire. There was something deeper about her look.

His spitfire?

No, that wasn't right, and he couldn't allow himself to go down that path. She wasn't his, would never be his, despite what his body wanted.

But Chance was starting to think it wasn't just his body he was fighting.

"Maddox, how about you tell us what led to you leaving in the middle of the night?"

Black's booming voice brought him out of his mental argument and back to the matter at hand.

Bree's stalker.

Chance's first instinct was to go to Bree and offer her silent support. But one look in her direction and he knew she didn't need it. She didn't need any man. He needed to do a better job of fighting the urges, stopping them before they even took root in his brain.

"I guess it's better if I start from the beginning."

He wasn't ready to hear her story, and get pissed on her behalf, all over again. But walking out of the room, when there was a very slim chance she would need him, was also not an option.

"I fled my home the day after graduation. My father and the world I grew up in thought it was normal to arrange marriages for societal gain. The boy he wanted me to marry

had been my high school sweetheart, and if I never learned what a cheating dickasaurus he was, I probably would've gone through with it."

Bree took a deep breath.

"Now I know what you might be thinking. Just say no. Well, I tried that. It didn't end in my favor. That's when I decided I wanted to be someone new. I ran away and started my life over. Got cocky and thought I bested my father. Until he sent someone after me and killed the man I ... had been casually ... seeing. Up until that moment, I honestly believed I was just another spoiled rich girl rebelling against her family. I didn't realize how far my father would go, and I knew I couldn't go back."

"So you've been on the run ever since?" Blayd asked.

"Yes. I never stay in one place longer than a month. I'm careful to never use my real name. I've always been good with computers and learned how to hack along the way. I've built up a pretty good reputation under the name Maddox because most people believed I was a guy."

Anna stirred in his arms, so he passed the little bundle back to Karlie. It was feeding time most likely, but he didn't see a bottle anywhere close. He knew his instinct was correct when Karlie excused herself and slipped out of the room, taking the only defense he had to keep him from reaching for Bree.

"You've been here a month. Is that why you decided to run?"

It was Steel's turn to start asking questions. He imagined they all had a million things they wanted to know. It was the nature of the beast in their line of work.

"No. Truthfully, I never had any intention of running. I thought I was safe here. That between me and Emma, we had enough things in place for it to be safe for me to stay."

"You're telling me my wife knew who you were this whole time?"

Oh boy. Keeping secrets was a touchy subject for Daniel. Chance didn't know how his team leader lived with the fact that there were things Emma couldn't tell him. He didn't know if he could live the same way.

"Calm down," Bree snapped. "Emma didn't know, so don't get mad at her. No one knew. Except maybe Black."

Every head in the room turned to look at their boss.

"I don't hire people I don't know."

It wasn't a confirmation, but not a denial either. Chance doubted they would ever know the truth. Black was a mysterious man who kept things close to the vest.

"So, who are you really? Someone famous?" Blayd wiggled his eyebrows. Their teammate had a flair for the dramatic. But this time he wasn't far off.

"You could say that," Bree sighed. "My name's Bree Harrison and my father's Samuel Harrison."

The entire room fell silent for a solid minute. Jaws dropped and Chance was sure if a mouse ran through the room during that minute, it would've sounded like an elephant.

"Holy fuck."

Of course, Blayd was the first one to recover. The man loved to hear himself talk.

"Your disappearance was national news," Gage added.

"No shit." Bree shook her head. "I'm sure that pissed my father off immensely considering anything that made him look bad wasn't tolerated. His daughter running away definitely made him look like the piece of shit he was."

"Did he lay his hands on you?"

Liam was in Papa Bear mode. Chance should've seen it earlier, the way his friend spoke about Bree and looked out for her. Even their discussion in the gym. It wasn't only about him, Liam was looking out for Bree as well.

"Just once. That's all it took for me to leave, but that's not why I stayed away or moved often. It was the guys who kept

getting killed.”

“How many?”

“Five. When I was working last night, I recognized a familiar code. Every time I’ve seen it before, someone around me has died. I couldn’t let that happen.”

A look around the room confirmed what he suspected; Chance was glad he wasn’t the only one who looked ready to commit murder on Bree’s behalf.

Emma stood up from where she was working on a laptop and pulled Bree into a hug.

“You should’ve told me.”

“I know,” Bree confessed. “But it’s been a gut reaction for so long that I didn’t even think. I just reacted as I always did. I now realize that was a mistake.”

It felt like he and the rest of his team were intruding on a private moment. Bree and Emma stood with their foreheads resting together. He had to strain to hear what they were saying to each other, and truthfully, he probably should’ve turned away and given them their privacy.

But he couldn’t look away. Despite fighting it, he wanted all of her moments. He wanted to know everything about her.

It was dangerous and if he didn’t shut it down, she would leave him a broken man.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The room slowly cleared out the longer she stood with Emma until the only three left were the women, minus Karlie.

“Did you really think we wouldn’t hunt you down?”

Bree sniffled out a laugh. Leave it to Emma to lighten up the mood. She hadn’t meant to get emotional, but seeing how much these people cared for her after only one month left her slightly teary-eyed.

“I told you I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

Kendra was surprisingly quiet throughout the exchange, even though she had chosen to stay with them.

“You aren’t mad at me, right?”

“I have no room to judge.” Kendra shrugged. “Besides, who am I to tell someone how they should respond to a threat? Only you can make that decision.”

Kendra had officially moved up the list to one of the people she now loved the most. Actually, it was a three-way tie between Kendra, Emma, and Karlie. She couldn’t pick her favorite. It was like picking a favorite child. Or a favorite book boyfriend. It just wasn’t possible.

“So tell us what happened in the cave with Chance. Last time I checked, he avoided looking at you and now he can’t keep his eyes off you.” Emma dropped her voice and looked around the room like the man in question would suddenly pop up out of nowhere.

Actually, considering that was exactly what he had done when she snuck off, it was probably smart of Emma to check.

“Nothing happened.” She didn’t want to break his confidence and telling Emma and Kendra seemed like a great way to do that. “We argued. Pretty much the same thing we always do.”

“Ah, not always,” Emma coughed.

“Yes, *always*. Even that was rage-filled.”

Kendra looked confused, so Bree put her out of her misery.

“I had hate sex with Chance. He immediately regretted it and then he caught me sneaking out. It didn’t exactly help my cause with him, so if he’s keeping his eyes on me, it’s only because he thinks I’m a flight risk.”

Bree was positive that Emma and Kendra didn’t believe a word she was saying, but neither called her out on it; a small mercy she was grateful for.

“So what did you find out about the person who was sent after me?” Bree asked, changing the subject.

She never understood if her father sent someone after her or after those in her life. She was always gone by the time those murders happened. So was it intentional, or did the stalker lash out each time because he missed her once again?

“Not much. The number was from a burner phone, but I did manage to trace the call back to California. Makes sense, since that’s where your father is and you think he’s the one who sent someone after you.”

It was more than just a belief, but she kept her mouth shut. Early in her career, she had been bold enough to hack into her father’s accounts. It was how she found out that he would do anything to get her back, including paying someone an extreme amount of money to find her and *do whatever is necessary to bring her ass back where it belongs*.

Reading that confirmed that she would never be safe again. Money talked. And she knew better than anyone what people would do to make a few extra bucks.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Kendra tried to reassure her. “The team will find this guy and end his miserable life.”

“I know they will.”

There was no doubt in her mind that they would stop at nothing to find the person who had the nerve to mess with one of their own. Which reminded her ...

“Chance mentioned the caller was talking about having someone on the inside. Do you think my father is working with the traitor and not Vito?”

She wasn't sure which was better. Both men were vile in their own right.

“We can't rule it out, but I think it's more likely that the traitor found out who you really are and wanted a bigger cut. From what I understand, your father is willing to pay top dollar for information on you.”

Ten years and he still wasn't over the slight. Bree couldn't understand it. The man he wanted her to marry had moved on. What could her father possibly still want from her?

She wasn't going to come up with the answer now, not after staying up all night. The day was just beginning, and the sun had started to come up. A new day and all she wanted to do was shower off the filth and crawl into bed for a few hours.

Bree waved goodbye to her friends and hugged them; a thank-you for caring and an apology for making them worry. New Mexico was intended to be a fresh start, she just never expected she would get so many extras.

It wasn't until she was back in her room that everything hit her at once. On the small coffee table, in a dozen pieces, was her laptop. The one piece of equipment that got her through so much, and she had destroyed it out of fear. There was no telling if it could be fixed. Bree doubted as much. She had done a good job making sure no one could find the information she had learned.

Why am I like this?

It wasn't easy to self-reflect. Most people didn't look in the mirror and examine who they were as a person, not unless a major event happened, and this was hers. The tipping point. An event that would determine how she would move forward. And that was still up in the air.

Bree was still looking at herself when she heard a knock on the door. She was tempted to ignore it. Her shower was calling her name. Whoever was on the other side could wait.

Then she let out a long sigh.

No, she couldn't. She liked these people too much to let them worry about her any more than she already has. And they would worry.

Bree didn't bother looking to see who it was. No one could get inside their building without going through several layers of security. So without much thought, she whipped the door open, half expecting to find Karlie or Emma. She wasn't prepared to see Chance standing on the other side in all his manly glory. His hair was damp, as if he'd actually had the opportunity to take a shower. But what really surprised her was the clothes he put on afterward.

"Where's your suit?"

"I figured with everything going on, there was a chance I would have to leave at a moment's notice. Stopping to change would be counterproductive."

Sure. If that's the story he wanted to stick to, then who was she to call him out on it? She had more important things on her agenda.

"Did you need something?"

That came out harsher than she planned, but Chance didn't appear to notice.

"Actually ..."

Chance didn't get to finish.

"Maddox, a word."

Black didn't bother waiting for an invitation to enter the conversation as he approached them in the hall. Their boss simply stuck his hand out and motioned for her to enter her room.

Her own damn apartment.

It took biting down on her cheek hard to stop her snarky reply. She figured if she kept her mouth shut, there was a better chance of getting both men out of her place sooner.

Fortunately, Black didn't make her wait long.

"If the opportunity arises, I would like you to consider being bait for the traitor."

Unfortunately, what he had to say only further pissed Chance off.

"Absolutely fucking not."

Bree sighed again. There went her plans for a shower and a nap. She would've been better off if she went with her first instinct and never opened the damn door.

"You don't get to decide." She pointed at Chance. "And you could've worded that better." She turned her ire on Black. "Did you really think blurting it out like that was such a fine idea?"

Their boss didn't know what had transpired between her and Chance, but the man had to know there wasn't a single member of the team who wouldn't object to the idea. It was in their nature to protect.

"I didn't know he would be here and truthfully it couldn't wait. An opportunity might present itself soon and I wanted to make sure we were on the same page."

"There is no fucking same page," Chance hollered. "She's not fucking doing it!"

Well, this was going splendidly well. At this rate, she was going to have a headache on top of being tired and dirty. A great combination for someone who needed to keep their wits about them.

“Let me repeat myself.” She looked Chance right in the eyes. “You. Don’t. Get. A. Say.”

There. Maybe, with it slowed down a bit, he would get the hint.

She was obviously wrong in that assumption.

“Like hell, I don’t. And the only reason Black sought you out was because he knew if he asked in front of the team, they would have the same reaction.”

Reining in her anger was taking far more patience than she currently possessed.

“You think I don’t know that? It’s still my decision and I’m fine with it. I want this over. If I can do something to help discover who the traitor is, then so be it.”

She had just been trying to figure out how she would move forward with her life and now she knew. She was done running. Done being afraid of her father and whoever he sent after her. She was done making decisions based on the reactions of others. Bree was going to do this for herself so she could take her life back.

“I’ll keep you in the loop.” Black was smart enough to slip out without another word, leaving her alone with a red-faced Chance.

“If you’re going to just stand there and yell, you can leave. I need to take a shower.” She spun on her heels and headed into her apartment. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



She did *not* just walk away after dropping a bomb like that. Did she really think he wouldn't care that she was putting her life on the line?

Well, she was about to find out just how much he actually cared.

Storming after her, it registered too late what she said she was going to do before she stomped off.

When he opened the door, the bathroom was already steamed up, and he found Bree in just her underwear. She didn't seem the least bit surprised by his sudden intrusion. Nor did she stop what she was doing.

He watched with rapt attention as she slipped the silk panties down her smooth legs and gingerly stepped out of them.

“Did you come in here to argue some more, or did you have another plan in mind?”

Just like in his apartment, her shower consisted of a glass enclosure that left nothing to the imagination. Her stepping under the spray didn't help; he couldn't stop his eyes from wandering over her body, her delicious curves and full breasts. Their first time together, he hadn't had the time or patience to fully enjoy her body. Now he was getting a view of everything and more.

“Dino got your tongue?”

Chance didn't know if it was the sassy way she said it or the flirtatious smirk she threw his way, but that was it. Before his mind fully realized what his body was doing, he was grabbing the back of his shirt and pulling it over his head. Kicking his boots off, he shed the rest of his clothes in seconds and pulled the glass enclosure open.

"I'll show you what my tongue can do." He slipped in behind her and pushed his palm between her shoulder blades. "Hands on the tile and spread those legs."

He kissed a trail down her spine. Each brush of his lips was rewarded by a small noise, sometimes a whimper, other times a moan. Every sound only spurred him on. Chance wanted to bring out more.

He fell to his knees on the hard tile floor, as her perfectly round ass begged for attention. Grazing his teeth along the silky flesh, he commanded, "I need these wider, Bree."

Chance didn't wait for her to listen. He slid his hands down her wet legs and pushed them out, first the right, then the left, until she was wide enough to fit his shoulders between them.

"I want to bite this ass."

The last word wasn't even fully out of his mouth before he was sinking his teeth in.

"Oh, God."

The words dragged out and he could feel her thighs shake beneath his fingers. Nothing was more satisfying than knowing he was the reason for every tremor that rocked her body. His eyes zeroed in on the flushed pink skin that peeked out between her thighs. Desperate for more, he grabbed her hips and tipped her ass up higher.

Unable to wait any longer, Chance spun around and dropped to his ass. He buried his face between her legs and lapped at her swollen flesh.

His tongue flicked her clit and brought another moan crashing through the small shower space. It wasn't enough. He

wanted it all. Wanted to claim her, to own every noise she ever made.

He wrapped his arms around her thighs and palmed her ass cheeks, not allowing her an inch of space as he continued to lap her up.

“Please, don’t stop,” she begged.

Water cascaded down around him, but he didn’t let it distract him. The taste of her on his tongue was an addiction. Once would never be enough.

His fingers flexed on her ass, and her thighs tightened around his head. His tongue speared her folds over and over again.

He wanted her to come this way, wanted her first of many orgasms today to drip down his chin, through his rare stubble.

“I’m going to come ...” Her legs shook. One hand dropped to his head and fisted his wet hair. Her body rocked forward as she rode his face.

Her wild abandon made his dick ache, but he could hold off just a bit longer. One more swipe and her whole body bucked against him. Her pussy clenched and it was his name she screamed through the sound of the water pounding around them.

She collapsed into his lap, but he wasn’t done with her yet, and he told her as much.

“That was just the beginning.”

Activating the core muscles he worked so hard on, Chance lifted them both off the tile floor and spun around until Bree’s back was against the glass enclosure. His cock lay heavy between them and begged to be inside her.

He was lining himself up to sink into her wet heat when it dawned on him.

“Son of a bitch,” he seethed.

“What’s wrong?” Her lazy voice wrapped around him like a warm blanket. He liked her like this, satisfied and hungry for

him.

“I didn’t bring a condom with me.”

Just like in the laundry room, he almost lost his head. He was starting to realize Bree had that effect on him.

“I told you, I’m on birth control and you’ve seen my records as I’ve seen yours.”

She didn’t finish her thought, but he knew exactly what she was saying. Bree was leaving it up to him. She knew he was the one with the hang-up. It was his problem to either overcome or allow to rule him.

The decision was easy.

“I need you. Now.”

That was all he managed to get out before he drove into her, before his body took over and all rational thought floated away. The need to make her his, to mark her, was all-consuming.

He sank his teeth into her shoulder. Her moan shot straight to his cock and almost had him shooting off early.

The combination was deadly; the sweet sounds that fell from her lips, the way her pussy hugged his cock, the nails dug into his back. It was stimulation overload, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Chance needed to touch her everywhere. His one hand massaged her ass and yanked her so she was able to meet every one of his brutal thrusts. She would be sore, and he had half a mind to ease up, but Bree wasn’t having it. If he relaxed his hand for even a moment, her heels dug further into his back.

Fisting her wet hair with his other hand, he tilted her neck so his lips could roam over her skin.

“Yes,” Bree moaned as his teeth grazed her pulsing vein. “I’m so close.”

He let her take over, use him to get herself off. The change of pace was his undoing.

“That’s right.” He encouraged her to keep grinding on him. “Take exactly what you need.”

The flutter of her walls was the last straw. He roared out his release just seconds before his name croaked from her mouth.

“Holy shit.”

He had to give Bree props for recovering first. He could barely get enough oxygen into his lungs, let alone string two words together. With his face buried in her hair, it took everything in him not to collapse to the shower floor with her in his lap.

“That wasn’t what I expected when I said I was going to take a shower.”

A chuckle fell from his lips before he could stop it.

“I don’t believe you,” he mumbled into her neck. “You knew exactly what you were doing when you said that. It was a challenge you knew I would accept.”

Chance was slowly becoming addicted to this woman. All she had to do was say “jump,” and like a good boy, he would ask how high. It wasn’t nearly as scary as he thought it would be.

“Maybe a little.”

He liked the feel of her laughter against his body. The warm breath of it on his shoulder and the slight vibration of her pussy as his flaccid cock slipped from her.

The loss of her legs around his waist was more than he could handle.

“Turn around so I can wash your hair.

“It’s the least I can do for highjacking your shower,” he quickly added when her eyes widened.

Chance expected her to call him out on the lie. Sure, he wanted to do something nice for her, but really he just wanted his hands on her. And not even in a sexual way.

“Okay.” Bree appeared to be reading more into it but still turned around as he asked. He looked around the shower for a bottle but came up empty. There was nothing but bars stacked neatly in a corner wire rack.

She must’ve known why he hesitated. “That one is the shampoo.” Bree pointed to a pink bar amongst the others.

“And you just ...” This wasn’t turning out as he hoped. He wanted to touch her, make her feel treasured. He wanted to do something he’d ever only dreamed of doing to the woman he would spend the rest of his life with.

Not fumble around like an idiot.

Instead of laughing at him or getting frustrated, Bree grabbed the bar and gently placed it in his hand. “Like this.” Hand over hand, she slowly helped him massage the bar along her crown before placing it back on the rack. “Not much different.”

It really wasn’t. After the initial intimidation of seeing something new, the mechanics of washing her hair were the exact same. Every little whimper as he worked his fingers across her scalp was hell on his control. He continued to remind his cock to wait his turn. The damn thing had its time and now it was time to take care of her.

“Tip your head back.”

She did without question. He was still working out most of the suds when she spoke in a low voice. “You’re really good at this.”

“Which is the conditioner?”

Bree pointed to a brown bar. This one was much softer, and slippery. Twice he almost dropped it before he managed to get a handle on it. Cradling her hair, he ran the bar down the lower half of it where the purple tips were slowly fading.

“I have a confession.” He put the bar back and worked his fingers through the soft strands. “I’ve always wanted to do this to a woman, but felt it was too intimate. I remember my mother telling me I would make a great husband one day when I had to do it for her after a brutal beating from my father.”

Because he was so in tune with her body, he could tell the second every muscle tensed. He wanted to kick himself for ruining her relaxed state.

“Please tell me your mother is no longer with the twatopatumus who contributed his sperm.”

Leave it to Bree. A smile never graced his face when it came to his father. Or as she so eloquently put it, the man who contributed his sperm.

“She didn’t get the opportunity to leave on her own, but she *is* free of him. He drank himself to death and choked on his vomit one night after another drunken bender. My mother found him in the morning outside their trailer.”

“When?”

“A month after my sister graduated from college. I’d been in the Navy for a few years at that point.”

His mother had been a light sleeper his entire life, a likely by-product of living with an abusive spouse her entire marriage. She would wake up on a dime, but that night, she didn’t hear a thing.

They never discussed it, but he often wondered if that night was the final straw for his mother. Chance lost count of the number of times his mother was forced to drag his father’s ass into the trailer while he was growing up. He didn’t think his mother knew the asshole would die but he could almost guarantee that she just wanted one night of peace.

Having this conversation was much easier when she wasn’t looking at him. Running his hands along her body didn’t hurt either, and the natural breaks to ask her what she used was the icing on the cake. He knew he wouldn’t have been able to talk about his family without any of the distractions to keep him calm.

“What do you use to wash your body?”

This time she handed over a large bar of soap with an array of colors mixed throughout. The scent he remembered from last time didn’t match the more masculine colors. He took a whiff.

Nope, definitely not the same.

“New scent?”

Chance reached for the loofah and slathered a generous portion before wrapping his arms around her body to start with her stomach.

“I like to try new bars each time. The name on this one intrigued me even though it was listed under the men’s section.”

He would be sneaking back into her bathroom later to see what other scents she had hidden up her sleeve. He liked knowing it would be a constant mystery. Something for him to look forward to every few weeks.

Chance finished washing her body, making sure that every inch was covered in suds before quickly doing the same to himself. The hints of cedar hit his nose and he knew without a shadow of a doubt it wouldn’t be the last time he would be using that particular bar of soap.

Turning the shower off, he opened the glass enclosure and stepped out to find them a set of towels.

“How did you manage to get such fluffy towels?”

Hers were gigantic compared to the ones he had in his apartment. His weren’t much better than a hotel towel and barely covered what he needed covered.

“Black asked what it would take to get me to come here and my stipulation was big fluffy towels.” Bree shrugged like it was no big deal. And it wasn’t. Just an odd request.

“I didn’t get asked what it would take to get me here.”

There was no hiding the affront in his tone. Not that fluffy towels would’ve been on his list, but it would’ve been nice to be asked.

“I guess my hacking skills made me special.”

She was special all right. In so many ways. It sucked that it took him so long to realize it. Chance grabbed the brush off her vanity and motioned for her to turn around. He didn’t miss

the way her eyes met his in the mirror, or the soft look she continued to give him. He'd waited his entire life to find someone he could take care of and he wasn't about to do a half-assed job. Even if the woman he wanted to care for could handle herself. He would let her, most of the time. But right now, after everything that had transpired between them, he wanted this.

When he was done and sure there would be no knots in her hair, he pushed the wet strands off to the side and placed a soft kiss at the junction where her shoulder met her neck.

“Time to get some sleep. A certain stubborn woman kept me up all night.”

Chance smiled when she rolled her eyes at him. Ditching the towels, he dragged her naked body over to the bed and under the covers, where he slowly entered her once again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Why was she so cold?

Bree scissored her legs back and forth to warm them up but stopped. Something was wrong. She had no pants on. She always slept in fuzzy pajama pants. It was why the temperature in her room was close to that of the Arctic. She liked to sleep in layers, and that could only be possible if she kept the room cold enough for a penguin habitat.

And it wasn't just pants she was missing. Bree picked up the covers and looked down at her body. She was naked. Butt-ass naked in bed. She was doing her best to clear the cobwebs from her brain when her apartment door opened.

“What the ...”

The last few hours came crashing back. Chance going down on her in the shower. The crazy-hot sex that followed, and the even crazier way he so sweetly took care of her afterward. Then there was the soreness between her legs. How she managed not to feel that when she first woke up was beyond her.

“I went to grab you some coffee. Figured you would need some considering the temperature. I don't understand how you can keep it so cold in here.”

Did she fall into an alternate universe? Who the hell was this caring man? First washing her hair and now this.

“How did you get in?”

She knew for a fact that every door locked when it closed. If she wanted to leave it open for a friend, she actually had to use an old-fashioned door stopper. It was aggravating most of the time.

Chance held up her set of keys and shook them.

“I grabbed these on the way out. I didn’t want to wake you and I wasn’t entirely sure, if given a choice, you would let me back in.”

He was probably right. But not for the reasons he likely thought. Now that she was fully awake, her mind was running on all cylinders and coming up with a million scenarios, some of which weren’t good. She was waiting for the switch to flip. For him to revert back to the old ways like he always did.

“I guess that depends on what you came back to say,” she responded with caution.

Bree pulled the blankets farther up her body. She was no longer cold; the blood in her body was pumping too fast through her veins, keeping her plenty warm. She wanted the blankets as an extra barrier, to protect herself against what he would say.

“I probably deserve that.”

Had she said that out loud? She really needed to work on her filter. Her mouth didn’t seem to get the memo that some things were better left unsaid.

“Your face doesn’t hide much.” Chance strutted over to the bed like a man who was proud of himself. After placing the hot mug on the nightstand, he sat down next to her. “I can see the barrage of emotions playing out in real time and I know I deserve every one of them.”

Okay, so not her mouth but her face. There was no helping that. Her face had a mind of its own and ran rabid.

“What is it saying to you now?”

She was genuinely curious about what impression he was getting from her. She would kill for a mirror. Or maybe a

sliver of glass to see if how she felt was being accurately portrayed.

“You’re nervous. Thinking I’m going to drop some bomb on you about what happened and then walk out. Ready to fight if that’s what it takes because that’s your default setting when it comes to me. I’m to blame for that.”

Okay, so he was spot on.

“I don’t like being nervous. It actually pisses me off. I feel weak when I am and that’s not okay with me. So the fight part isn’t entirely your fault.”

“You’re the strongest woman I know.” He rubbed her leg through the thick blanket. “I’m sorry I made you feel like you weren’t. That was a me problem, not a you problem. It just took some time for me to realize that. And believe me, I *did* realize it.”

She tried to tamp down the excitement. There was no use getting her hopes up if he didn’t mean what she thought it meant. She was in way over her head. The feelings she didn’t want had snuck up on her. Sex with Chance was only supposed to happen once. A *get it out of her system* kind of thing. This morning had been so much more than that. She was falling hard, and she worried it was going to hurt when she eventually hit rock bottom.

“And what did you finally realize?”

“You sure know how to call a man out on his shit, don’t you?” Chance gave her a lopsided smile.

It was enough to relax her somersaulting stomach a bit. “It’s how I roll.” She lifted her bare shoulder and smiled.

“It really is. It was one of the first things I noticed about you and one of the many reasons I steered clear. I knew from the start it was something I both liked and could get used to. That freaked me out.”

“Well, you did a good job hiding that you liked it.”

Too good of a job. It was a damn good thing she didn’t get a complex with all the blowing her off he did.

“And I’m sorry for that too. I have a lot of making up to do.”

She liked the sound of that.

“Well, if you must ...” She let the blanket slip down a little, just enough to see that her nipples were pebbled and begging for attention. Bree wanted a whole lot more of what she got before she fell asleep. Screw the twinge between her legs. She didn’t actually need to walk in order to perform her job.

Chance groaned. “Now I’m going to have to go into the meeting with my cock as hard as a rock.”

“What meeting?”

Damn their job.

“The one Black called when he saw me grabbing coffee and said we need to be at.” Chance looked at his watch. “The same meeting we are already three minutes late to.”

Bree considered how late they could be before Black sent someone after them.

“Don’t even think about it. Black already warned me he would send Daniel if he didn’t see me in ten minutes ...”

Chance barely got the last word out of his mouth before the banging on her door started.

“Let’s go, sleeping beauty!” Emma hollered. “I can only hold the hubby back for so long without resorting to stripping in the hall for him.”

“A real friend would’ve stripped already!” she yelled back, but proceeded to get out of bed anyway and head to her closet. “Looks like Daniel jumped the gun,” she mumbled to Chance as she pulled out a pair of leggings and a shirt. Tossing them casually over her arm as she moved back into the room.

“I hope you plan on putting underwear and a bra on under those.”

She gave him her best flirty smile.

“And what if I wasn’t?”

Chance stalked her way, like a hunter and she was the prey. Scooping one arm around her middle, he growled into her ear. “Then I would have to gouge my teammates’ eyes out because there’s no way they wouldn’t notice you were sitting there bare underneath that outfit. And no one gets to see what’s mine.”

A shiver ran through her body at his usage of the word *mine*. The part of her that normally prickled when anyone tried to claim her was actually singing its praise. Her inner goddess wanted to be claimed by Chance.

“I suppose I could save Blayd’s eyeballs.”

Chance harrumphed. “He might be the one person who actually deserves it.”

Spinning back around, she grabbed a pair of panties and a bra from the drawer inside the closet, Bree chuckled as she pulled them on. She didn’t think there was a guy on the team who wouldn’t take the opportunity to maim Blayd in some way, shape, or form. Nothing permanent, but certainly enough to teach him a lesson.

“Good girl.”

She never thought she would have a “praise kink” but there was no denying her pussy throbbed at those two little words.

“That’s not fair.” She dragged the leggings up her legs and quickly tugged the shirt over her head. “You can’t say something like that when we have to be somewhere.”

“I promise to make it up to you tonight.”

She shimmied past him, making sure to drag her fingers across his cotton-covered abs along the way. She wished he was shirtless so she could feel his hot skin beneath her fingertips before their meeting.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said in a low voice, and then strutted her ass out of the room with an extra sway of the hips for good measure, not even bothering to stop at a smirking Emma.

“I hope that smile on your face means you got more than just sleep since your little jaunt through the desert in the wee hours of the morning.”

“You should know me better than that. I never kiss and tell.”

Emma scoffed. “Umm yes, you do. Always, actually, and usually with flair.”

That wasn't entirely true. Emma knew a lot about her, but with Chance things were different. This wasn't one of her one-night stands. Chance was her ... boyfriend? Was that what people called it at her age? It seemed so juvenile.

“Not this time. Besides, I was told I was late for a meeting. Probably shouldn't keep the boss waiting much longer.”

She slipped into the conference room before Emma could question her more. One look at her friend and she knew she only managed to postpone the discussion. Emma wouldn't be dropping it anytime soon.

“Not sure why I bother calling a meeting for a particular time since no one bothers to listen.” Black stepped to the front of the room and looked around.

“Hey!” Blayd called out. “I was here on time. Doesn't that count?”

“I guess there's a first time for everything.”

The room erupted in laughter at Black's retort.

Bree couldn't believe she actually thought she could leave these people behind. Years without any deep meaningful connections outside of those she met on the internet had left her jagged. One month with these people and those edges had smoothed out some. She had started to discover herself again. There was no way she could go back to her old self.

They spent the next hour hashing out plans to flush out the traitor. The team responded as she expected after Black informed them of her decision to be bait. It took nearly fifteen of those minutes to convince them that it was what she wanted and no one would be changing her mind. Several of them

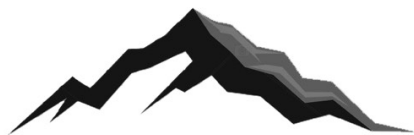
looked to Chance but he managed to side with her. She didn't know if he'd suddenly turned over a new leaf on the topic or would be trying to change her mind later, but she was excited either way. No one ever had stuck up for her, and if she hadn't been falling in love with him before that, she certainly was now.

Wait, *love*? Is that what those feelings were? She had thought she loved her high school boyfriend but looking back now, she could safely say it was nothing more than infatuation. A glimpse at what she thought at the time was freedom but turned out to be nothing more than an illusion.

What she felt for Chance was so much more. More intense. More butterflies. More smiles. Just more, and she didn't want it to end.

But it scared her just the same.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Bree was acting funny. She had been all smiles before the meeting, but the last time he stopped into her office, she seemed off. And not *I'm working extra hard, so leave me alone* off either. More like she was suddenly overthinking every aspect of their relationship and he needed to stop it before she worked herself into a frenzy.

After popping in the kitchen to grab her favorite snack, he headed back to her office.

“Trying to win her over with black licorice?”

Chance had been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't heard Liam come up beside him.

“I've already won her over,” he volleyed back. “This is just me being nice when I know how hard she's working.”

It was a bribe or peace offering or whatever the hell it needed to be to get her to talk to him. He was fully committed at this point and there was nothing he wouldn't do to show her that.

“So, a man in love, then.”

That stopped him short. Love. Chance hadn't thought about that. He cared for her. That part was prominent. He wanted to be with her and saw his future with her. But love had always been such a foreign concept that he never thought about what it would look like. His parents weren't good examples. His mother had yet to find someone new and maybe she never would. His friends were probably the only reference he had.

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly.

Liam merely smirked. “That wasn’t a question. I recognize the signs, but I get it might take some time to come to terms with it.”

His friend and mentor walked off with a smile on his face and not a care in the world that he just dropped a bomb that rocked Chance’s universe.

Was this love?

He looked down at the black licorice; a candy he never in a million years would touch, but would happily supply every day to one particular woman.

Maybe that’s love. And if it was, would it really be so bad?

He liked to think he was evolving, that he was changing for the better and shedding some of the preconceived notions he had. He looked down at his outfit. Another pair of tactical pants and a T-shirt. He hadn’t had to stand in his closet for twenty minutes and convince himself that it was okay to wear it. Sure, it was practical based on the threat to not only Bree but his team as well, but the usual internal argument he always had didn’t exist. And that was progress.

With a much more light-hearted spirit, Chance slipped into Bree’s office. She was feverishly typing on the new laptop. She had done a pretty good job destroying the first one. He made a mental note to take away all electronics if they ever had a fight.

Emma eyed him as he walked up to the woman he now realized he wasn’t just falling for but was already head over heels in love with.

“Hey, spitfire.” He leaned down and kissed her neck while dropping the peace offering next to her keyboard. “I brought you a snack.”

Chance was never big on cute names. Things like “sweetheart” and “baby” just never sat well with him. But Bree was his little spitfire and it only seemed appropriate to call her that.

Wide eyes met him through her dark lashes.

“Thank you?”

He couldn't understand why that sounded more like a question than being grateful. Grabbing one of the few chairs in the room, he sat down and reached for her hand. He wanted all of her attention for a moment.

“Why do you look so surprised?”

“I'm used to you avoiding me, and this office. Yet today I've seen you three times in a matter of hours. I'm just trying to wrap my head around it.”

Chance saw Emma out of the corner of his eye, sneaking out of the room to give them a little privacy. He would need to make sure he thanked her for that later, even though he didn't care if he had an audience for this next part. Bree deserved the world to know he cared about her.

“I avoided you because I was an asshole and was scared of you. I'm not anymore. I thought I made that clear after we woke up this afternoon.”

He played with the purple in her hair. It wasn't nearly as bright as it had been when she first showed up. He liked touching her. A lot, actually. He never would've considered himself a touchy type of person, but he was slowly learning a lot about himself the more time he spent with her.

“We got interrupted and never finished our conversation,” she reminded him.

“So we did. Was there more you wanted to say?”

There was a lot more on his end, but he could be patient. Bree had the tendency to jump in feet first and he didn't want to take that away from her.

“Is this a relationship?” she blurted without any preamble. Exactly what he would expect from her. “I know I'm not your type. I've driven you nuts from the second I walked off the plane. So is this just a fling to you? Because I need to be honest about something. I've only ever had sex with the same man more than once two times since my cuntcake of a

boyfriend in high school.” She held up two fingers like he needed the demonstration. “The first guy my stalker killed. There’s a reason I don’t allow myself to get close to people. Especially not men and right now I’m making an exception for you. If you haven’t figured it out yet, you’re the second guy. I like you but if this was just a fling to you, then please tell me so I can change my mindset.”

Feetfirst and no holds barred. That was his Bree, and he was just now realizing there wasn’t a thing about her that he wanted to change. The boring housewife he had always envisioned himself marrying would never satisfy him because he needed the kind of crazy that Bree had in spades.

“I thought what we had going was a relationship. I would never touch such a disgusting snack otherwise.”

Bree slapped his chest with a chuckle. “They’re not disgusting. People don’t appreciate their unique flavor.”

Chance laughed with her. “If you say so.” He rubbed the spot where she slapped him. Not because it hurt but because it happened to be right above his heart. The same organ she now controlled. “As for my type, I can’t say I ever really had one. Because of the way my father was, I built this image of what the perfect family should look like. That included the perfect housewife.”

“You picked the wrong girl, then,” Bree cut him off.

“No, I picked the right woman, just had the wrong vision in my head for years. I based everything in my life on what my father used to say to me. Not just my clothes, but how I was supposed to live my life, what kind of house I needed to have and what the perfect family should look like. It took meeting you for me to realize there’s no such thing as perfect and I would be bored with that life. I wasn’t doing what I wanted. I was doing what I *thought* I was supposed to do.”

Liam was right when he said every choice Chance made was because of his father. Chance spent his whole life convinced he would never let his father rule over him again and yet that was exactly what he had done. Every warped thought led back to what his father used to complain about.

Well, no more. The bastard was dead and his ramblings needed to die as well.

“What is it you want?”

Chance smiled. A real smile. He had been wearing them more often lately and it felt good.

“You in my life. To see where our future can lead together. No one can predict what’s going to happen five years down the road, but I would like to think that you’ll still be by my side. Possibly in a house because these apartments really aren’t meant for two people.” Bree laughed at that. “Kids, if that’s what you want, but no pressure.”

He probably shouldn’t promise that. Kids were one of the things he really wanted in life. He wanted to spoil them and give them the childhood he didn’t have.

“You say no pressure, but I’ve seen you with Anna.”

Busted.

“That might’ve been stretching the truth a bit,” he relented. Chance was almost afraid to look at Bree. He fawned over Karlie’s baby just as much as Emma did, but he couldn’t remember many times that Bree showed Anna much interest. “Are you against having kids?”

It was something important they would have to discuss eventually if they were going to have a future together. He didn’t expect it to be happening so soon. The whole conversation wasn’t going as he planned at all.

“I never thought about it.” She shrugged. “I’ve spent ten years on the run and at no point during all that did I see a future with someone. So kids were definitely out. Anna is pretty much the first baby I’ve ever been around. Growing up I didn’t have younger siblings. I spent time with a nanny, who didn’t have kids, and the few friends I had always came to my house because it was the biggest.”

Nowhere in all of that did she say she actually wanted them. His heart hurt thinking he might not get that opportunity.

“Oh my God, I’m not saying no to kids,” she quickly added. “I just need to spend more time around babies. Anna is adorable but I’m scared to hold her. I’m afraid I might break her.”

Chance let out a relieved breath. “I won’t let you break her. I would be with you the whole time.”

He was just glad she wasn’t saying no. Would he have made the sacrifice for her? Quite possibly. She made him feel things no one ever had. He didn’t think he could give her up.

“Is this why you brought me my favorite candy? To butter me up?”

He lifted his shoulder and gave her his best smoldering smile. “I mean, I knew something was up, so I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

Bree scrunched her nose up. “I’m not sure I can get used to this sweet side of you all the time. It’s probably going to give me a toothache.”

He threw his head back and let the laughter consume him. He never needed to worry about life with Bree being boring. She would keep him on his toes.

It was a solid minute before he was able to get himself back under control. “You might be the only woman to ever complain about a man being too sweet to you.”

“Not true,” he heard behind him. “I would complain.”

He whipped his head around and found the other three women standing in the doorway, clearly eavesdropping on their private moment.

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

Not a single one of them looked the least bit remorseful that they had interrupted an intimate conversation.

“No wonder you all get along so well,” Chance shot back.

“Strong women attract other strong women, and believe me, there’s no room for the weak here,” Kendra stated matter-

of-factly.

“She’s right,” Bree whispered. “Only the strong survive in these parts.”

He figured she was referring to the company they were forced to keep. All of the men on their team were a little rough around the edges. Although it could be said that Steel and Jaxson had softened a bit now that they had Karlie and Kendra. There was no hope for Daniel. Chance was almost positive the man only had one disposition and that was grumpy. All the time.

“Well, I’ll leave you ladies to work.” He pushed to stand up but not before he captured Bree’s lips for a smoldering kiss. It nearly knocked him on his ass, and he wished he never had to pull away. “I’ll see you soon.”

He didn’t miss the twinge of pink on her cheeks as he walked away. Or the fact that every jaw in the room was sitting on the floor. He would need to remember that the next time he wanted a little PDA. It felt good to knock them all off-balance. Plus, the constant upturn of his lips didn’t hurt either.

Life was good.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Bree traced her lips where Chance left his mark before sauntering out of the room.

“Holy shit.”

She didn’t have the words to tell Karlie how underwhelming that statement was. Chance’s kiss wasn’t *holy shit* material. It was earth-shattering material.

“I think it’s safe to say that man has staked his claim on you.”

Kendra dropped down in the seat Chance had just vacated. It wasn’t fair for him to just leave her like that; so full of wanting that she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on her job.

“I thought for sure the room was going to burst into flames with the way he was kissing you,” Emma gushed. “He means business.”

“It was just a goodbye kiss,” she tried to wave off Emma’s remark.

“Ah no, my friend,” Kendra corrected. “A quick peck is a goodbye kiss. That was a *she’s mine, so make sure you spread the word* kind of kiss.”

Bree didn’t know if she would take it that far. Yes, it felt like it to her, but was that really what he was trying to say? These were her friends and teammates. There was no need to “stake his claim.”

“If you say so,” Bree replied casually.

“Oh, I say so, and I’m not ashamed to admit that kiss turned me on a little.” Kendra kicked her booted feet up and smirked.

These ladies were crazy, but they were her type of crazy. And exactly what she needed to navigate this new part of her life. Love was scary, and despite how easy Chance was trying to make it for her, it was the scariest thing she would ever face.

Until he wanted children, that was.

Bree had no idea how she would handle that, but it was a problem for future her. She really wasn’t opposed to the idea, not as much as she thought she would be, and if she was doing it with Chance, he would make sure she didn’t screw things up or turn out to be like her own parents.

Like her mother, a mindless woman who thought the only thing that mattered was money. Her own mother would’ve thrown her to the wolves if it meant she could continue to live the lifestyle she was accustomed to. It was pathetic.

Bree grabbed one of the licorice and pointed it at Emma.

“We have work to do. My love life is not nearly as important as finding out who is betraying us.” That wasn’t true but she was proud of herself for at least sounding authoritative.

Since when was she the responsible one? Normally her life consisted of fifty percent work and fifty percent play. She always managed to do both at the same time.

“So, you admit there’s a love life?”

Gah! Her friend wasn’t going to stop until she gave her something.

“Fine.” She bit into the treat with a little too much force. “Yes, there’s a love life. Yes, I have feelings for Chance, and yes, that kiss was definitely his way of pissing on my leg.”

She looked around at her friends. Three identical *I told you so* smirks greeted her.

“You guys don’t have to look so smug about it,” she huffed. With another angry bite, she turned back to her

computer.

She wasn't used to this one yet. The shiny new keys felt different from the worn ones she was used to. Bree was starting to regret her burst of terror that led to her destroying the one piece of equipment that had been with her longer than others. Replacing equipment wasn't something new; software companies were constantly putting out the latest and greatest models. Any good hacker knew they had to keep up with the change. But that last one had been what brought her to Blackguard Security. It was sentimental and she wished she hadn't destroyed it so easily.

She and Emma worked for another two hours straight in silence. Kendra and Karlie had gone in and out, providing a comforting presence without disturbing them. But now her back was hurting, and she needed something more than candy if she had any hope of not biting someone's head off.

"I need to go find food." She pushed back from her workstation and looked over at Emma's desk. "Are you having any better luck over there?"

"I'm working on finding who made that call. Since we were able to lock in the number, I'm hoping to see when it's been used."

It would be a long shot since it was likely a burner phone, but sometimes luck was on their side.

"Want me to grab you anything?"

"No, thanks. Daniel is coming to get me soon so we can head home to eat."

Right on cue, the man himself strolled in. Daniel gave her a nod but beelined it straight for his wife's desk.

"You ready?" His gruff question wasn't really a question at all, not for anyone who actually knew him. Daniel loved his wife and he never let her overwork herself. It was something they fought about constantly, but Bree knew his concern was purely out of love.

"Yes, but I'm coming back afterward for a little bit."

Bree watched and waited for the twitch of his jaw, the one she knew meant he was gearing up to fight with Emma. She'd only been on the job for two days when she first witnessed it, and now, she watched for it. Observed. Daniel was a fascinating specimen to try and figure out.

She was almost disappointed when it didn't come.

“One hour. You need sleep and I want time.”

Guilt ate at her already empty stomach as she used that moment to slip out of the room. Emma had been woken up early because of the decision she made to run. Unlike Bree, it would seem her friend didn't get a mid-morning nap.

Bree was still thinking about how to convince Emma not to come back when she slipped into the small kitchen. Her apartment, just like all the others inside the main building, didn't have more than a mini fridge, so anything she wanted to prepare had to be made in the main kitchen area, which was a fancy name for a large break room.

It had a stove and refrigerator, but it was nothing elaborate. A small table was pushed off to the side like it had been an afterthought; a random piece of furniture someone felt should be there, but wasn't planned.

But it was the man at the stove who had her attention.

Chance was still in his tactical pants and fitted shirt, the one that showed off every muscle he possessed. She couldn't decipher if she was sad that he had shed the suits, or surprised that he hadn't snuck back to his room to put one on.

“Are you just going to stare at my ass all day or do you plan to join me?” Chance didn't turn around as he asked.

She moved farther into the room and hefted herself up onto the counter next to where he was chopping vegetables. There really wasn't any other place to sit and chat while he cooked.

“How did you know it was me?”

“I would know your scent anywhere.” He stopped what he was doing long enough to run his nose along her neck, sending

goose bumps down her flesh. “Especially since I helped scrub it into you.”

“Are you telling me I stink?”

Now that she was getting more used to this softer and fun side of Chance, she really liked it. He smiled more and she could see laugh lines. Both of which only made him that much more handsome.

“Nope.” He shook his head. “Believe me, I would tell you if that was the case.”

She playfully slapped his bicep as he got back to chopping.

“What are you making anyway?”

“Chicken stir-fry. You have a tendency to survive on sugar alone, so I thought it was best to hit some of the other food groups once in a while.”

Bree stuck her tongue out at him, although it was true. Cooking had never been one of her strong suits.

“Where did you learn to cook?”

She grabbed one of the peppers and crunched into it, similar to how she ate her licorice not long ago.

“My father felt it was a woman’s job, so my mother tried to teach me when he wasn’t around, which wasn’t that often. Then when I was in the Navy, I shared a place with my buddies off base. We got tired of ordering in all the time, so we were forced to learn. Almost set the house on fire a few times, but we managed to eventually get a few dishes under our belts. I wouldn’t call myself a chef, but I can survive on more than boxed meals if it comes down to it.”

Every time Chance mentioned his father, Bree wished she had been around when he was alive so she could’ve found the man and run him over with her car. Okay, not *her* car since she didn’t own one, but someone’s car. Then she would back over him and do it all over again for the hurt he caused his son. It was pointless thinking about it, since he was dead, but it still stuck in her mind.

“I’m glad you took the time. One of us needs to make sure we eat healthy.”

“You don’t know how to cook?”

His question didn’t sound like an accusation, but it still had her skin flaming.

“My mother couldn’t be bothered to teach me, because she probably didn’t even know how, and she refused to let my nanny teach me. She said it wasn’t a skill I needed since I would have my own staff once I got married. By the time I was on my own, the places I lived didn’t have much of a kitchen. Don’t get me wrong, I can make almost anything from a box and I’m proficient with a microwave, but that’s it.”

Her shoulders slumped forward. Here was a man who up until yesterday was convinced that he would marry the perfect Stepford wife. She was proving to be anything but.

Chance put the knife down and pushed himself until he was between her legs. His calloused hands cradled her cheeks. His palms were a stark contradiction to the man he always tried to portray.

“Don’t think for a second that I care that you don’t know how to cook. You are not to blame for that, and if you want, it’s something we can do together. I’m no master chef but I would love for us to figure it out together.”

There was no stopping the pool of tears in her eyes.

“I would like that.”

“Are those tears?”

Her stupid emotions were getting the better of her. Especially when his thumb ran along the apple of her cheeks, collecting the few offending drops.

“I told you about being too sweet.” She hiccupped a half laugh, half sob.

“I’ll make sure to remember that for future reference. Not too many sweet moments in one day. Check.”

The waterworks were drying up and being replaced by fits of laughter. She would never admit it out loud, but she liked both, especially when they took place in his arms.

“Well, what do we have here?”

CHAPTER TWENTY



His entire body locked up at Blayd's sarcastic tone behind him. He could tell the moment Bree realized it as well because she attempted to push him away. Her small hands slipped between them and the expression on her face could only be described as hurt. He refused to budge.

Chance needed to shut down the million thoughts that were racing through her mind.

"Blayd," he growled, without turning around. "We're busy, so do me a favor and fuck off."

He needed to do damage control and he would much rather not do it with his annoying teammate throwing commentary in the background.

"I'd say you're busy alright. No wonder you were so testy when I complimented her. You already managed to worm your way in."

Blayd didn't compliment. He made lewd comments and right now just thinking about the things he said about Bree's body had the anger rising. His fingers flexed where they still cradled Bree's face. He was itching to turn around and knock Blayd's teeth down his throat.

"Blayd, give us a minute. Please."

Bree held his gaze as she made the request. The hurt he saw just moments before was replaced with such understanding it made him itch to move. He didn't want her to see that side of him. The jealous and possessive side wasn't attractive.

“You two are no fun.”

Blayd’s words said one thing, but the retreating steps spoke volumes. There was some decency in his teammate after all. He wouldn’t have thought that was possible.

“I know I shouldn’t find it so attractive, but I kinda like that you were ready to rip Blayd’s face off.”

Chance wanted to clear something up real quick.

“I didn’t tense at first because I’m ashamed to be seen with you. I tensed because I know how angry I get when Blayd opens his mouth when it comes to you and I didn’t want you to see that part of me.”

There was that soft look again.

“I don’t want you to hold any part of yourself back from me, Chance. I want to see everything. Every emotion, every feeling. I want it all. There’s no shame in being jealous as long as you know I’m yours. That it’s you I want to be with. You’re the man who stole my heart and made me want things I never thought were possible.”

His heart was so close to beating out of his chest. She had no idea how much he needed to hear her say that she was his. Neither of them had used the words yet but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that she loved him.

“Yesterday, after you came out of the laundry room, he made a comment about how sexy you looked. I was tempted to commit bodily harm. That’s all I could think of when he walked in here and started up. I was ready to haul off and punch him.”

“I know.” She smirked. “I could feel the change in your body, but it’s not worth it. Blayd says things to get on everyone’s nerves. It’s just how he is. One day he’s going to find a woman who puts him in his place and I’m all here for that.”

Chance wasn’t sure there was a woman strong enough to deal with Blayd’s particular brand of annoyingness. With their luck, the man would be an eternal bachelor, constantly driving

them all insane. Although, that thought didn't sound great either.

“Now can we get back to the discussion at hand?” She pointed to the chopped vegetables on the counter. “I'm kinda hungry and you promised that we could learn to cook together.”

He pulled her closer. Crushing her hands between them as he brushed his lips across hers. Just enough to remind her that she was his and he was hers.

Yeah, he was possessive like that. Fortunately, it would seem she was too.

The next half hour was full of laughs and a few vegetable casualties. Chance learned rather quickly that Bree could turn anything into a competition. It was the most fun he ever had making a meal.

By the time they got down to eating, his stomach ached from laughing so hard.

“I have a feeling we are going to need a big kitchen if the two of us plan to make all of our meals together.” He shook his head.

“I guess it's a good thing the houses here have decent-sized ones.”

They did, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to move into one of those houses sooner rather than later. They were already finished and just waiting for people to inhabit them.

“Does that mean you're willing to move in with me?”

He blurted out the question before his mind had the opportunity to overthink the ramifications of such a request. He had no good reason to demand she live with him. Not like Steel did when he wanted Karlie in his house.

Bree stabbed a piece of chicken and brought it to her mouth. Chance slowly watched as she took her time savoring it before answering him.

“Was that asking me to live with you, or asking when is it going to happen because you already decided that’s what I’m doing?”

The way she popped her eyebrow confused him. He couldn’t tell if she was being serious and pissed at him, or if she was pulling his leg. Either was a viable option when it came to this woman. He would be spending the rest of his life walking that line.

He couldn’t wait.

“Both?”

Not his best response, but she was seriously fucking with his head. Even more so when she laughed.

“You should see your face right now.”

She rolled her eyes back into her head similarly to how she did when she was mid-orgasm. “Priceless.” It reminded him that he owed her a few orgasms since they got interrupted by a meeting earlier.

“I know that look.” She pointed her fork at him. Snatching her wrist, he brought the fork to his mouth and stole the pepper off it.

Chance liked her response even better. The large O reminded him that he wanted to know what her mouth looked like stuffed with his cock. He would have to add it to the list of things he wanted to do with her.

“You stole my food!” she gasped.

“I did. It also took you a few moments there to gather your bearings enough to notice.”

Bree was flustered and it was probably the best thing he had seen all day. He didn’t want to be the only one in this relationship who was constantly left off-kilter.

“I just couldn’t believe you would dare. Men have died for much less. I don’t share my food.”

How cute she thought that.

“Maybe you didn’t share with others before, but I’m not other men.”

He was going to prove he deserved her, and that he could match her at every level. Bree needed a strong man, someone who challenged her and didn’t roll over every time she gave him hell. Just like he did when they first met because he was too afraid to show who he really was. That man was gone.

“I could get used to this new Chance.”

Bree waved her fork around like a weapon. He would have to remember that for when he decided to make anything messy. He was all for fun, but he drew the line at sauce-covered shirts.

“Do you have more work to do tonight?”

“Only if Emma comes back. I won’t leave her to work alone. Otherwise, I have my computer set up to run a few programs that don’t need my immediate attention.”

Chance reached across the table and intertwined their fingers.

“My place tonight or yours?”

It had only been a day, but already, he hated to ask that question. It was full steam ahead for him now that he allowed himself to admit what he wanted. He didn’t want to waste time with silly things like asking where they would spend the night.

“You mean I get to see the inner sanctum of Chance?” The hand he wasn’t holding flew to her chest as she mock gasped at him.

“You’ll get to see every annoying thing about me when we move in together.”

“You were serious about that?”

Chance wasn’t sure how he could be any more obvious about what he wanted. He was already laying it all out on the line for her. Baring his soul.

But he would do more just to prove this was what he wanted.

“Dead serious. I shied away from you for a month because I thought it was best. I almost lost you when you tried to sneak away. You are *damn* good at hiding, and if you’d managed to leave, I would’ve never seen you again. Just the thought of that makes my chest ache. I’m done hiding. I’m done pretending I don’t want to be with you. I’m done letting the past rule how I live. This is me telling you I’m all in and I don’t do anything half-assed.”

He knew it was a lot, that everything he said might overwhelm her, but he wanted it out in the open. No more secrets. No more hiding. No more making her feel like he didn’t care when it was always the opposite. Even if he hadn’t wanted to admit it.

“Your place tonight. Then we talk to Black tomorrow about one of those houses.”

Chance let out the breath he hadn’t even realized he had been holding. Putting himself out there like that was tough. Especially when the woman sitting across from him was so strong-willed. A quality he admired immensely, but also knew meant that she didn’t need him. Not like he needed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Bree had a new favorite way to wake up.

In Chance's arms.

There was something extremely satisfying knowing that she was waking up warm and cozy, wrapped around a man who saw her for who she really was and enjoyed it.

Him going down on her helped, but not everything revolved around sex.

At least, that was what she was trying to remind herself as they walked hand in hand down the hallway toward Black's office. Chance wasn't kidding when he told her he was all in. The change was truly fascinating and didn't scare her as much as she thought.

The way he lived on the other hand. She didn't consider herself a messy person. Everything had a place. Even if that place sometimes was the bathroom vanity or spare recliner. The opposite could be said for Chance. Not a single thing in his room was left out. There were no papers sitting on the nightstand. Bottles didn't line the bathroom sink. Paper cups weren't stacked on top of the mini fridge because he preferred water in a cup over a bottle.

All things that a person was sure to find if they stepped in her room though.

"Why do you look like you're concentrating so hard? It's just a discussion with Black. He calls us in all the time."

“We are polar opposites.” The words just tumbled out of her mouth, but she refused to take them back. It needed to be addressed.

Chance halted mid-step, and because they were still holding hands, she was forced to stop as well.

“O ... kay ...” Chance dragged out the word like her sudden word vomit didn’t make sense. And maybe it didn’t because he wasn’t in her head as she was freaking out about being in his room mere seconds after feeling like she was living on cloud nine. Talk about a roller coaster of emotions.

“Have you *seen* my place?” She waved off her own question. “Never mind, of course you have. Which means you’ve seen that we live differently. I need things around me. Hiding them out of the way drives me batty. You, on the other hand.” She pointed at him like he didn’t realize who she was talking to, and a character flaw Chance would have to come to accept as she flailed her arms often. “Don’t have a single thing out in the open.”

Bree didn’t know what to make of the smirk he gave her. Was he just realizing she was bananas, and it was best for him to leave before she rubbed off on him?

“First of all, can I just say how much your brain fascinates me? I never know what is going to come out of your mouth, and truthfully, I can’t wait to spend every day with you finding out.”

Her heart rate slowed down a bit and she released a very loud and audible sigh. So he wasn’t thinking about leaving her.

“Second, the room we just left is another by-product of the person I thought I had to be. Leaving things around as a kid wasn’t tolerated and I never broke the habit, but it’s not who I want to be. I love that your desk is full of sticky notes that make zero sense to me but seem to be super important to you. I like that your bathroom shows someone actually lives there and not like some guest room that only gets attention once in a blue moon. Don’t for a second think we are too opposite to be together. That couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

“You probably think I’m off my rocker.”

She sure knew how to show her best qualities straight out of the gate. Talk about not having her best foot forward.

Chance tucked a loose strand behind her ear, but it was the soft smile that did her in.

“Not even close. This is new for both of us, and I anticipate we’ll have some learning curves along the way.” He winked. “Don’t worry so much.”

It was so strange seeing Chance be the fun and yet rational one of their relationship. Everything was upside down and she needed to get her bearings about her.

“You’re right.” She smiled. Bree wanted to say more but Black chose that moment to step out of his office.

“You two planning to come in sometime this morning or do you have better things to do with your time?”

“What if I did say I had something better to do?” she asked her boss, but didn’t take her eyes off Chance. He captivated her.

“I would say I’m happy for you both, but your love story needs to wait. We have a traitor to catch and you agreed to lure him, or her, out.”

Bree puffed out her cheeks and released the air in one big puff. Black had a point. She had a stalker she desperately wanted gone for good and the only way to do that was to get working.

“You could still change your mind,” Chance reminded her. He wasn’t keen on the idea. No significant other would be. Yet, he didn’t tell her she couldn’t do it, not after his first initial blowup.

“No, Black is right. I want my stalker gone for good and finding out who the person is will help us identify the traitor. Two-birds-and-one-stone thing.”

With Chance still holding her hand, they filed into Black’s office. Emma and Daniel were already there, waiting for them.

Her best friend's gaze zeroed in on where her fingers intertwined with Chance's. She wasn't sure if he just liked the connection, or if he was trying to help himself cope with the upcoming conversation. Either way, she liked the feel.

"Emma was just telling me she hasn't had any luck with the phone."

"Whoever Bree's father hired is good," Emma started. "He's been stalking her for nearly ten years. That's if we can believe it's the same person. During that time, he has clearly perfected his methods. The phone that was used to place the call while you both were in the cave has since gone off the grid. Destroyed, if I had to guess. Not sure if that's custom after every time he speaks to your father or if he's just paranoid that he was so close to our facility here."

It was what she figured Emma was going to find. Bree had tried to backtrack herself over the years. Pinging towers and scouring through phone records to get some piece of information, but to no avail. Her father and whoever he hired were always one step ahead of her.

"So what's the plan?" Chance's hand tightened as he asked the question.

"Our assumption is the traitor leaked the information about Bree working here," Emma responded. "Now, her records were supposed to be sealed. It took some digging, but before my girl here decided to run, she found someone had cracked into those sealed files. Am I correct?"

Bree nodded at her. "It's when I recognized the familiar hacking code."

"The only way to do so would be to be physically hooked up to one of our networks. That was one of the first fail-safes we put together when Bree agreed to join me."

As a hacker herself, Bree recognized the different flaws in many people's systems. One way for her to eliminate one flaw was to ensure someone had to be physically present on one of the two special computers. Accessing it remotely was possible, but she only knew one other person, besides herself, capable

of doing so—a woman who mentored her at the beginning of her career.

“So it had to be someone at the main building in Boston.”

“That’s what we’re thinking.” It was her turn to speak up and answer Daniel’s question. “No one except Black should be able to access that part of the building. He was here and we looked back over the footage. No one entered that area in the last six months but there was a power outage a few days before I recognized the code. If someone got in, they could’ve attached a piggyback to gain remote access.”

It was genius really. The fail-safe she thought they put in place was used against them. She hated to admit it, but she had to admire the person’s tenaciousness.

“I thought all security systems had a backup, so in the instance of a power outage, the system would still run.”

“It’s supposed to.” Black sighed when he answered Chance. “It has in the past. Just one more thing that confirms it was an inside job.”

Bree felt bad for Black. He took all the right measures to ensure this team stayed in the dark and it wasn’t enough. Not when someone close to him was working against every measure he had in place.

“So what’s the plan, then?”

She squeezed Chance’s hand and tried to give him a little comfort. He was getting more agitated the longer they spoke.

“We put out some false information. Strategically so that we can filter it back to who has access to the information. We embed our own codes. With any luck, we can narrow it down to the single person who is providing the information to Bree’s father.”

“And if luck’s not on our side?” Daniel scoffed. Rightfully so since the only luck the team has had lately was the bad kind.

“Then we only narrow it down to less than a handful of people,” Emma answered honestly. “Which considering right

now we suspect at least a dozen people, it *is* better.”

Bree tried to smile for Chance’s sake, but it fell a little flat. She had the same bad feeling she got every time her stalker’s code scrolled across her screen. Putting herself out as bait was the right move. But that didn’t mean there weren’t a million things that could go wrong.

She just hoped no one she cared about got seriously hurt because of her. She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if that was the case.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Before Chance met Bree, he considered himself a patient man. At least he had forced himself to *appear* patient because it fit the facade he wanted the world to see.

The last four days were proving just how fake that quality had been. Much like with his relationship with Bree, the moment his team decided to leak information, it was full steam ahead. Four times they had put out information, and four times he had been forced to watch as Bree put herself in harm's way while he sat back and waited to see if this was the day the bastard tried to take her from him.

It was exhausting; he only managed to get a few hours of sleep each night, usually when the two of them passed out in each other's arms after making love. But then he'd wake up a couple of hours later drenched in sweat because he dreamt of her leaving him in some way.

Kidnapped.

Shot.

Stabbed.

Every scenario played out like a Hollywood movie her father directed and it was driving him mad.

“Do I need to keep you out this next time?”

Chance spilled the coffee he was attempting to pour. Cursing himself for being so jumpy, he leaned over and grabbed one of the towels out of the communal drawer in the

shared kitchen as he tried to compose himself enough before facing his team leader.

“I wouldn’t listen anyway.” The snippy response was the best he could muster considering his foul mood. Daniel’s cold stare was the only proof he needed that his team leader wasn’t joking.

“And I know at least one teammate who would make sure your ass was tied up or knocked out.”

Yeah, Chance did as well.

“I need to be out there.”

He hated that his normally strong voice wavered. He needed to prove that he was in the right headspace to keep operating. Otherwise, Daniel wouldn’t hesitate to pull him. Chance was surprised his team leader was even warning him. That wasn’t Daniel’s MO.

“No, you need to get your shit together. You look like someone ran you over a few times.”

Ouch.

Chance knew it was true but hearing it from someone else was another thing. He wanted to argue but Daniel didn’t give him the opportunity.

“Maybe you can talk some sense into him,” Daniel said, stomping out as Liam walked in.

“Not you too.”

Chance turned back to pour more coffee into his now empty mug. He also took the extra time to rinse out the rag he used to mop up the first mess and hang it out to dry. The kitchen was used by all of them and it was a hard rule not to leave the place a disaster. Even if Blayd had difficulties following the simple rule.

“You know shit’s bad when Daniel actually seeks me out. The guy usually handles problems his own unique way.”

If by unique, Liam meant with brute force, then sure, that’s exactly how Daniel handled everything.

Chance leaned both palms on the counter and hung his head.

“I can’t *not* be out there. Not after all the dreams I’ve had. If she died because I wasn’t there to save her, I would never forgive myself.”

“You underestimate your team, and Bree. That woman isn’t going down without a fight and the fact that she wants to come back to spend her time with you means she would fight that much harder.”

He pushed off the marble and spun at Liam. “But she shouldn’t have to!” he snapped. “I should be the one protecting her.”

“Says who?” Liam didn’t back down from his anger. “You really think Maddox, sorry, I mean Bree. Hard to get used to saying that, would tolerate your Neanderthal antics?”

That gave him pause. He wanted to say yes, she absolutely would tolerate it, but Bree was known to surprise him. She was a bit of a wild card who proved time and time again that she didn’t need anyone.

“I need to be there,” he stressed again.

“Then get your shit together.”

Liam was the second person to walk out on him in a matter of minutes. Only this time, no one replaced him, so Chance grabbed the mug of coffee and slipped back to his room.

“There you are.” Bree’s bright smile made his chest ache. If he didn’t heed Daniel’s and Liam’s warnings, he could lose everything before they really had a chance to get started.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d grab some coffee.”

Bree’s smile was still bright, but the closer he got to the bed, the more he could see the stress lines around her mouth and eyes. He wasn’t the only one worried.

“Why don’t you come join me for a minute?”

She tapped the open spot he vacated just an hour earlier, and he found it hard to resist her.

“I thought if I didn’t say anything, it would get better, but each night it gets worse. What are these dreams you keep having that wake you up?”

Chance pushed his hand through his hair in frustration. The same way he had done for the past hour. He hadn’t looked in a mirror, but he was pretty sure it looked like he stuck his finger in an outlet and got electrocuted. It was no wonder his team was worried about him. He never looked anything but put together.

“I keep dreaming that I don’t get to you in time. That your stalker either kills you or manages to take you away from me.”

Bree scrambled out of the sheets and tossed her leg over him until she was straddling his lap. They always fell asleep naked, so at some point between when he slipped out and came back in, she had gotten up and pulled one of his shirts on. And not the ones he had become accustomed to wearing lately but one of his dress shirts. How had he missed that when he first came in?

“Where did you pull this from?” He fingered the bottom edge.

“I snuck into your closet. Don’t tell my boyfriend, but I kinda miss the button-ups some days.”

Her teasing had the desired effect she was probably aiming for. He chuckled for the first time in four days.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“There’s the smile I wanted to see.”

“I’m sorry.” He ran his fingers under the shirt and cupped the globes of her ass, where she was completely bare under his clothing. Just the thought stirred something primal in him and made him want to protect her all that much more. “I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

“It’s kinda my job.” She lifted her shoulder casually, causing the one side to slide down a bit and expose her naked shoulder. “I knew the risks when I agreed to forever with you. It’s how we handle it that’s important.”

“Are you saying I’m not handling worrying about you very well?”

He loved the way her nose scrunched up and she shook her head. “Not really.”

His shoulders slumped. “One would think that hearing something three times in less than an hour would mean it was easier to accept.”

“Not so much,” she correctly deduced.

“No, not so much.”

“Who else got to you before me?”

At least he knew she wasn’t in on it with the other two.

“Daniel and then Liam. Although Daniel sent Liam, so really, they just ganged up on me.”

“You poor thing.” Bree did a shitty job hiding the smirk as she pretended to feel bad for him. So he didn’t feel bad when he retaliated.

By tickling her.

He didn’t stop, even when she almost kicked him in the nuts. He just flipped them over so he was the one straddling her hips this time.

“You ready to take it back?”

Bree’s laughter filled his room, and the sound was music to his ears. He wanted to hear it every day for the rest of his life.

“*Uncle!*” she screamed between fits of laughter. “*Uncle!*”

Chance conceded but only because all the wiggling she was doing beneath him was getting uncomfortable. His cock was straining inside his boxer briefs and demanding to get in on the action. Any other time he would be more than happy to slip inside her and drown out all the problems they face, but they needed to have this conversation.

“You were right.” He traced his fingertips along the side of her face. “I’m not handling things very well. These dreams are messing with my head and all I want to do is sweep you away

and hide until it's all over. I know that's not possible. I know you would never forgive me if I did that, but I can't help but wishing to find some way to protect you."

Each word softened Bree's expression more and more. The love shining through her eyes had him ready to take on the world, if only she always looked at him that way forever.

"I don't need your protection." It was her turn to trace along his face. "I appreciate it, but it's not needed. I just want you to stand by my side as we fight this threat together."

He was weak when it came to her. There was nothing he wouldn't give Bree if it was really something she wanted.

"I can't deny you anything, can I?"

Her lips turned up into the biggest smile. "Probably not. It's my charm."

"Sure, let's go with that."

He shimmied down her body and pulled her with him so they were both sitting up.

"Liam and Daniel both told me I needed to get my shit together if I wanted to keep going out with the team."

"So tell me what you need from me to make that happen because I want you there."

This was why he loved her so much. Her prickly personality was just a way to cover up the soft heart she had for those she cared about.

"Promise me you will do everything in your power to come back to me no matter what. I will gladly make sure your stalker never walks on this earth any longer, but I need your promise."

She cradled his face.

"That's an easy one. I promise. I will always come back to you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Something didn't feel right. And she wasn't just saying that because she much preferred to be back in bed with Chance. Something genuinely felt off and she couldn't put her finger on it.

This was their fifth and last attempt at figuring out who her stalker was. If nothing happened tonight, then the team was back to the drawing board. Maybe that's why things felt off. If this didn't pan out, she didn't know what they would do or how long it would take to get another opportunity to finally catch the person who had been terrorizing her for ten long years. Not to mention they needed a win when it came to their traitor. Vito was constantly one step ahead of them and it was getting on her nerves. The hit on the team members hadn't gone away. There hadn't been progress on it either though. As far as they could tell, no one had accepted the work. That alone was suspicious enough.

The whole thing was fishy, and Bree was starting to wonder if the problems were one and the same. Her stalker was essentially a hitman, so what were the odds the same person was after all of them? It was something she would need to run by the team just as soon as she was done being a sitting duck a few miles away from their compound.

Did I mention how much walking annoys me?

"Look sharp." Daniel's booming voice came through her earpiece. "You got a car headed in your direction."

This had to be it. They were miles away from any town. She was supposed to make it look like she was sneaking away once again. And after five nights of walking different areas of the desert, she really hoped things were finally coming to a close.

Her feet were killing her. She hadn't gotten more than a few hours of sleep each night and the cheery attitude she had just that morning for Chance was complete horseshit, but she did it because she loved him and it didn't take a rocket scientist to know he was having nightmares about something. It wasn't just the thrashing that woke her up. It was the way he called out her name in such agony as if his heart was being ripped from his chest. She never wanted to hear that again.

“Visual on the driver?”

Emma was back at the compound, and maybe, with any luck, they would be able to get a positive identification.

“Negative,” Gage answered. “All windows are tinted.”

“Not even sure how the driver is able to see anything they are so damn dark,” Blayd chimed in.

Fuck. They needed one thing to go right. One win to counteract the half-dozen losses.

“Wait, the vehicle's stopping. Three hundred yards south of you.”

Bree turned around at Daniel's tone. She had just started to hear the sound of the engine in the dead of the night when he spoke up, but the vehicle didn't have any lights. Instinct told her to run. It would look suspicious if she didn't. Alone in the middle of the night with some random car on her ass. Yeah, it was either run, or give herself away.

She made it three feet before all hell broke loose. Someone's *motherfucker* echoed in her head at the same time as a resounding bang reverberated through the otherwise quiet night. Bright lights of orange and red flittered through her vision as her body was flung forward. She landed directly on her shoulder before skidding farther across the desert. The hard ground tore at her skin and leggings.

What the fuck was that?!

Her head was screaming, her ears ringing. She was ninety percent sure her shoulder was dislocated. At least she hoped that was the reason for the pain radiating down her arm. All those TV heroes made popping it back in look easy. She couldn't imagine doing that with the pain she was in. And as far as she could tell, there wasn't anything around for her to use.

Bree rolled onto her back and winced with each movement. This was by far the worst pain she had ever felt and that wasn't a record she had wanted to beat. She hated pain. Never tolerated it well despite the front she put on for the world.

"Hello?" she croaked.

Her team had been in her ear before things went south but all she could hear now was static.

She needed to make sure everyone else was okay. Now that she had a few moments to clear her head of the initial blast, and yes, that was exactly what she thought happened, she started to put the pieces together.

The bright colors. The loud noise. The debris still tumbling through the air. Someone had been one step ahead of them. Or maybe it was two steps. Either way, her life was in danger as well as those on her team. She knew she needed to get as far away as possible. Back to her team. Away from whoever was in that car.

Gravel crunching close to her caught her attention. Bree tried to turn her head in the direction of the sound but the pain in her shoulder stopped her. A cry fell from her lips. Biting down on her back molars, she pushed through it and quickly wished she hadn't. The man walking in her direction was not someone she recognized but the sadistic smile on his face hinted at his malicious intent.

"It's been a long time coming, Bree."

So this was her stalker. The hellish smile confirmed he was just as deadly as she always thought he would be.

The prick didn't bother to make introductions. He reached down and fisted a chunk of her hair, pulling at the roots and ripping a scream from her throat. Bree cursed her lack of self-restraint. She didn't want to give this man any satisfaction, and certainly not the kind that proved she was, in fact, scared for her life or that he was causing her immense pain. Guys like this fed on those two things.

If he was who she thought he was, then ten years' worth of running had created a fear she wasn't proud of.

"Where is it?" he growled.

Bree had no idea what he was referring to. She didn't have anything on her and there was nothing mentioned when they leaked her current location. This setup was simply to find out who the traitor was. They would now have it narrowed down to two people, which was a relief in so many ways.

"I don't have anything," she answered tightly. Her face was stretched uncomfortably with each pull of her hair.

"I know you've been communicating with your team, now tell me where the device is."

Son of a bitch. Her earpiece. That's what he wanted. The only lifeline between her and those she cared about. She couldn't let him find it.

"I don't know what you're talking about! I was trying to leave." Bree stuck to her cover story.

There was no way for her to slip it out of her ear without him noticing, even if it wasn't on the side of her bad shoulder. Bree just hoped that her crazy hair would be an asset for once.

"There isn't time for your bullshit."

She didn't get the chance to brace for the sudden pain of being drug across the desert by her hair. Her one arm lay limp and bounced on the hard dirt. Each bump sent a shot of pain through her. Using her good arm, Bree managed to take some of the pressure off her head by clamping on to the man's wrist, but it wasn't enough.

"Stop," she begged.

The pain in her arm took her breath away, so she wasn't even sure he heard her. When it was clear he had no intention of listening to what she said, Bree tried to dig her heels into the ground to gain some purchase and slow him down long enough so her team could rescue her.

If they weren't dead.

No one answered her calls and they had to have heard her screams of agony. If they were alive, someone would be coming for her. She just needed to buy some time.

"Stop," she begged again.

It was taking all of her energy not to pass out. The pain was unbearable and her body was overstimulated. There wasn't a single part of her that didn't hurt, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on. Those three hundred yards Daniel mentioned felt like a million miles.

"Enough of the games."

The tension on her head suddenly loosened, but before Bree could register the freedom, her head was bouncing off the ground, sending another shooting pain down her skull. It was the last straw. She couldn't hold on any longer.

Darkness crept in. Her vision began to blur. She could've sworn the man was leaning over her, but she couldn't be sure. Everything was fuzzy and only getting worse.

"Ah ..." The prick who caused her so much pain gloated. "Found it."

Her final connection with her team was ripped out of her ear and thrown to the ground. A crunching sound confirmed its destruction, and with it, the last of her hope slipped away.

Bree allowed the darkness to consume her because she needed a reprieve from what she thought she heard just seconds before her earpiece was violently removed.

She could've sworn she heard Chance scream her name in agony.

The same way he had done in his sleep several times over the past few nights. She would never forget the horror of it

because this time it was truly her fault.

And she couldn't forgive herself if Chance now spent the rest of his life torturing himself for not getting to her in time. Just as he'd predicted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Rubble rained down around him, and rocks pebbled his face and arms. Chance tried to cover his face, but he couldn't get his left arm to move. What he thought sounded like a groan met his ears. His head was resting on something hard, and it felt like he was caught in a long tunnel. All of the noises around him seemed far away.

What the fuck just happened?

It took him a few minutes to catch his breath before he no longer felt like each movement would kill him. Rolling onto all fours, he clutched his ribs and tried to look around. The desert looked like a war zone. There were at least two craters within his immediate line of sight. His ears were ringing and he could barely discern the different noises around him.

Bree!

Where the fuck was Bree? He needed to find her, make sure she wasn't hurt. A car had been approaching her when the first bomb had gone off. Based on the holes in the ground, at least one more had gone off after that. He needed to know that one of them didn't hurt her.

Chance stumbled to his feet and glanced around. His teammates lay scattered across the dirt. Each one was in a different position of trying to gather themselves, or so he thought. One of his teammates still lay on the ground. Chance started that way, but the sound of voices in his head stopped him.

Was he hallucinating?

Then it dawned on him. The earpiece. The voices were coming from the earpiece he used to stay connected to his team.

Chance paused and concentrated on what he was hearing. The piece must've been damaged in the blast because he was only getting every few words. But he would recognize that voice anywhere.

Bree. His woman. The woman who agreed to this crazy scheme to discover who the traitor was. She was alive, but hurt, based on what he could hear. There was no mistaking the terror in her voice.

It wasn't until he looked around the second time that he saw it. The vehicle that had been barreling down on them before all hell broke loose was parked less than a quarter mile away with its headlights lighting up the area and a large figure was standing over something.

No wait.

Someone.

That was a body on the ground. Based on the size, it had to be a woman.

"No ..." Chance dropped to his knees. His legs completely failed him when he needed them the most.

"Bree."

Her name was ripped from his throat. He watched in horror as the man picked her body up and tossed it carelessly into the back seat.

Chance needed to help her, but his body refused to cooperate. His brain demanded he stand up but his legs ignored the command. He was frozen. Paralyzed by his own nightmares, everything he feared coming true. And it was agonizing that he couldn't stop it.

Even if he managed to get up, she was too far away. Chance could do nothing but watch as the car drove away with the woman he loved.

Alive or dead was anyone's guess.

No, he couldn't think that way.

He needed to believe she was still alive and just wounded from the blast. Just like he and the rest of his team were.

“Chance.”

He didn't know how long he knelt there in the dirt. The car was long gone, and still, he couldn't force his body to move. The disconnect between his brain and body was too great.

“Liam.” The one word was all he could manage to croak out.

Ass on his heels, Chance couldn't take his eyes off the area where the car disappeared. Liam dropped down next to him.

“Where's Bree?”

“Gone.” Another one-word answer. It was all he could formulate.

“What do you mean gone?” Liam gripped his shoulder, and the pain was the jump start he needed. “Explain.”

One foot forward. It was a start. With one knee bent, he looked over at the man he considered both a friend and mentor.

“He threw her body into the back of the car.” The words burned his throat. “Like she was nothing more than a piece of trash.”

Liam shifted so he was crouched right in front of him. Blood trickled from a cut on his friend's head and his normally gray streaks of hair were covered in dirt.

“She's still alive.” Liam gripped his arms. “You need to remember that and use that conviction to find her.”

His friend was right. He needed to shake off the nightmares that plagued his mind the last few days and remember this was Bree they were talking about. She wouldn't go down without a fight, and if she truly were dead, he wholeheartedly believed he would've felt it. His body was in tune with hers.

“Okay.”

“Good.” Liam helped him the rest of the way up. “Now let’s check on our team so we can go get your girl.”

Jaxson was the first member they came across. He swayed slightly, but other than blood dripping from his arm, he wasn’t too bad. The same couldn’t be said for everyone. Just feet away from one of the craters lay a still-unconscious Blayd. Liam swayed in that direction and dropped to the ground.

“He’s got a pulse.”

Chance let out a relieved sigh. As much as Blayd annoyed the shit out of him ninety-nine percent of the time, it didn’t mean he wanted the man to die.

Chance turned around in a circle. Daniel was limping his way over. His shoulder also looked to be jacked up as it hung loosely. Gage was on all fours and clutching his ribs. Steel stumbled for two steps before dropping to his knees. Daniel was right there to assist, and the two men leaned into each other and were walking his way.

“Blayd?” Steel looked down with concern.

“He’s got a pulse but also a large bump on the back of his head. He needs a hospital.”

Out of the blue, a high-pitched squeal cut through their eardrums. Every person on his team cringed at the sound and ripped their pieces out. Tossing them on the ground, they all looked at each other.

“Where’s Bree?”

Daniel’s question jarred him.

“She was taken.” It didn’t get any easier to say the second time around, nor did he think it would each time he was asked. “I need to find her.”

A vehicle engine disturbed the mostly silent night. Like the trained operatives they were, each person spun around, rifles at the ready. The sudden movement only made matters worse. He could fight when push came to shove but he wasn’t at his best. And neither was anyone else.

Fortunately, they recognized the vehicle. It came to a screeching halt mere feet away and two very angry women shoved out.

“What the fuck is this?” Emma was on the move even as she asked the question.

“We isolated who the traitor is. Well, it’s between two people, but we figured it out.” There was no malice in Daniel’s tone, as one had come to expect from him. His team leader even latched on to Emma the second she was close enough and Chance doubted it was because Daniel was afraid he would fall over.

“The plan wasn’t for shit to blow up in the process,” Emma continued on.

“Things never go according to plan when assholes are involved.” Daniel shrugged, or at least attempted to.

“Are you okay?” Kendra was at Jaxson’s side and running her hands over every inch of his body.

“I’m fine.” The wince in his response said otherwise but it was understandable. They were all beaten up in some way or another.

“Where’s Karlie?” Steel demanded.

“Red-hot pissed back at the compound,” Emma told him. “Black refused to let her and Anna leave after communications went down. He has them both in the panic room while we came to check things out, something he also wasn’t thrilled about. You men sure like to act as though it’s your job to protect us, like we can’t do it ourselves.”

Chance wasn’t about to remind Emma that it was their job to protect the women they loved. If it had been Jaxson or Daniel who stayed back, there was no way they would’ve allowed those two to leave. Not because they weren’t capable, but when you loved someone, you naturally felt the need to keep them locked away.

“We need to get moving. I need to find Bree.”

“We need to get Blayd to a doctor first,” Liam demanded.

“I’m ... fine.” It was barely more than a whisper and Blayd was certainly not fine, but it was good to hear his teammate’s voice again.

“Black already has the doctor en route. I told him I would assess the situation and see if the hospital would be better.” Kendra stepped away from Jaxson.

Chance could see how hard it was for his teammate to let her go check on Blayd. He had to turn away from the love. It hurt too much when the woman he loved wasn’t there.

“We’ll find her. I promise.” Emma joined him and placed her hand on his good arm. Daniel was right behind her with his own hand firmly planted on her hip as if he were afraid to have his hands off her. Chance could understand the sentiment. When they got Bree back, she wouldn’t be out of his sight again for a very long time.

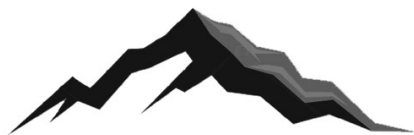
“He just threw her into the car like she meant nothing.”

The scene continued to play in his head like a movie reel stuck on the same two minutes.

“We *will* find her and bring her back to you. Now that we know which two people to look at closer, I will turn their lives upside down to find her for you. You have my word.”

Chance believed Emma. He had to because the other option wasn’t an option at all. A life without Bree in it wasn’t one he wanted to live.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Well, nothing about this situation was going as she planned. Obviously, they wanted to identify her stalker and have him lead her team back to the traitor. Blowing up the desert wasn't supposed to happen. Getting kidnapped wasn't supposed to happen. And being locked in a small cage was certainly not supposed to happen.

She wasn't a dog, and she didn't appreciate being treated like one. Actually, now that she knew how this felt, the first dog she got was going to run free. No cages for her future dog. This shit was stupid.

The squeak of rusty door hinges stopped all wayward thoughts of future pets. Scooching on her ass, Bree shimmied around until she found the source of the noise. Wherever her kidnapper was keeping her was hidden behind a secret wall. Or at least that's what she assumed when the wall suddenly opened up.

“Ah, I see you're awake. How do you like your new living arrangements?”

She looked up at the man who held her life in his hands. Bree hated him. She hated that his outward appearance didn't match the decrepit soul she knew he had to have. It pained her to know that her stalker looked like someone she would've stopped to say hi to in a cafe. But there was something about his eyes. They told the true story.

“Swell,” she answered sarcastically. “In fact, I'm thinking of opening an inn and this was exactly what I had in mind for

the guest rooms.”

“Do make sure you let me know how that plan works out for you.”

Bree bared her teeth like the dog he was treating her as. Let the prick step close. She would show him what her bite felt like.

“Who the hell are you?” she spat.

She wanted the name of the person who was sent after her. She deserved as much after all the years of running. And now this damn cage. She wanted the name of the man she would be killing with her bare hands. If not her, then surely Chance would do it.

“The name’s Carl Beaumont.”

Of course, he had an ordinary name.

“What, your parents didn’t think Lucifer was appropriate? They must not have realized who you would become.” At least a name like Lucifer would’ve given her some indication of what he was capable of.

The creep had the nerve to laugh.

“I was told you wouldn’t come quietly but I didn’t realize you would provide me with such entertainment.”

Bree would show him entertainment all right. Just as soon as he moved a little closer.

“Tell me, Carl, are you the same person who’s been after me these past ten years?”

There was that laugh again.

“So you *did* know. Your father was so sure your stupid female brain would never figure it out.”

Bree bit back the nasty retort. Her father could rot in hell, right next to this man, for all she cared. He was constantly underestimating her. Her whole life, she was expected to look a certain way and forget about using her head. It was just another part of her that needed to be pretty, not functional.

“I didn’t move around so much because it was fun.” She had to keep from rolling her eyes. He found her entertaining now, but she had a feeling that could change on a dime and she had no intention of seeing that depraved side that killed those men.

“You made my job difficult.” All her humor went out the window with that sentence. She hadn’t been hiding her smile, despite her situation. “I must admit I liked the challenge. It pissed your father off to no end, but I enjoyed every minute of our little game.”

Bree wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Is that what this is to you? A game?” Her voice was a few octaves higher than normal. “*Murder* is a game to you?!”

Carl merely lifted one side of his lips. “You’re a little young yet, dear, but soon you will realize everything in life is a game. It’s all about who is the smartest and the deadliest.”

Fuck him and his patronizing spiel about her age. He couldn’t be more than ten years older than her, and he had the nerve to talk about life. Bree knew all about how hard life was; she got a quick course in the lesson the first time Carl killed someone.

“Is that why you *killed* some helpless boy? To prove just how *mean* you could be?”

She had officially gone too far. Bree could tell the moment the smile slipped away, and the cruel look she had seen in his eyes the first time he walked in was suddenly arctic.

“I killed him because that’s what I was told to do. You disobeyed the rules. And people get punished when they don’t follow the rules.”

“*What rules?*” she yelled back. “The ones my father thought he could lay down on me? I was eighteen years old! I no longer needed to do what he told me, and I sure as hell had no intention of marrying the twat he wanted just because it would make life easier for him!”

“So instead, you fucked your way around the continent and were responsible for dozens of men being murdered in the

process.”

Her whole body froze at the confession. He couldn't possibly mean what she thought he meant.

“Dozens?” The single word was barely more than a whisper, but it felt like a scream in her own head.

“Did you really think I only killed a handful?”

Bree was going to be sick. She couldn't remember the last thing she ate but she was positive it was about to make a comeback.

“I killed every man you fucked in the last ten years. I've had eyes on you every single day. You were never truly safe. I just let you believe the illusion.”

Oh God. The guilt she thought she carried before was nothing compared to the one she would carry now.

All of the fight drained out of her. She needed to know.

“Why?”

“Because your father said I could. When you rejected his suggestion for a husband, he signed you over to me and said I could do as I wish. I chose to murder every man who ever came near you, and I'll keep doing it. Starting with the sailor who thought he could take you away from me.”

Bree barely heard the retreat of footsteps as she curled into herself in the corner of the cage. She thought she was strong, that nothing that vile man could say would destroy her, but she was wrong. So wrong. All of those lives were destroyed because she was busy having fun.

She didn't deserve a man like Chance.

BREE WAS in the same position when Carl returned later. She had no idea how much time had passed.

“I see you're still processing what I told you.”

“Go to hell.” Her voice cracked from all the crying she had done. It wasn’t one of her best moments, but she would give herself some slack. It wasn’t every day that a person found out they were responsible for dozens of deaths.

“I can assure you I’ve been living there for years. I’ve come to think of it as my home.”

Great. Her stalker was an egomaniac without a conscience and considered himself a modern-day devil. How lucky for her.

“Are you going to wallow all day, or is it finally time for me to tell you even more good news?”

Bree didn’t know if she could handle any more of this man’s version of good news.

“Go ahead. You’re probably just going to tell me anyway.”

“Your lack of enthusiasm is depressing. What happened to the spirited woman I first captured?”

That had her sitting up and wiping away the few tears that still lingered.

“You told her you killed dozens of people because of her. How the fuck did you expect me to react?”

“Truthfully? Not like a whining bitch.”

If his objective was to piss her off, it was working. She once again hoped he would come closer so she could bite him. Maybe draw a little blood. The thought of being a cannibal never appealed to her, but a girl had to do what a girl had to do.

“Fine, I’ll ditch the whining and just be a bitch. What good news do you have for me?”

“That’s more like it!” That sadistic smile was back, and Bree couldn’t wait to wipe it off his face. “Now, what’s the one thing your team wants to know more than anything else?”

Every limb in her body locked up. He couldn’t possibly be willing to share who the traitor was. It made no sense to

supply that information without something in return ... unless it was a trick.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do,” Carl gloated. “You’ve spent weeks trying to figure out who betrayed you and your team.”

Son of a bitch. She did want the information, but at what cost?

“So how about you tell me rather than beating around the bush? Unless this is one of your games as well. String me along and hope I start begging you.”

“I’m truly disappointed we haven’t had the opportunity to meet before this. I think I would’ve liked listening to your banter every day.”

That made one of them. She would have been happy to never meet her stalker. Actually, she would have been happy to never have one at all.

“I see you aren’t in the mood for my games. Very well. I shall tell you but only because I can’t wait to see your face when you realize just how far the betrayal actually goes.”

It felt like a lead ball was sitting in her stomach. There was no way anyone on Phantom would’ve betrayed her. She might’ve only known them for a month, but she could honestly say she never felt closer to people in her life. Carl had to be wrong.

“Out with it.” Her voice wobbled, giving Carl more emotion than she ever wanted, and he knew it. The bastard had the nerve to smirk at her. She would enjoy watching him die.

“I must admit I thought for sure I lost you this last time. I was concerned you had finally managed to go off-grid. But how fortunate that the one person you stayed in contact with throughout the years also happened to be the one person who worked for me.”

No.

It couldn’t be.

“Annette,” she whispered.

“You really are smarter than your father gives you credit for.”

Annette was her mentor, the hacker who taught her everything. The only person who would've been able to successfully hardwire into Black's computers to get the information needed. It was the one person she never would've suspected.

“But that means ...”

“She's been working for Black the entire time. Or should I say ...” Carl was practically jumping for joy like a kid on Christmas morning, waiting for Bree to connect the dots.

Neither of the two people they had narrowed it down to were women. There were only two people who knew her location the night of the attack and both were men. Then it hit her.

“Annette's not a woman.”

“Just like Maddox isn't a man. It's ironic how the two of you both took names meant for the opposite sex! This whole time you thought you had a mentor who was just like you. The only person in the whole world who actually knew that Maddox was indeed a female, and it turns out you had nothing in common at all! In fact, the person you thought was Annette was *really* the man your father wanted you to marry. This whole time you trusted the *one person* you so desperately tried to get away from.”

That lead ball was now a violent chemistry mixture and it was working its way up her stomach. She was going to hurl all over her small confinement. And Carl just laughed at her misery.

She had been so stupid thinking she had actually managed to get away from her father and the life he wanted her to live. In reality, she had allowed herself to be manipulated. She was just as stupid as her father thought she was, and because of it, her team was now exposed to the one man who wanted them all dead.

It was her fault Vito Accardo was able to put a hit on the team. How would they ever forgive her?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Chance was going stir-crazy. Actually, he was pretty sure he was well beyond that at this point. His team had been checked out and even Blayd was released back to duty. Although, he wondered if that had more to do with Blayd threatening bodily harm rather than actually being healthy, but he wasn't going to argue. It meant one more person would be there to make sure the son of a bitch who dared touch what was his would be six feet under.

“Black wants us all in the conference area.” Gage bumped him on the shoulder on his way past.

“It's about damn time.”

He needed answers NOW. It had been four hours and twenty-seven minutes since he last laid eyes on Bree and that was four hours too many. Emma didn't have any answers when he stormed into her office not long ago, so he wondered what had changed.

“Oh good, you're finally here.” Emma hooked his arm the second his feet crossed the threshold. Before he could even reply, she was shoving his ass into the chair next to where her laptop was set up.

“Okay, so I know, when you popped in, I said I didn't have anything, but that wasn't entirely true.” His body stiffened at her words. “Before you say anything, I needed to be sure.”

“Sure of what?”

He wasn't normally this impatient, but this was Bree they were talking about.

“So, as you know we narrowed it down to two people.”

“Yes, some Anthony something or other, and a John what’s his face.”

Emma just stared at him.

“Wow, you really paid attention to what I told you earlier.”

She rolled her eyes and he wanted to snap that he didn’t have time for her attitude, but he kept his mouth shut. Daniel was in the room, and if he heard Chance talking to his wife like that, there would be problems. The kind that ended with Daniel’s fist in his face. As much as he could go for a good round of boxing, he didn’t have the time to spare.

“The names are irrelevant to me. Just tell me which one I need to kill so we can get on with this.”

“Anthony Boxtton. He’s the guy we were looking for. Not the stalker, but the traitor. Turns out he’s a pretty good hacker, and by good, I mean great. Genius-level great.”

“If he’s such a genius, then how did you figure out it was him?”

“See, that’s where things get a little dicey. You remember Bree and I knew each other for a while before she came to work here?”

Emma was clearly not getting the point that he didn’t have the time for this nonsense.

“Yes, you two worked together when she called herself Maddox and the world thought she was a guy. Helped you when you were working for that shithead. What’s your point?”

Chance could see he was walking a thin line. He didn’t have to look over his shoulder to know Daniel was staring at him, and if the look Emma was giving him was any indication, she also didn’t appreciate the tone he was using.

“The point is, we used to talk. Not on the phone obviously but through chat rooms. I remember her telling me about a mentor, Annette. Supposedly Annette was next-level smart and taught Bree everything she knew. Bree once mentioned

she would be the only one who could ever access Black's computers because of how encrypted they were."

"But the person you mentioned is a guy. They both are."

"And the world thought Maddox was a dude."

Then it clicked. The puzzle pieces fell into place and a light bulb inside his head went off.

"Anthony is Annette."

Emma snapped her fingers and pointed at him. She didn't need to say it, but it was clear in her mind she was either thinking *finally* or *winner, winner, chicken dinner*. Based on what he knew about Emma and who she hung out with, he was going with the second one.

"So how does that bring us closer to finding out who Bree's stalker is? We know he had to be in contact with Anthony at some point, based on what I overheard from the cave, but that doesn't bring us any closer to finding out where he's holding her now."

The little excitement he felt about finally figuring out who the traitor in their ranks was flew away and he slumped a little in his chair. They were no closer to having Bree's location than they had been an hour ago.

"Oh, ye of little faith." Emma shook her head. "Do you really think I would bring you in here if that's all I had?"

"Uh, actually it was Black who called us in."

Well, now that he thought about it, Black was across the room speaking with Daniel. The complete opposite of what his boss normally did when he called a meeting.

Emma let out a very unladylike snort. It reminded him of the weird noises Bree always made when he got on her nerves while she was working. "Oh, please. Everyone assumes Black called a meeting because he sent out word to have everyone come here. He only did that because I told him to."

"Okay, so what do you have, then?"

“I have dozens of messages between Anthony and various phone numbers. It would appear our stalker changed numbers often, but Anthony did not. He must’ve figured he was too good for precautions like that. I cross-referenced those phone numbers with Bree’s father, also, a man who didn’t bother to change up phones, and whaddya know, I have at least a dozen that match.”

“Please tell me one of those numbers has been used recently?”

Chance wasn’t above begging. He really needed some good news at this point. He would even take a small sliver of semi-good news, if it meant they were a step closer to finding her.

“It has. Just moments after Bree was abducted. The number sent a text to Bree’s father.”

Yes! That was good news.

“And since then?”

Emma’s face fell slightly. “Nothing else, but I’m still monitoring. Even if her kidnapper ditched the phone, the moment another message comes through, I’m on it. I’ve already set up searches for all the numbers that normally contact both Anthony and Bree’s father. The second a strange number comes through, I will be all over it like white on rice. This bastard isn’t getting away with taking our girl from us.”

No, he certainly wasn’t. Hell would freeze over before he lost Bree without a fight. She meant everything to him, was everything he never even realized he wanted. She came into his life like a tornado but was really the rainbow after the storm. Everything she did made his life better. He just needed the time to tell her.

IT WOULD TAKE another seven hours and a lot of pacing and arguing with his team members before Emma screamed for him.

Racing down the hall, he nearly took out Liam trying to get to the office Emma shared with Bree.

“What?! What is it?”

“I’ve got a location!”

He couldn’t be sure he heard her correctly.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I’ve got a location! The phone number texted Bree’s father again. I guess he didn’t have time to ditch it and get a new one.”

“Where?”

His heart was racing. Finally, they had something tangible to work with. The last few hours had been torture. Time and time again one of his team members had to stop him from trying to go out and look for her. He hadn’t known where he would even go, but sitting around had felt counterproductive. It turned out he was rewarded for his patience after all.

“Just over the Colorado border. Not far by plane. Black’s in the process of securing two vehicles to have waiting for you when you land. Go get the team, then go get our girl.”

Emma didn’t have to tell him twice. He shot out of the room and headed straight for the armory to grab his gear. Fortunately, his team was already there and gearing up.

“I don’t need to bench your ass, do I?” Daniel asked him when he stepped up to his locker.

“Nope, but I can’t promise I won’t kill the fucker when we get there. He’s a known killer and I would much prefer he no longer walked this earth.”

The man had killed people simply to scare Bree. That alone deserved a date with the devil, but then kidnapping her on top of it? There was no way the man would live to see the end of the day.

“Fair enough.” Daniel nodded.

“I got your back.” Steel pounded a fist on his shoulder. If there was anyone else on the team who understood his need

for vengeance, it was Steel. It wasn't that long ago that Steel also wanted a man dead. In his case though, it had been Karlie's brother. Either way, the man was no longer living and soon there would be one more added to that list.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Losing hope was one of the worst things a person could do in her situation. She hadn't wanted to; she liked to believe she was made of tougher stuff than that, but never had she felt more betrayed.

Annette wasn't just her mentor. There were times when she considered the woman a mother to her. Passing down wisdom.

Now that dream was shattered into a million pieces of glass, just scattered across the floor with no hope of ever being put back together the same way. That was how she felt. She couldn't see herself ever being the same again, and why should she be? She had brought nothing but chaos to those she cared about.

The men that she'd slept with had died all because she felt the need to share with the one person she thought she could trust. It had been an illusion, a way for her father and ex-boyfriend to keep their dirty claws in her.

"Are you still wallowing in here?"

"Excuse me if my world has suddenly been turned upside down and I'm not moving past it fast enough for you."

She wished he would leave and let her come to terms with her shattered pieces without an audience, but of course, he wouldn't even grant her that one wish. Instead, he stood by like the creepy stalker he was, watching and criticizing every move she made. It was both exhausting and exasperating.

“Did you honestly believe your father’s reach didn’t extend that far?”

“That’s exactly what I thought, or at the very least he would forget about me after all this time.”

His behavior was by far the most insane thing she’d ever known and that was saying a lot. He was a Hollywood director. She had seen hundreds of movie scripts people submitted over the years, but this one? This would be an Oscar winner for sure.

“I would say a father never forgets his daughter, but in your case, I think it’s more like a man never forgets being rejected. You sealed your fate the moment you walked away. It became a game then. One your father and fiancé refused to lose.”

“Don’t call him that. He doesn’t deserve that title after fucking someone else while we were dating.”

“Touched a nerve, did I? That’s what he was though, even if you hadn’t known it. Your father and his father signed the papers when you were still in middle school. You were always supposed to fall in line and do as your father expected of you.”

Screw being upset. If this prick wanted her angry, then he was going to get it. Pushing herself up in the tiny space, she met his evil smile with one of her own.

“I guess I got the last laugh. I was never forced to marry him, nor will I *ever* be. Nothing they do to me will ever get the desired result. I would rather die than be married to that asshole.”

“Keep telling yourself that, but just know I reached out to your father when we got here. He’s already on his way, along with Anthony. They will both be excited to see you locked up like the good bitch they want you to be.”

Carl’s evil laugh followed him back out the secret door. Grabbing the thin metal bars, she took all of her frustration out on them. She needed to get out of there before her father showed. She had no desire to ever come face-to-face with that man again.

Bree spent the time going over every inch of the space. What should've been a normal dog crate was anything but. The sliding locks on two separate sides were welded shut, as was the sliding tray on the bottom. In fact, every point of contact was welded shut. Whoever bought the damn thing wanted to make sure she wouldn't be able to escape. She refused to give up hope though. If Carl wanted the bitchy side of her, then that's precisely what he was going to get.

BREE WAS STILL FORMULATING her escape when Carl walked back in what felt like hours later. But it was the two men behind Carl who demanded her attention. Nothing had changed over the past ten years. In fact, she was pretty sure her father managed to look younger after all that time. She supposed Botox would do that for a person, and if there was one thing she knew about the man who contributed to her DNA, looking young was high on his list.

“I thought Carl was bluffing when he told me he had you locked up. I'm glad to see how right he really was.” Her father's nasally tone went straight through her like nails on a chalkboard. She wanted to gouge his throat and remove his ability to ever speak again. She couldn't fathom how people looked up to men like Samuel Harrison.

“This cage is protecting you from me,” she snarled. The longer she sat in there, the more her hatred built. She would gladly rip all three men apart if given the opportunity. She didn't care that they were bigger than her, stronger than her. She had anger on her side, and hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

“You always did have a mouth on you.”

She had tried to avoid looking at the man who had betrayed her in so many ways. First by cheating on her, then by going along with the stupid scheme to marry. Not to mention the whole pretending to be her mentor, and now,

being a traitor. There wasn't a single redeeming quality in that fucker.

“Is it Charles? Or wait, do you go by Anthony now? Or maybe I should call you Annette? Yeah, I think I'll go with that last one since every action I've seen from you proves how much of a cuntcake you really are.”

Charles's face turned the shade of a tomato as he attempted to charge after her but was stopped by Carl.

“Can't you see she's just trying to get under your skin?”

That was exactly what she wanted to do. She needed one of them to come close enough to grab them. She had thought her best bet was Charles. She just didn't realize how easy it would really be.

“The stupid cunt needs to be taught some manners.” Spit flew from across the room and landed mere inches from where she was locked up. She needed him just a little closer.

“Aww, did the truth hurt your feelings?” Bree was really ramping up the attitude with each word. “Maybe you should think about the people you keep company with. It's obvious they don't care about your image.”

She was so close. Charles was fighting Carl's hold, but it was no match. Her ex-boyfriend was puny compared to the man her father sent after her.

“Enough.” Her father attempted to sound authoritative, but the word came out whiny and not at all effective to her or Carl. Charles, on the other hand, stopped immediately.

Interesting.

Their dynamic was truly fascinating, and in another life, she would've wanted to study it. However, in this one, she just wanted them to go away. Fall off the face of the earth so no one else was forced to deal with their wretched behavior.

“Carl's right. She's just trying to get under your skin. I warned you about this and told you to be prepared. You said you could handle her.”

Bree tried to hide her chuckle behind a cough, but it was no use. The moment was just too funny not to laugh at. The fact that any man thought she could be handled was hilarious. But for it to be by a man who clearly didn't have the balls to handle a fluffy bunny let alone someone of her caliber.

Hil-fucking-arious.

“All three of you are idiots if you think that you could *handle* me.”

She crisscrossed her legs and leaned back. Since it didn't look like she would be goading any of them into getting close to her anytime soon, she was better off making herself comfortable. She'd been on her knees or scrunched in a ball for too long. What she could really use was some stretching of her legs, but that didn't look to be in her future.

“You've got a mouth on you for someone who's caged like a dog.”

Why must her father speak? Everything that came out of his mouth only further pissed her off.

“Did you just come here to look at me like some circus freak, or was there a point to your visit?”

“Yes, we did.” She hadn't thought it possible for her father's nose to get any more stuck up but there it was. The damn thing nearly touched the ceiling; he was looking down on her with such contempt. “We came to make sure you were indeed locked up because our plane leaves within the hour and you will be on it.”

No! Her voice was caught in her throat. All three men gave her the same sadistic smirk before turning on their heels and walking back out the door.

She needed to find a way out. There was no way she would be getting on that plane. Not if she ever wanted to see Chance and her friends again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“Visual confirmation. The man who just stepped out of the vehicle is Samuel Harrison.” Daniel’s voice filtered through his earpiece.

“Do we know who the other man is?” Chance asked.

The second guy was younger. At least half the age of Samuel, although one wouldn’t know that by looking at Bree’s father. If he hadn’t known better, Chance would’ve assumed Samuel was in his early thirties; the man had apparently had copious amounts of plastic surgery over the years.

“Anthony Boxton, AKA Charles Freedman.”

Charles. Charles. Why did that first name sound so familiar? He knew a few Charleses but none that would cross paths during this situation. Yet the name was pulling on a memory. He thought back to all the conversations he had with Bree and then it hit him.

“Wait, as in Bree’s high school boyfriend?”

“That would be correct,” Emma confirmed. She had decided at the last minute to travel with them. Kendra agreed to stay back and look after Karlie because they figured her computer skills were of better use than Kendra’s skills as a pilot and soldier.

“How the hell did Black miss that when he hired him?”

“We do background checks, not facial recognition when we hire someone,” Black defended himself. “But that’s about to change.”

Chance was sure there were going to be many changes after this. Black had more precautions than most companies, and still, it wasn't enough.

“Was he hired before Bree or after?”

“Before,” Emma cut in. “Which is why we didn't put him at the top of the list. We figured it would have to be someone who came after all the shit went down with my rescue and then Karlie's.”

He would've assumed the same thing. Especially now that he knew that the traitor was also the same man whom Bree's father wanted her to marry. The fact that they traveled together meant that they'd probably been working together for a while, but it made no sense. Why would Bree's father feel the need to have someone close to Black? There was no way to know his team would hire Bree. Something didn't add up.

“It's time to move.” Daniel's harsh command had him jumping into action.

It was about time. Liam and Black were positioned in the hills, with their sniper rifles, while the rest of the team would enter the large house on foot. The place belonged in Hollywood, not on some dead-end street in a shitty run-down town. Driving through, they had actually wondered if anyone even lived there anymore. Based on the information Emma could find, the town didn't have many residents, not after the large factory closed down and people were forced to find work elsewhere. Apparently, the factory had been the only thing keeping the town alive. Now it sat decrepit, just like most of the homes around it. Except this one. Whoever chose to build the estate knew what they were doing. No neighbors to worry about.

The team moved in unison and split in half as they approached the house. Chance, Daniel, and Gage would take the front door, while Steel, Jaxson, and Blayd took the back. Heat signatures showed there were four bodies in the house. It worked out perfectly. He would have the opportunity to end everyone who ever hurt Bree all in one shot.

Daniel counted them down, and before he knew it, they were kicking in the door. The sound of wood splintering all around him was music to his ears. So were the surprised gasps, as Charles was the first to run into the hallway.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?!” the asshole screamed like a banshee and ran straight toward him with his arms flailing.

Dropping his rifle and allowing the sling to catch it, Chance shot his arm out and clotheslined the man before he could get too far.

“Tie this fucker up. I’ve got a few questions for him.”

Gage grabbed Charles by the shirt and flipped him over. Gage was slipping on the flexicuffs as Chance reached for his rifle and continued farther down the hall.

“Come in, come in. I should’ve known you would find me eventually.”

Seated on a sofa in a large library was a man not much older than himself. At first glance, it looked like a typical rich guy enjoying a whiskey in the early evening. But then he met the man’s eyes and Chance knew. This was the person who had killed the men Bree had been with. There was something dead about the way he looked on.

“Your home, I presume?” Chance dropped his rifle once again and switched it out for his pistol. He couldn’t see a weapon but that didn’t mean there wasn’t one stashed somewhere close.

“It is. Although I don’t get to spend as much time here as I would like since I’m busy chasing a wayward female around the country. The name’s Carl, and you must be Bree’s latest conquest.”

Her name on his lips had his trigger finger itchy. This was the man who dared take her away from him.

“Where is she?”

“Now see, I’m not ready to tell you that yet. I much prefer to play with my prey before I end their life.”

Was he talking about Bree or him? If this Carl guy so much as hurt a hair on her head, he was going to torture him within an inch of his life over and over again.

“I’ve got the father! He tried sneaking out the back door,” Steel hollered at him.

“Looks like it’s just you left. Your other two partners weren’t a match for my team.”

Carl threw his head back and let out the vilest laugh Chance had ever heard. And that was saying something, considering all the assholes he had come across over the years.

“Those men weren’t my partners. I tolerated Samuel because he paid well and afforded me to build this place. Charles was a necessary evil, but a pathetic one at that. I couldn’t care less what you do to either of them.”

There was no honor amongst thieves. Or in this case, amongst murderers. Carl didn’t seem to mind that he was the only one left standing. In fact, Chance thought perhaps he preferred it that way.

“You’re not leaving this house alive.”

“On the contrary. I have a few tricks up my sleeve and you’re about to see the first one. It’s either me or her. Which will you choose?”

An ear-piercing alarm echoed throughout the house. Chance looked around the room, and before he knew what was happening, Carl was on the run.

“Find out what that alarm is for!” he barked to Emma.

Chance started to chase after the kidnapper, but once again, all hell broke loose. More alarms started to sound and an explosion somewhere outside rocked the floor and threw Chance face-first into the wall.

“What the fuck is happening in there?” Liam demanded.

“Chaos,” Blayd quipped in his earpiece. “Mass fucking chaos. Emma, please find a way to shut this shit down.”

It was stimulation overload. Carl was hoping to throw them off by overwhelming their senses and he was doing a great job of it.

“I’m working to shut things down now but there’s only one heat signature behind the room you were just in, Chance. I think that’s where Bree is being held.”

Chance was torn. He wanted to be the reason Carl never walked this earth again but he also wanted to make sure Bree was unharmed. He knew based on the heat signature she was alive, but that didn’t tell him if she was okay or not.

“Go.” Daniel stepped up next to him. “Find Bree. I’ll bring the asshole back so you can get your pound of flesh.”

He nodded his thanks and clapped his team leader on the shoulder. Rushing back into the library he looked around for a door but couldn’t see any. It would be fitting that the man would have some secret way in. Feeling his way around the room and ripping books off the shelf, it wasn’t until the noise finally stopped and he was on the last bookcase that it finally happened.

Instead of falling off the shelf like the hundreds before it, the book he yanked on made a soft click and a rush of air hit his face. With both hands, Chance pried the secret door open and nearly lost the little patience he had left when he saw how Bree was kept.

“Bring me bolt cutters,” he snapped into his comms.

“Oh, thank God!” Bree smiled when she saw him. “I was about to pull my hair out with all the noise in this place.”

He wanted to smile at her attempt to joke about the situation but he couldn’t find it in him. Carl had locked her in a fucking cage. A fucking dog crate and welded the damn thing shut. He was able to see the welds from across the room but his anger only intensified the closer he got.

Steel rushed in seconds later but skidded to a stop. “Is that a ... “

“Fucking dog crate,” he growled.

Steel slapped the mini bolt cutters into his outstretched hands. Fortunately, his teammate was a walking toolbox. If it fit in his pocket, then Steel carried it. In times like this he was grateful for that quality.

Chance cut as quickly as he could, considering whoever welded the cage had made sure not to miss a single area that would normally be the door. It took three minutes, but once he had the final cut made and the door ripped open, Bree crawled out and flung herself into his arms.

“I’m so glad to see you.”

He was glad to see that her time in the crate didn’t negatively affect her. As he was making the cuts, he worried there would be lingering side effects.

“Someone tell me you have the fucker.”

Chance tried to keep his voice level as he ran a comforting hand down her back. If his team reported they lost Carl, he would lose his shit.

“Got him,” Daniel confirmed.

With a kiss to her head, he whispered to Bree. “Stay with Steel. I have to take care of something.”

She latched on to him. “I want to go with you.”

He shook his head. “I refuse to let you see what I’m about to do.”

It was one thing to take someone’s life in the heat of the moment. It was something else entirely to kill without remorse, and that was exactly what he planned to do to Carl. The man wouldn’t live to see another day.

“I know what you’re going to do and I want to be there. It’s *my* life he ruined. I’m the reason you all are in your current predicament. He bragged about killing every person I’ve ever been with. Not just the ones I knew about, so I’m telling you, I *want* to be there.”

He met her steady gaze, and could see in her eyes that she was telling him the truth. Chance looked over her head at Steel. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, maybe

confirmation that the decision he was about to make was the right one.

When Steel nodded his head in agreement, he knew that was exactly what he had needed.

“Okay.” He glanced back down at her. “Come on.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Bree never considered herself a vengeful person, not normally, but specific situations change a person. Knowing the man tied up in front of her was responsible for so many deaths was her turning point. She wouldn't feel guilty for watching as Chance sent him to hell.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked her for what felt like the tenth time.

“I'm sure.” She kept her gaze steady despite the turbulence in her stomach. If she allowed herself too much time to think things through, she might change her mind, but jail wasn't good enough for him. The senseless murders of all those men were reason enough.

Before she could fully register what was happening, Chance had his gun out and pointed at the center of Carl's forehead. Another breath later and he pulled the trigger. No warning. No last words. Just another murderer eliminated.

Bree expected to feel something. A sense of loss for all those who had died at Carl's hand. Guilt for an execution she approved. But there was nothing. Nothing but numbness.

“What happened to Charles?” She didn't even sound like herself when she asked.

“Gage has him tied up. There's a few things I want to ask him.”

That made sense. Several things didn't add up but maybe that was because she didn't have all the information. Or maybe

she really wasn't as smart as she thought she was. Clearly, her father and Charles had pulled one over on her.

“Do you want to go with me when we talk to him?”

Talk, not interrogate. She wondered if that was for her benefit. There was no way Chance and the rest of the team didn't want to torture the information out of Charles, not after what he put them all through.

“I need some answers myself.”

Charles snarled at her when she walked in under Chance's arm. She needed the connection to him. She had a feeling that, once he learned just how much this was her fault, he wouldn't be holding her the way he was now.

“I see the cunt managed to pull you into her web.”

Chance's fist shot out and connected with Charles's nose before she even registered he was moving. The crunch of cartilage echoed throughout the large room.

“Watch your mouth,” Blayd hissed from where he stood behind Charles.

“You would do well to heed his warning,” Chance added calmly. “I've already killed one of your partners today. I'm not above adding you to that body count.”

She never expected that he would be able to remain so calm. Other than the brief outburst that resulted in Charles's bloody nose, Chance was as calm as a cucumber.

“Now, tell us why you targeted our team. It is your fault that we have the hits out on us, isn't it?”

Charles had the nerve to laugh.

“Oh, it's not my fault. The blame lies solely with Bree.”

There it was. The team was going to turn on her. Wrapping both arms around her middle, Bree tried to keep herself from falling apart. She couldn't let it happen in front of everyone. She just needed to hang on a little bit longer.

“Oh, that's right. Annette, isn't it? That's the name you used to keep tabs on her over the years?”

Wait, what? Chance knew? Bree looked around the room at the different members of her team. None of them seemed surprised by Chance's revelation. The only one who suddenly looked worried was Charles.

"How did you figure it out? I covered my trail," Charles whined.

"You weren't the only person Bree confided in," Emma replied.

She wanted to smack herself upside the head. Emma. Of course. She had told Emma all about her mentor. Emma must've pieced together that Anthony was Annette.

"Why did you take the job with Blackguard Security?" The question tumbled out of her mouth.

That was the one thing she was sure about. She never told her mentor about taking the job. She confided that she helped a friend occasionally, but she never said that she would stop running and try to settle down for the first time since walking away from her parents.

"You aren't as smart as you thought." Charles smiled. "I know all about Emma and what she did. Who do you think leaked what she was doing? I needed her back with Blackguard so I could put my plan in motion, and that included you being hired. The good guys are always so predictable."

She wanted to be sick all over again. Nothing about her life was what she thought. This whole time she was convinced she had slipped away from her father and the life he wanted for her, but the truth was, she had never been free. He and Charles had still found a way to manipulate her.

"I'm done," she whispered, and stepped farther away from Chance. She needed some air, and no one stopped her as she slipped out of the room. She no longer cared what happened to Charles or any of them for that matter. Bree was exhausted and wanted out of this hellhole.

Bree was standing out front when Chance joined her a few minutes later. He stepped into her line of sight but didn't make

a move to pull her into his arms.

Everything led back to her. She could no longer deny it, not after what Charles said. If she had never needed a mentor, Annette would never have been able to sink their claws into her and everyone would be safe.

“This is all my fault,” she said quietly.

“No, it’s not.” Chance must’ve known what she needed better than she did because it was the softness in his voice that kept her from lashing out. She had expected anger, maybe a terse response, but never such softness.

“How can you say that? If it wasn’t for me running away from my father and then seeking out a mentor to improve my hacking skills, Emma and the team wouldn’t be in danger right now. *You* wouldn’t be in danger right now.”

This time Chance did step closer. He used his finger to lift her chin so she was forced to look into his eyes.

“Your father would’ve found another way. His intention was always to control you, and if you never had Annette, then there wouldn’t be us. Black wouldn’t have had to seek out Daniel to start a team just to rescue Emma. Steel would never have found Karlie locked in that basement with Anna. And we would never have needed to pull you in for assistance, so I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to meet you. So really, it’s because of *you* that two of my team members are happy right now.”

Well, when he put it like that ...

“Everyone’s not mad at me?” She hated the way her voice wobbled with uncertainty.

She wasn’t a wobble kind of girl. She lived her life knowing she could take it by storm. This kidnapping had shaken her foundation, and truthfully, it sucked.

“No one is mad at you. At Charles and your father? Absolutely. Black wants Charles back at the compound with us because he needs more information, and Emma is in the process of gathering as much as she can to put your father

away for a very long time. Unless you would rather him dead?
'Cause I can make that happen."

The thought had crossed her mind, but she had seen enough murder for one day. Besides, death would be too merciful for the man who wanted to control her. It was better he lived out the rest of his life knowing someone else controlled his daily activities.

"Prison is the better punishment."

"Agreed." Chance smiled. "Now let's get the hell out of here. I have much better things I would rather be doing."

CHAPTER THIRTY



This was the third night in a row he'd been woken up by a restless Bree. He had tried to be subtle in asking what was bothering her, but she refused to talk to him. He had known letting her watch as he shot Carl in the head would come back to haunt him.

Work had slowed down a bit for them as Daniel kept Charles locked in interrogation. Samuel Harrison was arrested for multiple charges, including murder. Emma had been able to provide the FBI with paper trails showing how he paid Carl to not only stalk Bree but also kill the men she was with. Vito Accardo was still hiding but there were hopes that Charles could help with that.

With all of that taken care of, it was time to get to the root of Bree's nightmares.

"Bree." He gently rubbed her arm. "Wake up."

This couldn't wait until morning. It was essential they cleared the air.

Bree shot up and nearly smashed her head against his. He was lucky his reflexes were as good as they were. Starting a conversation with them both banged up wouldn't get them anywhere.

"I'm sorry." It was her immediate reaction every time he tried to soothe her from one of the nightmares.

"Don't apologize, just talk to me. You've been avoiding the subject for days now and I can't take it anymore. It's killing me to see that you're suffering and it's because of me."

Her hand stroked his bare chest, but before she could slide it too far down and distract him, as she'd done in the past, he curled his fingers around hers. Brushing his lips across her knuckles, he pleaded, "Please talk to me."

When she let out a very slow but frustrated breath, he knew he'd finally worn her down.

"It's your voice that I heard right before everything blew up."

He narrowed his eyes. He wasn't following and she must've understood that because she quickly continued on.

"Those nights that we went out trying to trap the traitor, you'd been having your own nightmares. You told me you dreamt of not being able to save me. It was during those nights that you would call out my name in agony, like your heart was being ripped out of your chest. It killed me and I never wanted it to come true. In the desert, right before everything blew up and Carl took my earpiece out, I heard you scream my name and it was the same voice. The same agony from your dreams."

Chance wanted to smack his forehead. Of all the conversations he'd had with her, he never thought about that one. He had been concerned about her time in the cage and witnessing him execute someone, but not once did the actual kidnapping cross his mind.

He pulled Bree until she was smashing into his chest.

"I thought you were dreaming about me killing Carl."

Hot air fanned his skin as she let out a small laugh.

"I know this is going to sound horrible, but I feel no remorse for that. He admitted to me he killed dozens of men, simply because I spent time with them over the years. Good men who didn't deserve it. They had chosen to occupy their time with me and were punished for it. I refuse to let Carl take up any more headspace than he already has the past ten years."

Dozens? The word echoed around in his head like a pinball. Chance had no right to be jealous of all those men, but he never claimed to be a rational human being. Bree had

admitted she had a past. It just sucked that it was tainted due to the actions of one horrible man.

“I’m glad it’s not his death weighing on you, but I don’t want to be the reason you aren’t sleeping at night either.”

Bree snuggled closer to him.

“That sound killed me, knowing I was the reason for it.”

He pushed her back, so she was forced to look him in the eye.

“It’s not your fault. Just like none of the other stuff was your fault, this wasn’t either. There was no way to know he would blow things up to get you. The team should’ve been better prepared and I’m sorry you had to hear me screaming for you. The thought of never having you in my life was agony, but it also brought us back together. I knew you would fight and you had to know I would come for you no matter what.” He took a deep breath. “I love you and I don’t want a life that doesn’t have you in it.”

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes and he was right there to catch the first one with his thumb as it attempted to roll down her cheek.

“You love me?”

“With everything I have in me,” he confessed. “You are everything I didn’t realize I needed in my life. I had this perfect vision of what I thought I wanted, but the reality is, I was just too afraid to see that it was fake. That version was me hiding because what I really wanted was so much scarier. True happiness and love terrified me, but now that I found it, I never want to live another day without it.”

More tears cascaded down her cheeks.

“Please don’t cry. Are those happy tears or sad tears?” he asked with concern.

“They’re happy tears.” Her smile was a little shaky, but it was a smile nonetheless. “I love you too. Happiness wasn’t in my future. I was so sure that I didn’t deserve it. I’m glad you

proved me wrong and stopped pushing me away when I hit on you.”

They both busted out in fits of laughter. Their relationship wasn't a conventional one. It didn't start like most people's love story and that was okay. It was uniquely theirs and he wouldn't change it.

“Your persistence is just one of the many things I love about you. Without it, I would still be my boring self and no one wants that. Hell, you even managed to get me to scatter my clothes across the floor last night rather than immediately put them in the hamper.”

He didn't add that he had been too busy watching her strip for him to care where his clothes landed. It was just one of the many subtle changes that he was getting used to as he shed the man he thought he needed to be and explored who he really was.

“You also didn't put the toothpaste back in the cabinet last night after I used it.”

“Damn, I knew I was forgetting something,” he joked.

It felt good not to obsess about where things were placed every single second of the day. He wasn't about to trash up the apartment, but it felt good.

Bree grew serious. “Thank you for accepting me as me.”

Knowing how she was raised and how her parents made her feel about her life, that simple sentence was deeper than any I love you.

“I always want you to be exactly who you are. I'm going to love you through it all.”

“Ditto.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Don't change because you think it's what I want from you. Do it because you are breaking free of the confines your father put on you and explore what makes you happy. I will be there every step of the way.”

Bree didn't know it yet but she gave him the greatest gift in the world. Just to be himself. Everything else they could get

through.

EPILOGUE 1



Bree looked around the empty house. It was a similar layout to the other five in the cul-de-sac, but the dark tones throughout separated it from the others. Chance had all but demanded they check each one out. Even the ones her friends already resided in, just to be sure there was nothing else she liked.

“This is the one,” she told him confidently.

She ran her hand along the black marble countertops, envisioning the many cooking mishaps they would inevitably have together. Neither of them was great in the kitchen, but they agreed to try and learn together.

“Are you sure?” Chance wrapped his strong arms on either side of her and pressed his fists into the counter, essentially caging her in as his broad chest touched every part of her back. “We can look again or change anything you like. When Black had them designed, he went standard throughout but said we can change anything we wanted.”

She already knew all this, so why Chance continued to harp on it really intrigued her. Throwing her ass back, she made herself just enough room to wiggle around so Chance was forced to look her in the eyes.

“I said this is the one I want and there’s not a single thing I would change about it.”

The house was made for her. Every room was exactly what she would’ve picked if given the choice and Chance knew that. She had said as much a dozen times as they walked throughout the place.

“I just want you to be sure. No doubts. No regrets.”

So this wasn't just about the house.

“Why don't you tell me what this is really about?”

She knew she was right when Chance let out a frustrated huff and raked his fingers through his hair.

“You're finally free. Your stalker is dead. Your asshole of a father will be spending years in jail, and after the threat you gave him, I doubt he would be stupid enough to send anyone after you. Charles will never get near you again. You're free!”

It was true, she had visited her father in jail and maybe gloated about how her life turned out in the end. She might've also told him that if he ever thought to contact her, she would make sure someone in jail turned him into his bitch. It turned out she had a knack for violence. Who would've guessed?

“And ...”

Bree knew there was more to his speech. She just needed to pull it out of him.

“And you could go anywhere in the world.” He threw his hands up. “Do anything you want. You're an amazing hacker with killer skills. You could make a fortune and have anything you wanted.”

Ah. Now she understood what was bothering him. It was cute to see how flustered he got when his insecurity reared its head. It didn't happen as often anymore, not after their little heart-to-heart, but sometimes she wondered if he still let his father's old ramblings sneak in from time to time. Like now. Little did he know he had nothing to worry about.

Bree grabbed his face just to be sure she had his full attention before she spoke.

“Yes, I could absolutely do all of those things.” The light in his eyes died just a little. “But I don't want to. I've seen the world. I've moved to a new place every few weeks for the last ten years. But there isn't a single place I want to be that's not with you.”

“I would go with you, if that’s what you wanted,” he quickly added.

And that was how she knew this was the kind of relationship that was meant to last.

“I know you would, but it’s here I want to be. Surrounded by our friends. Our co-workers. Knowing that I only have to walk a few hundred feet to spend time with any of them. That our future children will have friends to grow up with. People to get in trouble with.” She smirked before getting serious again. “I want to stay here, so please stop trying to over-please me. It’s starting to freak me out a little.”

That got the smile she was hoping for.

“Freaking you out, huh?”

Chance caged her back in and dove for the spot on her neck that always managed to bring her straight to her knees.

“So much.” Her response wasn’t as strong as she was aiming for. It was breathy and full of need. It was embarrassing how easily he managed to do that to her.

“I guess I need to fix that.”

A squeal snuck past her lips when he cupped her ass and lifted her onto the same counter she was admiring just minutes before. Chance pushed her thighs open with his hips until the bulge in his pants was lined up with her most sensitive areas.

“So you’re sure this is the place?” His hot breath fanned across her neck with each syllable.

All she could manage was a nod. Her need for him was too strong.

“Then I guess we better get started on christening every inch of it. Starting with the kitchen.”

He was true to his word. Three times, in fact. Kitchen, half bath, and even the floor of their new master bedroom got to hear her scream his name over and over again.

EPILOGUE 2



Liam

He hated to be the one who delivered bad news but sometimes it couldn't be helped. When his friend and boss sent him out on what he assumed would be a wild goose chase, Liam never thought he would be relaying the news he had just gotten confirmed.

The DNA lab they used had taken a little longer than normal, mostly because without knowing the identity of the traitor, Liam didn't know who he could trust. Once they had Charles locked in a cell below their building, it was infinitely easier to get the information he needed.

But Liam wondered if that was really a good thing. Was dragging an unsuspecting woman through their current situation what was best?

His team had yet to locate Vito, and they still had a traitor amongst them. Even if that said traitor was no longer running free, Emma and Bree still wanted to make sure Charles hadn't recruited anyone else. Their lives were about to get interesting real fast and yet he knew the moment he shared the news with Black, he would insist on seeing her for himself.

And that was where Liam's current problem lay. One look and he knew he wanted Addison as far away from their situation as possible. A protectiveness like he had never felt before consumed him the second he laid eyes on the fiery redhead, a trait that surely came from her mother considering how well he knew her father.

It was that relationship that had him feeling guilty. Addison was easily twenty years younger, and he was old enough to be her father. Yet the constant reminder did nothing to squash the sudden lust that hit him square in the gut. Or the barbaric reaction he had every time he let himself think about her.

He pleaded with himself to forget she existed as he walked into Black's office.

“What brings you here so late?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

There was a strong urge to delay, to come up with some excuse why Black didn't need the information he had.

“Did the lab finally get you the results?”

So much for finding some way around it. He couldn't lie to his friend, to one of the few men he trusted with his life.

“Yes.” He forced the lump in his throat down. He knew what his next words meant. “The information you received was correct. Addison Durham is your daughter.”

DON'T MISS Liam and Addison's story in [Resisting the Spark](#).

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