

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face in the upper right, with her eyes closed and a serene expression. The background is a dark, blue-toned landscape of a forest at dusk or dawn, with a body of water reflecting the sky and trees. The title 'HIDDEN ASCENT' is written in large, bold, purple letters across the center. Below the title, the subtitle 'Hidden Alliance Book 2' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the author's name 'SHAWNA COLEING' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font.

HIDDEN ASCENT

Hidden Alliance Book 2

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HIDDEN ASCENT

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Chapter 1

ISLA WALKED LOW, stepping heel to toe in silence as she inched forward. When the man in front of her stopped, she stopped and straightened.

After adjusting her grip on her weapon, she gave her bulletproof vest one last tug into place. While cumbersome at times, it had saved her life more than once. Today, she wore it because it was part of the required uniform, not because she would need it. Tonight was a simple assignment. They wouldn't get any resistance. But the rush before entering a building was the same.

A hand tapped her shoulder, and she reached forward, tapping the man in front of her. She'd only known Greg for about a month, but she liked him. He was dependable and solid in a crisis. An excellent addition to the team.

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "How about candles? Does she like them?"

He twisted around. "Last week you gave me nothing, and you want to talk about it now?"

She smirked. "I work better under pressure."

The week before, Greg had shared with her that he wanted to propose to his girlfriend, then proceeded to ask for her advice on how he should go about it. But without a romantic bone in her body, Isla had little to offer besides a scene from a romantic comedy a friend had forced her to watch. It had been torture. Greg had agreed.

He turned back around and followed the man in front to the open door of a giant warehouse. She followed behind, along with the rest of the team.

They were a specialized team. Highly skilled. Too skilled for this operation. But Supervising Special Agent Ian Fogarty wouldn't let anyone else in on it, so it was up to them to get in and get out. The intel was theirs and theirs alone. They knew how many people they would find relaxing in the back room, unaware that they were about to be taken into custody for a drug operation they'd been facilitating. Isla's team even knew the competence of their quarry in combat. Those they would capture tonight were the brains of the operation, not the brawn.

It was hard to take a job like this seriously, but it was easy to fall back on training. This was a job they could do in their sleep. And in a few more hours, they'd all get to go home to their loved ones. Those who had any.

The room was dark, but they moved through it quickly and efficiently, spreading out to clear it as they went.

After the main part of the warehouse was clear, the team leader, Hugo, signaled them to head for the back. As soon as the team moved forward, the bang of a gunshot filled the room.

Everyone dove for cover except Hugo, who dropped to the ground where he stood.

Isla, trained too well to stare in horror at her fallen leader, crawled on her belly to conceal herself behind a pillar before checking for any other casualties.

Besides Hugo, she couldn't see that anyone else had fallen. She checked on him again, but he remained still.

Leaning on the pillar with her knees tucked up and ready to push off from her position if needed, she spoke into her radio to call for backup, but the only response she got was static.

It was too dark to make out much in the room, but she could see the outline of two more of her teammates taking cover. She signaled with an exaggerated movement that they were cut off. One of them motioned that he was going to try and make it to the door. She responded that he should hold his position, but he stood anyway as another shot exploded, and he slumped to the ground.

Isla scrambled to the other side of the pillar. She'd seen the muzzle flash, but it was in a different position than the first that had taken down Hugo. Either the sniper could easily move around from above, or they were being stalked by more than one. Either way, they were all exposed.

She stared at the rafters, trying to make out any movement from above, but the ceiling was shrouded in total darkness.

“Where are you?” she whispered as she pressed herself against the concrete at her back.

Something caught in the corner of her eye from above, and she dropped lower as a bullet embedded in the pillar where her head had been. She would have scrambled to find more cover, but an instinct she didn't recognize—the same one that had caused her to move away from the gunshot moments ago—had her droop in position as though the bullet had hit its mark.

She forced herself into stillness even when she heard another of her team shot. Closing her eyes, she controlled her breathing. She was in the middle of a nightmare with no way out.

When the room went still, she focused on her hearing. Their assailants wouldn't stay in the rafters forever. But after counting the number of shots and checking off her teammates, she realized it could be only her and one other that was still alive.

“Don't shoot!”

Isla's eyes opened wide when she heard the shout. She could see a figure moving slowly across the room with his hands up. It was Greg.

“Greg, don’t show yourself,” she muttered. He should know better. Everything about this mission made it clear that this was a setup. None of them was meant to make it out of the building alive. All the secrets they had about this group would die with them. Then she thought of the other two men who had been part of the operation but weren’t here, Ian Fogarty and their Department of Homeland Security contact, Harris Baker. It was impossible to warn them. They could be dead already.

Greg continued slowly to the center of the room.

Get down! Isla yelled to him in her mind.

“I surrender. Just don’t shoot.” It was only another second before the gunshot hit him, and he was dead like the rest.

Panic closed off Isla’s throat as she fought for calm. She didn’t want to die like this. Her job was risky, and death was often a possible outcome, but she’d made a vow to herself a long time ago that, when it came down to it, she wouldn’t die scared.

This is it, God. I didn’t expect it to end like this. It’s not what I wanted. But I trust you. Wherever you are. Whatever you’re doing. I trust you. I just wish I...

She opened her eyes when she heard footsteps.

Two figures had entered the room.

Isla remained motionless as she watched them walk slowly toward Hugo’s prone body. When they reached him, one of the assailants fired a round into her team leader to make sure he had no chance of recovery. They continued moving through the room and doing the same to the rest.

Fury burned deep in her belly as she watched them.

Don’t let them get away with this. She wanted to charge them. If she could only get her hands around their throats before they had the chance to take her out...but she couldn’t be driven by emotion. Emotion got you killed.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a chance. They thought she was dead. If she could make it out of here alive, she would make whoever was behind this pay for annihilating her team.

The rifle she'd been carrying was on the floor behind her position, so it wasn't an option to defend herself. But she had a sidearm in her belt that she might be able to reach.

Slowly, she shifted her arm, keeping the rest of her body still as she monitored the movement of the two men.

She grimaced when they put a bullet into Greg, but her resolve solidified.

With her hand on the holster, she waited to release the gun until one of the men fired his weapon, covering the sound of her movement.

When they headed her way, she let out an extended breath, steadying herself. In the moments that were about to follow, she didn't care if she lived or died.

Pushing the fear away, she focused on her next action. She'd fire her weapon in quick succession. If she missed either man, it would be over for her.

With her hand on her gun, she counted off their steps as they moved closer, then pulled the gun free and whipped her body around, firing twice.

Both men fell, but she couldn't be sure she'd killed them, and now wasn't the time to check. Others could come at any moment.

She ran for the door. Each press of her feet into the floor sent a reverberation up her body as she waited to feel a bullet tearing through her skull.

When the night air hit her face, she dove behind a pile of pallets nearby only long enough to gather herself. The longer she stayed on the premises, the greater the chance she'd get caught.

After confirming she wasn't being followed, she made a break for the support vehicle but found the two men who had been waiting in the van were dead.

It jarred her enough that she staggered backward until she heard shouting from the building. She stumbled toward a break in the fence, then sprinted down the road. When she

reached the first intersection, she turned and continued running, changing direction any chance she could until her mouth was thick from the exertion.

Fogarty and Baker were in danger, and she was the only one who could warn them.

She slowed her speed and replaced her gun into its holster when she entered a busier part of town. It was still early enough that traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, was abundant, and the way she was dressed was drawing too much attention. But her biggest problem was that she had no idea where she was.

She stepped in front of a slow-moving car, holding up her badge, then moved to the driver's side, knocking on the window.

"I'm agent Isla Taylor with the—"

The driver didn't wait to hear more before driving off. It didn't look like the safest part of town, and this guy wasn't waiting around to find out if her badge was real or not.

Several people had stopped and were watching. She scanned the street. She couldn't remain in the open like this. Not when they'd be searching for her. Drawing more attention would only make matters worse.

She noticed a convenience store down the road and hurried inside.

"Can you tell me where I am?" she said to the clerk, who had been flipping through a magazine. She didn't stop to think before it was too late how weird that question sounded.

He looked her up and down. "You don't know?"

"I'm lost."

He turned his attention back to his reading material. "Then telling you what street you're on isn't going to help."

"Do you sell maps in here?"

"You want to buy a map?"

"No. I want to look at it."

“You can’t try before you buy in here. You know how many people I’ve gotta chase out of the magazine section every day?”

She rested her hand on her weapon and stepped up to the counter, grabbing the magazine and tossing it on the floor. “Just tell me where your maps are.”

“Nice try.” He pulled a bat from under the counter. “I’ve had a few would-be robbers come through here this year, but you’re the first who’s dressed up for a costume party. Your gear doesn’t even look real. I’d offer to call the cops, but it takes them too long. It’s easier and quicker for all involved if I simply threaten you myself. Now get lost.”

She pulled out her badge and held it out to him. “Special Agent Taylor with the DEA. It’s urgent.”

“I’ve seen more realistic badges. Where’d you get that, eBay?”

“What is your problem? Just let me see a map, and I’ll go.”

“We don’t sell them. Who uses a paper map anymore? That’s what Google is for.”

“Then I don’t suppose you’d let me borrow your phone’s map?”

“No way.”

“Look—” She noticed a name tag pinned to his shirt. “Dave. I really am a federal agent with the DEA.”

“Oh yeah? Then why don’t you have a phone yourself?”

“I was on an operation. I’m in the middle of a very serious situation. My team was ambushed, and there are two others whose lives are in danger. I need to get to them, but I can’t do that if I don’t know where I am.”

Dave made a face. “An ambush, huh? Sounds to me like you were set up.”

“They’re the same thing. And this gun—” She pulled it out. “Is real. So is this vest.”

“Uh-huh. Well, if I were you, those two you mentioned who weren’t at this ambush, I’d stay well away from them. They’re probably the ones who set you up.”

“You watch too many movies. They weren’t part of the tactical response team. That’s not their job. Now, are you going to stop wasting my time?”

“Sorry, but this is a slow job. I get bored easy, and your story is the best fiction I’ve heard all day. You’re really selling it.” He whacked the counter with his bat. “But I also think you’re psychotic, and if that’s the case, I don’t want to feed your delusion, so please leave the store immediately.”

She didn’t have any more time to convince him of her position, and threatening him wasn’t going to work since she’d never shoot him.

“Fine. But you’re making a big mistake.”

“I can live with that.”

After she left the store, she removed her vest and tactical shirt, tossing them in a nearby dumpster. Anywhere she went would likely elicit the same response. She had to change her tactic if she was going to get anywhere tonight.

Her black T-shirt was plain enough, but the black boots and combat pants she wore weren’t exactly incognito.

Stuffing her hands in her pockets, she tried to walk casually down the street but could feel the stiffness in her body. Nothing about her demeanor was nonchalant. She needed to get help, but she couldn’t fake her way through tonight. She couldn’t pretend she hadn’t just experienced her entire team being murdered. But if she couldn’t get to Fogarty soon...Her hands fisted in her pocket as she pushed away the thought that he was already dead.

A couple blocks farther on, she found a gift store open.

She pushed the beads aside and cringed at the smell of incense as she wound her way through the tight aisles until she saw a forty-something man with thinning hair and wearing a Batman T-shirt putting candles on a shelf.

“Hi,” she said sharply.

He looked at her with a lopsided grin. “Good evening. What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for a map,” she said, lifting her hands to show she was unarmed. “I like Batman.”

“What?”

She was an expert on tactical missions, but she would never make a good undercover operative. She was a terrible liar. “Your T-shirt.”

“What about it?” His voice was slow, like he was getting a high off the smell. It gave Isla a headache.

“Never mind. Do you have any maps in here?”

“You mean like real ones?”

“As opposed to fake ones? Yes.” Her tone was as clipped as his was drawn out.

“No. We only have the touristy ones. If you need to know where you are, they don’t do you much good. You should try the convenience store down the road.”

She pressed her lips together to keep herself composed. Her adrenaline was dropping and sapping her energy with it. Playing the damsel in distress role wouldn’t work for her. She may have a small bone structure, but she knew the hard look she wore on her face. Couple that with what was left of her tactical gear and her poor acting skills, and she’d only make things worse. She’d have to go for a reasonable middle ground that she could sell even to herself.

“I had my backpack stolen with my phone in it,” she said matter-of-factly. “I chased the guy, lost him, then found him again. By that time, he’d ditched my bag.”

Batman’s mouth had dropped open slightly. “What’d you do to him when you found him?” She couldn’t tell if his wide-eyed look was concern or intrigue.

“You don’t want to know. The problem is, I chased him so far, I’m not sure what part of town I’m in.”

“Why don’t you call an Uber?”

“My phone was in my bag, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“My money too.”

“So you couldn’t have bought the map even if we had one?”

“No. But all I need to do is get my bearings.”

“I can show you the map on my phone if that would help.”

“Yes. It would.”

He shrugged. “Sure. Just don’t steal it.”

“Okay.”

He pulled out his phone and brought up the map app for her, then handed it to her.

Once she identified her position, she noted a large office complex she recognized.

“Thanks. You’ve been a big help. I appreciate it.”

“Any time.”

Chapter 2

“JAY, BRING THE KID OVER.” The man who spoke had spiderweb tattoos coving his neck.

Jay put his hand on the boy’s shoulder but pressed down to keep him in the seat instead of doing what he was asked.

Benny couldn’t have been more than eleven, and he was scared.

“Jay, what are you doing? I gave you an order. Drag that piece of garbage over here. I don’t want to get blood on the furniture.”

Jay couldn’t figure out what annoyed him more, that Spider thought he could order him around or that an eleven-year-old kid was about to be tortured for information.

“You gave me an order, did you? Last I checked, I don’t work for you, Spider. Besides, this was never part of the arrangement. I don’t do torture.”

“I never asked you to do it, did I?”

“I think it’s time to let the kid go.”

“Not until he gives us Ezra.”

Ezra was the reason Spider’s uncle had hired Jay. He’d made a mess, and Jay was good at cleaning up messes for whoever wanted to pay him. Often it was other criminals, but he’d been known to do jobs for the feds every now and then too.

“Hurting kids was never part of the plan.”

“Don’t tell me you’re soft.”

“I have standards.”

Spider laughed and looked at the other two guys with him to make sure they joined in. “Standards?” he spat. “You hear that, boys? Jay Parker has standards. Well, Parker, that’s not what I hear.”

“I don’t actually care what you hear.”

Jay knew the talk that went around about him. He was fine with it. It gave him a scary reputation, and most of it was true. Truer than he usually admitted to himself. It was the reason he’d set boundaries for himself. He’d gone down a dark path for a while and had barely come out of it alive. He had to make sure he never went down there again.

“You should,” Spider said. “My uncle hired you to help me. He gave you to me. Now you do as I say, standards or not.”

“Shoemaker hired me to clean up after Ezra, not be your lapdog.” And Jay preferred to walk in neutral territory. He didn’t pick sides. He did what he was paid for and moved on. And he certainly wouldn’t ever agree to work under someone else’s command. “I knew I never should have taken this job.”

“Oh yeah? Then why did you?”

“I wish I knew.”

When Spider’s uncle had offered Jay the job, he’d known in his gut he should turn it down, but he’d ignored it. So here he was being told what to do by a cocky narcissist who didn’t care what damage he did as long as it got him his own way.

Spider was a twenty-two-year-old who’d been given authority way before his time by some idiot who should have known better. And Jay was going to pay for it. The power had gone to his head, and people like that can’t be reasoned with.

Spider pulled his gun and pointed it at Jay. “What’ll it be? You gonna do what I say, or am I gonna have to shoot you dead?”

“You’re going to shoot me now?”

“Why not?”

“Cause it would be a waste of a bullet.”

Spider ran his tongue along his teeth. “Maybe, but it sure would feel good.”

“Fine, shoot me. But I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“We didn’t pay you to think, we paid you to do a job.”

“Thinking is part of my job,” Jay said, then added in a mumble. “Imbecile.”

Spider flinched, then stepped up to him. “What did you say to me?”

It had already been a long day, and seeing the fear in Benny’s eyes made Jay reckless. “Nothing. Sorry. I’m not trying to make things worse. My job here is done. Let me take this kid home, and we can both get out of your hair and let you get on with your work.”

“Your job’s done when I say it is.”

“No. Your uncle hired me to clean up after Ezra. I’ve done that. You got Benny as extra into the deal, but only for what information he could supply. I did your uncle a favor because I know how badly he wants Ezra. But it’s a dead end. You’ll have to find some other way.”

Spider had a twitch in his eye that suggested he’d kill Jay for nothing more than annoyance. Whatever came next, Jay would have to tread carefully.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Spider said.

“I never said you were.”

“I heard you once killed a man with a pencil.”

“I already told you, I don’t care about what you heard.”

Spider stepped closer. “You stabbed him with it twenty-two times and liked it.”

“So?” It had been twenty-four, but the guy had deserved every one of those holes. Jay wasn’t that man anymore.

“Spider, I’m telling you, if you hurt this kid, you’re only going to make things harder for yourself. It’s more to clean up. You really want your uncle to pay for that?”

“My uncle trusts me. He knows I’ll do whatever it takes, unlike you. And when the kid tells us where his dad is, I’m going to make a little mess of my own with his face.” Spider smiled, and the diamond attached to his tooth gave off an obnoxious sparkle. “Then you can come in and clean that up too.”

“I know you’re new to this, so I’m going to give it to you straight. If Benny knew where his dad was hiding, he would have told you already. Ezra is a hardened criminal who’s not going to tell his kid where he’s going.”

“Says you. But I think you’re holding out on us. I think you know what’s inside this kid’s head but you want to get it out yourself. ’Cause you like it. You like watching the fear in their eyes.”

Jay swallowed. He hadn’t thought Spider could get under his skin, but now his skin was crawling. Being reminded of the things he had done set him on edge.

“I know about you, Jay Parker. I know who you really are, and I’ll keep digging until I find the button that pushes you so hard you crack.”

Jay pulled his gun and grabbed the kid by the neck, forcing him backward and the chair up on two legs. He shoved his gun into his mouth. “You gonna tell us where your dad is?”

Benny was crying now and shaking his head as he choked, unable to get a word out.

The last thing Jay wanted was to hurt the kid, but he knew Spider wouldn’t listen to him, and he wouldn’t let up until he was satisfied. And somehow, Jay’s past had snuck up on him, or maybe it was closer to the surface than he realized. He hadn’t been challenged in a long time. Jay’s reputation was taken for granted, but now, Spider was squeezing, so Jay squeezed Benny’s windpipe harder.

He was angry with himself, and he was angry that this kid had put him in this position.

When Benny's eyes rolled into the back of his head, Jay released him and stepped back.

He squeezed his hand into a fist as he watched Benny struggle to get his breath back. He had to get out of here.

"See?" he said. "He knows nothing. I've been in this game a long time, and I know when—" Jay saw the change in Spider's eyes too late.

Spider swung his gun sideways while keeping eye contact with Jay and shot Benny in the chest.

"When you're right, you're right," Spider said with a smile. "The kid's of no use. Now, you going to keep arguing with me? Or are we going to find Ezra?"

Jay focused on Benny, who had fallen backward in the chair with the force of the gunshot and now lay still, staring at the ceiling.

Spider had finished what Jay had been too close to. He turned back to Spider and stared at him. All he saw in the other man's eyes was evil. But he may as well have been looking in the mirror.

"You shouldn't have done that." Jay could barely recognize his own voice.

"Says who? Maybe you should focus on doing your job properly and let me do mine. If you don't want to do it anymore, fine. You've used up your usefulness like this punk kid."

"Maybe you're right." Jay closed the space between them. "I quit," he said quietly. "And you can tell your uncle I won't ever work for him again. Not after what you just did."

Spider growled and lifted his gun to shoot Jay, but Jay had anticipated it. It was why he had moved closer.

Twisting the gun out of Spider's hand, he took it and fired three times, shooting Spider and the other two men with him. Then he walked to a chair where he'd left his coat.

After dropping it over his arm, he returned to Spider and watched as he choked on his own blood.

He felt nothing as he saw the life drain out of Spider, and it scared him. He'd thought he had clawed back some amount of humanity after what he'd done in the past, but even as he wiped his prints off the gun and dropped it on Spider's chest that no longer struggled for breath, he knew he'd been lying to himself the whole time. He'd never changed. No matter what he did to get out of that life, what rules he made for himself to live by, evil was there inside of him.

After he left the building, he trudged down the quiet street, stumbling aimlessly, unaware of where he was going. Memories he'd buried now resurfaced and melted together into a numbness that coated him in a heavy paste.

He couldn't remember the path he'd taken and was surprised when he stepped onto the sandy beach. He stopped and lifted his head to look out at the darkness in the abyss beyond the shore. It called to him.

He'd spent a lot of time in the water growing up. It had been a refuge for him. A place to silence the voices in his head that told him he was nothing.

He was a strong swimmer, but swimming laps wasn't on his mind. The nightmare of emotions that heaved in his chest demanded to be released. Somehow, he had to find a way to pay for his sins.

Kicking off his shoes, he entered the ocean, wading out to his waist as the cold water threatened to steal his breath before he could hold it.

He blinked as a large wave crashed against his chest, splashing salt water on his face.

Somewhere out there was absolution. If he could swim hard enough for long enough, he'd find the release he was so desperate for.

Another big wave hit him, and he stumbled backward several steps. It wasn't death he was after, but a fog had settled over his thoughts, and they swirled in confusion. All he knew

was that he couldn't keep pretending. He needed to do something. Anything.

When the next wave rushed the shore, he dove into it. His arms reached over his head as he sliced through the water.

Kicking as hard as he could, he pushed the pain and anger away with each move. As his energy was consumed, he imagined his past burning away. This would be it. This was how he'd finally escape a history too horrible to face.

Chapter 3

ISLA CUT the engine of the dark blue sedan she'd finally been able to commandeer and watched the house of Ian Fogarty, her supervising agent, from down the block.

The clock on the dash showed it was a quarter past eleven, but Fogarty's house was quiet and dark. He should have been awake awaiting word of the outcome of their operation. Unless they got to him first.

Lord, give me strength, she prayed, more out of ritual than any expectation that God was with her at that moment. She was about to either give Fogarty some very bad news or find a scene to confirm her worst fears. She needed whatever encouragement she could get, even if it was a rote prayer.

Her eyes scanned the street as she pressed the car door closed.

A sound from behind had her pulling her gun and spinning around. Two houses down, a man wearing a bathrobe threw out the trash.

She immediately dropped her gun to her side. It was a nice suburb with lots of leafy trees and manicured lawns. If a neighbor called the police or security, they'd likely respond immediately. But what she needed at the moment was stealth so she could ascertain the seriousness of the situation. Then she'd have the feds all over this.

Raking her fingers through her hair, she pulled it into a ponytail and approached Fogarty's house until she reached a

line of thick bushes that acted as a fence at the edge of his yard.

She hid herself among them and slowly made her way closer to the house until she heard a crash from within and saw a muzzle flash. Secrecy was forgotten as she ran toward the house.

Sliding into a duck under a window with her gun drawn, she tried to peer through, but the curtains were drawn, so she circled the house, checking the windows as she went. At the back door, she found it had been forced open.

Her hand reached to tug on her bulletproof vest but only got a handful of her T-shirt.

“Great,” she whispered before entering the house. “Nothing good is happening tonight.”

After clearing the kitchen, she continued through the house, following procedure as she checked each room she passed until she reached the door of the room where she’d seen the flash. It was slightly ajar.

She positioned herself to the side of the door and pushed it open before retreating.

When no response came from inside, she entered, ready to fire. Fogarty lay bleeding on the floor. No one else was there.

“Ian.” She dropped beside him, pressing her hand on his chest wound but keeping an eye on the door. “I’m so sorry. I got here as fast as I could. I should have been here sooner. I could have stopped it.”

“No,” he gurgled.

“Okay, don’t talk anymore. I’ll get you help.”

He reached for her arm when she rose, but his hand slipped off.

“It will only take a second.” She used the phone on the desk to call for an ambulance before returning to him.

“You’re going to be okay. The ambulance will be here soon. Hang in there.”

“It’s too late.”

“Don’t say that. They’ll get here in time. You’ll be okay.”

“It’s my fault.”

“This? No. This isn’t your fault. We were ambushed on the operation tonight. The whole team. They knew we were coming. Everyone else is dead.”

“Not you.”

“No. I made it out, and I shot the men who did it. And I’m going to make sure everyone involved has to pay. I’m sorry I didn’t get here in time to stop them from shooting you. But you need to live. I need your help. We have to find out who did this.”

He shook his head. “No. Isla. Let it go. Hide.”

“I never knew you were such a scaredy-cat. Ian Fogarty running away from a fight? No way. We won’t let them get away with this. They killed everyone, Ian. They have to pay.”

“You’ll die.” He shook his head again. “You’re already dead.”

Isla pressed harder on the wound. “I made it out alive. But you need to focus on you right now. You can make it through this.”

“You’re not listen—” He tried to raise his voice but ended up coughing up blood. “Let it go,” he rasped once he got his breath back. “You have to hide.”

“I won’t. They don’t scare me.”

“They should. It’s too big for you.”

“That’s why I need you to stay with me. We’ll do this together.”

“No.”

“Yes. You won’t die. I won’t let them kill you too.”

“Isla. Listen to me. Very. Carefully. I did this. I’m part of it.”

“What?”

“I deserve to die. I sent you all. You’re dead because of me. It was me.”

“No. You didn’t know. How could you have known?”

“I did, Isla. I knew. I knew about the setup. I had no choice. You don’t know how high—This goes high.”

“Ian, what are you saying?”

“You’re already dead...” His breath dragged out in a ragged gasp. Then his body sagged.

“Ian. Please.” She shook him. “Wake up. You have to tell me what’s going on. Who can I trust? Ian. Ian!”

She watched his open eyes, willing them to blink back to life, then dropped her head when she knew it was over.

When she heard a noise from behind, she turned in time to see the lamp swinging for her head. She tried to block it, but it was too late.

It was only a few seconds before she blinked her eyes open and felt her fingers being forcibly wrapped around something.

She looked as a masked man lifted her arm, bending it at the elbow so that the gun in her hand was pointed at her head.

“No!” She struggled in her weakened state to free her arm but could only change the angle enough that the shot embedded in the floor beside her head. The second time that night.

He tried again, but she’d gained back more of her strength and was able to buck out from under his weight and rip from his grasp.

He jumped to his feet, and she raised the gun, firing as he dove from the room. She was sure she hit him. But it wasn’t a kill shot.

She pushed up to her feet and lunged for the door, but her head spun, sending her crashing into the wall.

After sliding to the floor, she pushed up on her hands and knees, shaking the fuzziness from her head. Nausea pushed into her throat, and she swallowed it back, taking in deep breaths to recover enough so she could stand.

When she tried again, she was able to remain on her feet, but she had to move slowly. Her head was still in a spin. She used the wall to push her way into the hall, scanning for any sign of where the intruder had gone.

She could find no sign of blood, and when she heard the sirens of the approaching ambulance, she went back to Ian and crouched down beside him, searching his pockets.

“Come on, Ian. Tell me who you were answering to.”

His pockets were empty, so she went to his desk but couldn't find anything useful.

Blood from her head injury dripped onto a piece of paper on the desk. She rubbed at it without thinking, smearing it across the page, then growled as she crumpled it up and hurled it at the garbage bin. It bounced off and landed on the floor.

She stared at it, then pressed her hands into the top of the desk, closing her eyes to steady herself.

When the paramedics knocked on the front door, she tucked her shirt in as she went to answer it.

“He's dead,” she said when she opened the door.

“Are you the one who called it in?” one of them said.

“Yeah. There was an intruder in the house. Ian didn't make it.”

The two paramedics looked at each other. “We weren't told this was a hostile environment. We need to wait for the police.”

“He's gone.”

“You sure?”

“It's safe. But you can wait outside anyway.”

“We'll check on the patient—”

“I told you, he’s dead.” She wouldn’t let them pass.

“But we still need to assess him. And you’ll need to stay and speak with the police when they arrive.”

“I’m an agent with the DEA. I know the drill.”

“Do you have ID?”

She showed them.

“Is this a federal matter?”

“The dead man in there is supervising special agent Ian Fogarty. And I won’t compromise the crime scene by letting you through.”

“With all due respect, agent, we have a job to do.”

“And so do I. When the police arrive, I’ll organize for a team from the feds to come in. We’ll need forensics in there, not paramedics. But if you want to waste your time hanging around, feel free. You can wait outside.”

“Can we at least look at that cut on your head? Did you lose consciousness when it happened?”

“Only for a second. I’m fine.”

When two cruisers pulled up at the curb, the paramedics returned to wait at the ambulance while Isla went to speak to the police.

She held out her badge as she approached until an unmarked car arrived, and a man she recognized got out.

“Baker? You’re okay?” Isla said.

“Should I not be?”

“It’s not safe. What are you doing here?”

“I should ask you the same thing. When I heard Fogarty’s address on that dispatch call, I came straight here. I thought tonight was your operation?”

One of the officers joined them and said, “You guys want to fill us in on what’s going on?”

Baker pulled out his badge. “Harris Baker. Department of Homeland Security.”

“This is a DHS matter?”

“Not quite. But we’re going to call in our friends. It’s one of ours in there.” He looked at Isla. “Is he okay?”

“He’s dead.”

Baker put his hands on his hips and blew out a slow breath. “Do you know who did it?”

“Officer, would you excuse us for a moment? And don’t go in the house. I want forensics in there before anyone else.”

She grabbed Baker’s arm to pull him aside, but he flinched. “Sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No. I pulled a muscle this morning during my workout. It’s fine. So what’s going on?”

“It’s bad.”

“Fogarty’s dead. That is bad. Do you know if it was a hit? Or just a break-in gone wrong?”

“I *was* on that operation tonight. They’re all dead.”

“Who? The Red Wolves? I thought we were taking everyone in for questioning. What happened?”

“Not them. My team. The Red Wolves knew we were coming.”

“Isla, what are you saying?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” She raised her voice. “Everyone is dead except me. I watched my whole team die.”

Baker put a hand on her arm to quiet her. “Okay. I hear you.” He looked across her shoulder at the police. More had turned up. “Keep your voice down.”

“Sorry. I’ve had a rough night.”

“Why come here? Why not go back to headquarters?”

“Because someone told the Red Wolves we were coming, and there was no way to know who. Not then. All I could think

was that they wanted to get rid of all the loose ends. Including you and Fogarty.”

“And I got the short straw? Good thing they didn’t come for me first.”

“I did the best I could.”

“How come you’re not dead? I mean, I’m glad, but how’d you get away?”

“They thought they’d killed me, but they missed.”

“They shot everyone else on your team but missed you? How could that be?”

“That’s the question you’re asking me right now? How’d they miss? I don’t know. All I know is I had the opportunity to kill them, and I did.”

“You were under a lot of stress, so we’ll overlook your mistake, but—”

“My mistake?”

“Yes.”

“I made a mistake making it out of there alive?”

“You are a highly skilled agent. You should have taken them into custody so we could question them. I can understand why you would let your emotions take over when you watched your whole team get killed, but you’ve been trained not to let emotions rule you. If we had them for questioning, we could have found out how they knew you were coming. Now, Ian’s dead, and we have no answers.”

“I had no choice but to kill them or be killed. Those were the only two options available to me. As soon as I escaped, I came here.”

“As soon as you escaped? Your operation took place over an hour ago. How long did it take you to get here, exactly?”

“Are you accusing me of something? Because if you are, you’d be better off to come out and say it. I got here as soon as I could and found my boss had been shot. Not only that, but

Ian said he was a part of it. And now I'm supposed to listen to this garbage?"

"Whoa, hang on. Ian told you he was involved?"

"He said it came to him from above. He said he knew about the ambush, but he had no choice but to set us up."

"How high above?"

"I don't know. He died before I could question him further, okay? Then, whoever it was who killed him tried to kill me and make it look like murder-suicide."

Baker ran his hand through his hair, then opened the passenger door of his car. "Get in. If this is true, we've gotta get you out of here. I know somewhere safe you can stay while I look into this."

"You're the only other person on the team for this operation. Your life could be in danger too."

"They killed Ian because he knew who he was taking orders from. I'm not a part of this."

"But you know about the Red Wolves. I think that was why we were killed."

"I'll be careful. But you need time to recover."

"I should be out there helping you."

"Don't worry. I'll bring you back in once I get an idea of the scope of this thing. Do you want to have that cut on your head looked at while we're here?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Give me a second to call in a team, then we'll go."

Chapter 4

IT TOOK them close to an hour to reach the dirt road where Baker said Homeland had a safehouse.

He stopped the car and reached his left hand across to turn on the dome light. Isla glanced down at his right hand resting in his lap.

“That arm must really be bothering you.”

“Yeah. I’ll take some more muscle relaxers soon.” He opened the glove box in front of her and pulled out a gun. “You need one of these?”

She reached for her holster and found it was empty. “I must have left it at the house.”

“That’s okay. I’ll let the team know. In the meantime, you can have this one.”

He got out of the car without handing it to her, and she noticed the sleeve of his suit jacket was matted against his arm. She couldn’t tell for sure if it was blood, but he’d promised her a gun that he still carried.

“Why did we stop here?” she said when she got out. “I don’t see a house.”

“It’s through those trees there. There’s a path, I promise.”

He opened the trunk and pulled out a flashlight, then walked to the edge of the trees. “There’s plenty of moonlight, but I’ll take this for good measure. You coming?”

“Yeah.” She moved slowly toward him. The side of his jacket was hiked up, caught on the gun he’d taken out of the bag.

“How far is it?” she asked when she reached him.

“Not far. All we have to do is walk straight. Ladies first.”

“How’d you know I was at Ian’s place?”

“I didn’t. I told you, I heard the address.”

“You have nothing better to do with your evening than listen to 911 calls?”

“I find it relaxing. The issues we deal with every day are so much more complex than the day-to-day stuff the police deal with. It grounds me.”

“Where do you live?”

“What? What does that have to do with anything?”

“You got to Ian’s pretty fast. Almost like you were nearby already.”

“What are you saying?” His hand went to the gun.

“Your arm is bleeding. I’m confident I shot the intruder before he got away. Was it you who killed Ian?”

He licked his lips. “Why would I kill Ian?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

He pulled the gun, but Isla already knew the truth and had reacted a breath before he did. She kicked the weapon from his hand, and, when he dove to retrieve it, she jumped on his back, cutting off his airway. He pushed back and slammed her into a tree. Her grip loosened, and he got free, but when she slumped to the side, she found the gun was under her.

Before Baker could pounce, she pulled it on him.

“Don’t shoot.” He held his hands up. “Please. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“I want to know who killed my team.”

“You already know who. The Red Wolves.”

“You know that’s not what I mean. Who ordered the hit?”

“That’s a tricky question. What I can tell you is that I didn’t.”

“But you know who did. And you were the one they sent in to dispose of Ian. Who sent you?”

“It’s complex. I didn’t know what they were planning at the start.”

“Who is ‘they’? Is this a government coverup?”

“Government? You really think government employees could pull off something like this? I mean, sure, there’s a few of us involved. Ian and myself, for example.”

“How high does it go?”

“Ranking’s not really relevant here. Most of those in positions of supposed power within the government structure aren’t good at much besides pushing paper around. I, for one, wouldn’t entrust an operation like this to anyone much higher than Ian’s pay grade.”

“But he told me I didn’t know how high up it went.”

“He didn’t mean within the department. There are powerful people at play here. That’s what he meant. You’re in way over your head right now. You can take your moral high ground, but it won’t save you. If you don’t want to die, then you’d better disappear. Because one way or another, they’ll make sure that no one ever sees you again.”

“We’ll see about that.”

An owl hooted nearby, drawing her attention away. Baker swung a large branch at her, but she dropped back out of the way, stumbling into a tree.

She raised the gun to take aim, but Baker had disappeared into the woods. She could hear the crunch of his steps and fired in that direction, but the pace of his running didn’t change.

She didn’t waste any time getting back to the car. Baker would likely circle back around. His mission hadn’t finished

just because she got his weapon. He'd do whatever it took to take her out. That's what she would do.

As she drove Baker's car back up the road and onto the highway, she filtered through those she could contact about what had happened. But she had no way of telling who else was involved. Baker had said there were others. She had no contacts high enough to ensure she was out of reach of this thing.

She knew of no one she could risk trusting within the federal government. But there was one man she knew she could rely on no matter what. He was the only one she could entrust with her life.

She took the next exit.

Isla pressed the doorbell twice before she banged on the door. She could barely remember driving to the house, and now that she was standing on the porch, her eyes blurred, and her head reeled.

She propped herself on the door, resting her forehead on it while she hit it with the palm of her hand.

"Peter!" she called out. "Peter Black. Open up."

She closed her eyes so she could focus on keeping her feet under her. But when the door opened, and she reached for a handhold, she couldn't find one.

"Hey, whoa," Peter said when he caught her. "Where'd you come from?"

"Peter. I need help."

"Isla?"

"I'm in trouble." The fight inside of her that had helped her hold onto consciousness left her now that she knew she

was safe. The black hole that had been threatening her since the forest swallowed her into oblivion.

When her awareness returned, she kept her eyes closed. She knew something bad had happened, but her mind wasn't cooperating.

Relying on her other senses, she identified a fire by the crackling sound. That theory was confirmed by the light that flickered on the other side of her eyelids.

A light pressure rested against her head. The coolness suggested it was a cold cloth. Then she remembered.

She opened her eyes and saw Peter's concerned scowl focusing on her head. His gaze shifted to her eyes.

"You're back."

She grunted in response.

"I was tempted to take you to the hospital."

"No."

"I figured as much. Besides this lump and cut on your head, I can't find any other damage. Is there anything I should be looking for?"

She lifted her hand to touch her head, but Peter grabbed hold of it and pressed it back down to her chest.

"I've disinfected it and stopped the bleeding. Leave it alone."

"Sorry. Thank you."

"Pleasure. It's good to see you again, by the way. Although the circumstances are concerning."

"I've been through a lot tonight. At least, I think it's still tonight."

She shifted on the couch and pushed herself up a little, looking around the room. "What day is it?"

“Thursday.”

“And the time?”

“Late. Or early. Depends on your point of view. The sunrise is still a few hours off.”

“Jemi’s sleeping?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry to bring you my trouble, but I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You know you’re always welcome here. You want to tell me what happened? Should I be expecting helicopters to surround my house and call for your surrender?”

She closed her eyes at the memory of what happened to her team and her boss.

“Sorry. Bad joke.” Peter stood and got a glass of water off a nearby table. “Drink?”

“No. Thank you. No one knows I’m here.”

“You want me to call anyone?”

“No. I don’t know who I can trust besides you and Jemi.”

“Sounds serious.”

“I was on an operation earlier tonight.” She pressed her fingers over her eyes. “It was supposed to be easy.”

“Not so easy, then?”

“They’re dead. Every one of them was killed.”

Peter rested a hand on her arm. “Your team?”

“I’m the only one who got out. I went to see my supervisor. He’s dead too. But before he died, I found out he was involved. And he told me he’s not the only one.”

“You were set up? Are you sure?”

“We had a contact in DHS working with our team. He just tried to kill me, and I’m certain he’s the one who killed my boss.”

“Where is he now?”

“Don’t know. That’s his car out there.”

“Does he have GPS on it?”

“I disabled it before coming here.”

“Despite the knock on your head, you seem to have all bases covered. And this all happened tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“You did well keeping yourself alive.”

“I don’t know how. I should be dead multiple times over within the last few hours.”

“I guess God’s not done with you yet.”

“I’m sure He’s got better things to do with his time than chase after me.”

“You’d be surprised. I’m just glad you came here. You can rest for as long as you need.”

“I’m not here to rest. I need your help.” She sat up, dropping her feet onto the floor, but the blood drained from her head, and she had to lie back down before she passed out again.

“Like it or not, you need the rest. You can’t do anything in the state you’re in. There’s not much you can do right now besides recover, so you may as well take advantage.”

“I can stop for a few hours, but I need to find out who’s responsible for the murder of my team, and I can’t do that on my own.”

“No. You’re right. But I know someone in the FBI who I think—”

“No. No law enforcement. I told you, I don’t know who I can trust.”

“You can trust this guy. I do. He’s helped me with some stuff before.”

“Maybe you can trust him, but what if he tells someone he shouldn’t? I won’t be responsible for anyone else being killed.

I came here because I need *your* help and no one else's. You've always told me to come to you if I need anything. Here I am."

Peter pressed his lips together and dropped his head. "I'm sorry, Isla. I can't right now. I would if I could. You know that."

"What's stopping you?"

"It's Jemi."

"Since when doesn't Jemi want you helping your friends? I'm surprised she's not down here right now offering to help. Does she even know I'm here?"

"She's sick. Very sick. I won't leave her. I can do some small stuff for you, but I can't leave her long."

"I—I'm so sorry. Of course. You need to be with her. It's okay. I'll find a way. I can do this on my own."

"Hang on. You just said you can't do it alone, and you're right. You need help."

"I don't have any other choice."

"Have you tried praying about it? You still do that, right?"

"Of course I do, but God's got better things to do with his time than find me a partner I can trust."

"So, you really do still hold that line? I would have thought you'd have grown out of that by now."

"Grown out of it? It's called growing up. I'm a speck on this earth. I don't have delusions of grandeur that God's focused on me all the time."

"And you don't think He wants this thing to be resolved? You don't think he wants justice for your team?"

"Sure, but it's my team. It's my responsibility. God gave me a brain. Now, I have to use it."

"Yes, you do, but that doesn't mean God isn't very much interested in being involved in this and your safety. After all, He got you out of that ambush alive, right?"

“Yeah, one person. I’m the only one left. And the only reason I’m still here is because the men who were firing on us thought they’d shot me too. That’s why I got out.”

“If you don’t want to pray, that’s fine. But I’m going to. You need to rest anyway.”

Isla settled onto the couch after Peter left the room.

God, if you had anything to do with saving my life, then I’m grateful, and I guess it goes to show that my work here isn’t finished. But don’t worry about Peter and his prayers. I’ll figure this out.

But if you could look after Jemi. She’s a very good woman, and she’s helped a lot of people. If you can...I don’t know...I never know what to ask. Just help her get better.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but her mind wouldn’t yield. Maybe she could find an herbal tea to quiet the ramblings in her head.

Moving slowly, she took several minutes to rise off the couch and then shuffle into the kitchen, where she found Peter putting on his jacket.

“You going somewhere?”

“Out. Why are you up?”

“I need a cup of tea.”

“Go back and lie down. I’ll make you one before I go.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve been praying. I think I have my answer.”

“It’s been, like, ten minutes. What answer can you get in ten minutes?”

“It’s been closer to fifteen. But that’s beside the point. It takes as long as it takes. But I think I know someone who can help.”

“In the middle of the night? Who?”

“I’ll tell you when I get back.”

“Why can’t you tell me now?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Tell me, or I won’t be here when you get back.”

Peter sighed. “I can’t tell you because I don’t know. Not yet. I prayed about it and felt that I should go visit the shore.”

“Am I hearing you right? Or is this a hallucination brought on by my concussion?”

“You’re not hallucinating.”

“Okay, then perhaps *you* are. You haven’t hit your head recently? Or maybe it’s the stress from Jemi’s sickness?”

“My mind is perfectly sound.”

“But you sound crazy.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Let me get this straight. You asked God for help, and he told you to go to the ocean?”

“That’s about it.”

“What about staying with Jemi?”

“I won’t be long.”

“The ocean is a couple hours’ drive.”

“But you’re here.”

“And you expect someone will magically be there when you arrive?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that I need to go.”

“This is crazy.”

“You said.”

“Well, when you meet the little old lady walking her dog and tell her that God told you she’s been ordained to help me stop a conspiracy, can you let her know I said ‘hi’? Then tell her she should run away from you as fast as she can.”

“Funny. But I don’t know what you’re so worried about. If this is all some crazy idea like you think it is, then what can it

hurt? If nothing happens and no one's there, I'll be back in a few hours."

"I guess I'll see you in a few hours then. On your own."

"You promise you'll still be here?"

"Sure. You've piqued my interest. I can't wait to say 'I told you so' when you turn up empty-handed."

"I can live with that. See you soon."

Isla sat at the counter while she waited for the water to boil. The reason she'd come here was because she knew she could trust Peter. He had a way about him that she didn't see in many people. Both he and Jemi trusted God in a way that was completely foreign to her. They had a relationship with Him that wasn't available to her.

So, even though her mind knew without any doubt that Peter wouldn't find anyone at the shore, a place in her heart still wondered if God really would bring her help in the form of a stranger. He might do it for Peter, but would he do it for her?

Chapter 5

JAY'S MUSCLES WERE FATIGUING, but the weight of everything that had happened that night dissipated. He let all of his emotions go as he pushed his body to its limits.

He was near exhaustion when he started treading water to catch his breath.

The water was cold, and his lungs were tight. He turned and counted the lights that dotted the shore. It was an impossible distance away.

When he'd set out, his thoughts had only been on release. Any concern about making it back to land when he was finished had remained buried in the fog of his hurt. But now, he was a long way out, struggling to keep his arms and legs in motion. He'd drained himself, but now that he'd settled, he was ready to head back to shore. An impossibility.

His head dipped under the water, and he kicked to push himself to the surface to take another breath before going under again.

He hadn't come out here to die, but that's what would happen.

Fear of death sent a shock of adrenaline through his body, and he broke the surface again.

"I don't want to die," he said, teeth clenched in cold. But even shivering was hard in his exhaustion.

He laid on his back to attempt a back stroke, but it was too late. Even if he could get his cramping muscles to cooperate, he'd end up dying of hypothermia before reaching the beach.

His head dipped below the water again, and he thrashed to get back to the surface. Panic stole what was left of his strength, and he sank into the dark depths.

A voice in his mind told him to give in to his fate. He wasn't leaving anything or anyone behind, and nothing about his life was worth remembering. Him remaining on the earth was wasted space. He didn't deserve to live.

But as he gave in, his thoughts filtered back to when he was a boy roaming the city. He was like Benny, a punk kid who lived on the streets. Jay had joined up with a gang to feel strong and find a sense of identity, but all it had done was pull him into a life he regretted.

A vision filled his mind of a time when the gang had set upon a local street preacher who'd turned up on the corner once a month spouting warnings of the end times. He would beg each person who passed by to turn to Jesus.

One day, he and the other boys had decided to teach the preacher a lesson. They pushed him off his stool, kicked him while he was down and then had stolen his wallet.

Jay hadn't wanted to do it, but his dirty sneaker had connected with the man's leg like the rest of them.

Later that afternoon, the remorse had him chained up. He couldn't think about anything else for the rest of the day. Eventually, it had become unbearable, and he'd known he needed to do something or he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

He'd taken a couple of crumpled dollars—it was all he had—and found the street preacher sitting on his stool against the wall. He'd been reading an old worn Bible.

Jay had shoved the bills under the man's nose. The preacher looked at the money, then at Jay.

At first, he'd thought the preacher didn't remember that Jay was one of the kids that had given him trouble. But then,

he'd seen something in the man's eyes.

When the preacher had reached toward him, he flinched but stayed where he was. If the man cuffed him across the head, he deserved it. He'd take his beating, then drop the money in the guy's lap and take off.

But the preacher had taken hold of Jay's hand, closing his small fingers around his money.

"I don't need this," the preacher had said. "I have all I need from my Heavenly Father who gave up everything for me."

"I don't want anything to do with that," Jay had replied with a sneer. "I'm just here 'cause I'm sorry for hurting you and stealing your wallet."

The man had nodded and frowned. "One day, when everything is lost, and there's no more room for hope, remember that all you need to do is call out to Jesus, and He will rescue you."

Jay returned to the present. His lungs were burning for oxygen, but his body refused to return to the surface.

Jesus, I have nothing. I have nothing of any value to give you, but please help me. I don't deserve your help, but if what that man said was true, I'm calling out to you to rescue me. Please. Whatever little I have left is yours.

Heat radiated through his body, and his legs twitched. He kicked, and his strength returned, so he kicked again until his head rose above the water and he took a deep breath, choking on the water that he sucked into his lungs.

As he coughed, his body warmed further, and he kept his head above the water.

He looked again at the lights on the shore. But it was still so far away.

The warmth that radiated from his core must have been because his body was succumbing to the cold, but then why could he move his arms and legs?

If his life was over, then it wouldn't matter if he trusted that God had responded to his cry for help. So he started

swimming back to land, unsure if his arms and legs were moving in a way that would propel him to safety. But he kept moving. Kept kicking. His arms plunged into the water, drawing back and repeating. He focused on the strokes, afraid to stop and look. Afraid to break the thin thread of hope that made his muscles work, to discover that each stroke was only taking him farther out to sea.

He didn't push himself like he had when he'd first entered the water. His focus wasn't on release now. It was on ignoring the screams his body made to give up.

But he refused to give up. He wouldn't give in to his fate. He couldn't. His life was no longer his own. It belonged to Jesus, and if Jesus wanted him to make it out of the water alive, then he'd do everything he could to make that happen, even down to his last breath.

And then what? The question buzzed in his mind, taunting him.

All that's left for you is to become a crazy street preacher standing on a stool and pleading with the world to turn their lives to Jesus. Is that what you want?

But Jay didn't care. If he survived the night, he'd do whatever was required of him. He'd surrendered to a God he sure hoped was real.

It wasn't until the waves pounded his face into the sand that Jay realized he'd made it back to shore. His mind and body tingled with numbness, and his head pounded with a raging headache. He was only able to drag himself half out of the water before he collapsed.

The waves crashed over him, lifting his body a little so it felt as though someone was shoving him out of the water.

"I can't. I can't move." But he knew that, if he didn't get warm, he would still die.

You would give up so easily?

The voice that spoke inside of him sounded like a challenge. He was never one to give in to anything easily.

He dragged his arms through the sand, positioning his hands beside him. In his mind, he was pushing himself up, but then another wave hit him, and he realized his chest was still on the ground.

“I can do this.”

Can you? Do you want help?

“Can I ask for more help after you saved me from drowning?”

I will never leave you or forsake you. Get up.

Jay tried again, and this time, his muscles responded. He took a moment to rest on his elbows before pulling his knees underneath him.

Then, he crawled up the beach. Each movement was a struggle, but it brought more warmth into his muscles and he was no longer in the surf.

When he reached the dry sand, he pushed back onto his haunches and rubbed his hands up and down his thighs to create more heat. Then, he rubbed his arms one at a time. But he was still so cold.

His mind was still numb with cold and pain, and he had no plan. He couldn't even remember where he'd left his car.

He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't cooperate, and he fell to the side. If he had to crawl to safety, then that's what he'd do.

Looking up to the road, he noticed a car in the nearby parking lot that had been empty when he'd arrived.

A man now stood in a pool of light with his arms crossed, watching.

Jay could think of only one reason a grown man would watch him like that. He'd been sent to make sure Jay was taken care of. Word moved fast on the street. Somehow, he'd

been followed. But why would the man wait so long to see if Jay returned? And why was he standing there now?

Jay cleared his throat, hoarse from swallowing sea water. “What are you waiting for? I can’t do anything to stop you. You may as well do what you came here to do.”

The man took a couple of steps closer. “If I came here to kill you, all I’d have to do is stand here and watch. You’re doing a marvelous job of it with no interference from me.”

“But that’s all you’re doing, standing there and watching. You’ve got nothing better to do with your evening than watch me die of hypothermia?”

“I won’t let you die, but I’m trying to make a decision. Although I’m curious to know why you think someone wants to kill you?”

“That’s not why you’re here?”

“No.”

“You make a habit of watching grown men struggle to pull themselves from the ocean?”

“No, this is a first. And also not one of the scenarios I envisioned when coming here.”

“What *did* you expect to find?”

He smirked. “An old lady walking her dog, maybe? Anything but this. God sure has a strange way of doing things.”

“God?” Jay’s shivering turned into a spasm. He wrapped his arms around his body before it settled.

“Yeah. I’m here because of Him. That might sound odd, but we can worry about that later. I think it’s about time we get you warm. I don’t want to push you, but you are running out of time.”

“I’m fine. You’re here because of God?”

“You’re not fine, and yeah. So are you.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because you’re the only other person on the beach. I thought at first that I misunderstood and wouldn’t hear the end of it from Isla, but I don’t think so. In fact, for each moment that passes, I’m more and more confident.”

“Isla?”

“I’ll get to her later. It’s a bit of a long story.”

Jay looked around. The horizon was beginning to lighten from the rising sun.

It made no sense, and yet, how could he deny it? “So, you’re saying God sent you here to find me?”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s got a job for you to do.”

Chapter 6

PETER WALKED down the beach to rescue the man who had washed up on the shore. It was not what he'd expected to happen. On the drive there, he had come up with several scenarios about what he might find, none of which came close to this. Although he shouldn't be surprised that God would do things contrary to what he expected. It wouldn't be the first time.

"You have no reason to trust me," Peter said. "But I also have no reason to trust you."

It may have been clear from the clothes clinging to this man's body that he was a physically capable man, which was one requirement Peter was looking for. But as for why he was in the water, and why he thought someone was out to kill him, those were serious question marks he was nearly unwilling to risk.

But God was strengthening his resolve. And when he reached a hand down to help the man up, he knew for sure. God made it clear that he wasn't to judge based on appearances.

"My name's Peter. If you're willing to come with me, I can at least make sure you don't die. After that, it's up to you."

"I'm Jay."

"As in the letter?"

"Close enough."

Together, they plowed slowly through the sand. Peter tried to help Jay, but he wouldn't let him. Instead, he fought for each step.

"That's my car over there," Peter said once they left the sand. "You want me to bring it closer? Or do you think you can walk that far?"

Jay looked up at the sky as though searching for a sign from God that he wasn't making a mistake.

"Or I could leave you alone, if you'd prefer. I can call an ambulance, and you can go with them instead."

"No. I can walk."

Once Peter got the hot air blasting in his car, he waited outside and spent the next half hour praying as Jay leaned into the heat pouring from the fans and gathered his strength.

I get that this is the guy, but I'm not sure how Isla is going to take this. I'm pretty sure she expects me to return empty-handed.

He ducked down and looked through the window at Jay. His hair was spiked and wild with the salt water. And bowed over like he was, he looked like he belonged in a mental institution.

I know, I know. You said not to judge him, but do you really think Isla will be okay with a guy like this? At least he's clearly not connected to the government, but he swam in from somewhere and used up every ounce of his strength to do it.

But who dropped him in the ocean in the first place, and why? What did he do?

"You said God had a job for me?"

Peter spun around to see Jay on the other side of the car, resting his forearms on the roof.

"I did. You're looking better." He smiled. The fight to survive that had hardened Jay's features had adjusted now that he was warm. This was a man confident in himself. It was time to find out if he'd be willing to be confident in God.

“You haven’t asked me what I was doing in the water.”

“That’s not because I don’t want to know. But I thought it best to make sure you didn’t die first. However, I am a good listener if you need to talk about it.”

“What if I say no?”

“Would you be willing to tell me if you deserved to be thrown in the ocean to drown in the first place?”

“You think someone wanted me dead?”

“You thought I was here to finish the job, so I thought maybe someone tossed you in the water, hoping that would do it. You obviously have more grit than they gave you credit for. A man like you they would have taken out wide. You must have swum a long way.”

Jay didn’t respond right away but finally said, “I’m not a good man, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Peter shrugged. “Maybe.”

“No one left me in the middle of the ocean. I swam out there because I was trying to escape who I’d become.”

“You wanted to end it all?”

“Not exactly. My intention in going out there wasn’t to kill myself.”

“Then why did you think I was here to kill you?”

“Because of what I did before my swim.”

“So you were running away?”

“Not from that. I was running away from myself. But then, when I got out there, I realized I couldn’t make it back. I actually thought you already knew that.”

“Why?”

“Because you said God sent you.”

“He did. But He hasn’t told me anything about you. For example, you say you’re a bad man, but you believe in God.”

“Bad men don’t believe in God?”

“Perhaps ‘believe’ wasn’t the right word. I should have said trust. But then, there are none who are righteous. We all start out bad. It’s only Jesus who changes that.”

“We don’t start out the same kind of bad. If you knew the things I’d done, you’d understand.”

“But you trust in God?”

“I do now.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“There’s not much to tell. I should be dead. I was drowning after swimming out into the ocean, and I asked Jesus for help. I don’t even know what that means, and I can’t explain how I made it back to shore alive, but here I am. And here you are.”

“That explains a few things.”

“I’m glad one of us knows what’s going on. I don’t even know why I’m telling you any of this. I can hear myself talking. I know how crazy I sound.”

“Except that you’re talking to the right guy. You don’t sound crazy at all. It sounds to me like you’re finally paying attention. God has always had a plan and a purpose for your life. It’s just taken you a while to get on board with his plan.”

“Which brings me back to our original problem.”

“And that is?”

“That I’m not a good man. If God wants to use me, that’s up to Him. I meant what I said out there. My life belongs to Jesus now. But if I told you what I’ve done, you would wish you never helped me.”

“Why? Did you kill someone?”

“More than one.”

“Is that it?”

“I think you’re missing the point.”

“No, I think I understand perfectly. You’ve screwed up. A lot. You’ve done terrible things and finally reached a point

where you recognized the mistakes you made. Then, you cried out to God, admitting that you're a sinner, and you asked him to save you."

"How'd you know all that?"

"You're not the first. It's called salvation."

"That's not what happened out there."

"Yes, it is."

"I've never been to church, and I'm pretty sure I haven't touched a Bible in my life."

"There's nothing you can do to earn salvation."

"Then how do you get it?"

"You ask. Like you did. Now you've got it. Your name is in the book of life. Welcome to the family."

"It can't be that easy."

Peter laughed. "You call what you just did easy? If that were true, you would have done it a long time ago. It's simple, but not always easy."

"I only did it when I realized I couldn't live without it."

"No one can."

"I'm still not convinced I'm the right man for the job."

"Why not?"

"I've helped bad men get away with their crimes."

"Okay."

"You still think God wants my help?"

"I might not know your past, but God knows everything you've ever done, and He still saved you tonight. He still wants to use you. From my experience, God doesn't look for someone who's 'good'. He looks for someone who's willing. None of us is really good, anyway. Not without Him."

"Okay, for argument's sake, let's say I'm in. What now?"

“I’ll need to bring you home with me. I realize that’s a big ask. You’re going to have to trust me, but I will never force you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Peter had known a lot of guys like Jay. He knew he was brave enough to go through with it, but he might need a little more coaxing to get him curious enough to bother taking the risk.

“There is a chance this may not work out in the end anyway,” Peter said. “It’s important you know that up front.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know your qualifications. What if you don’t have the skills to do the job? At this point, I believe you’re the man God sent, but I won’t know for sure until I know what you can do.”

“As long as it’s not sitting at a computer for hours on end, I’d say I’m qualified.”

“We’ll see.”

“But you’ll have to tell me what it is you need from me. You haven’t even told me what the job is yet. Is it a secret?”

“No. Not at all. I just wanted to make sure we were both on the same page first.”

“I think we are so far.”

“A friend of mine has gotten into some trouble. I would help, but my circumstances prevent that. And the situation involves intricacies that limit who we can trust.”

“And yet you think you can trust me?”

“You crawled up out of the ocean. I’m pretty sure you’re not part of the trouble we’re facing.”

“And what exactly is the trouble?”

This was probably the most precarious part of the entire conversation. Different people reacted differently when you brought government organizations or law enforcement into a conversation. Especially if you’ve spent a good part of your life avoiding them.

“She was on assignment with the DEA.”

“She?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. I’m just trying to get a clear picture. She’s a DEA agent?”

“She is.”

“Okay.”

Jay hadn’t flinched and now looked interested. It was a good start.

“They were ambushed, and her team was killed. Everyone except her. Her boss was also murdered shortly after. When she arrived at his house to check on him, she found he’d been shot.”

“Why would someone kill the whole team, including going to the house of an agent? It’s one thing to attack a group that’s attacking you. That was a risky move.”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like it was well planned.”

“Yeah.”

“And this woman who survived, you don’t believe she was in on it?”

“No.”

“You’re certain?”

“If you’re going to trust me, you’ll have to trust her. I’m certain that what she said was true.”

“Are there any other players I need to know about?”

“The man who killed her boss is with DHS. He was part of the team. He tried to kill Isla, too, but she managed to escape.”

“Again. Lucky girl.”

“I hear your sarcasm.”

“I wasn’t trying to hide it.”

“I believe God saved her. Like he saved you.”

“Are there any other federal agents involved?”

“We don’t know. That’s why I’m here. But you’re obviously skeptical, so if you want out, say so. I won’t put Isla’s life at risk.”

Jay walked to the front of the car and leaned on the hood, staring out at the ocean for several minutes. Peter hoped he was praying.

“All right.” Jay pushed up off the car and walked over to him. “Here’s the deal. The only reason I’m even considering this is because this night is about as strange as it gets, and I’m not ready to discount anyone or anything. I am someone who can handle a job like this, so I’m willing to move forward and see how things progress. But I want you to guarantee that I can get out at any time if I’m uncomfortable with what’s going down. I’ve made enough mistakes in my life. I don’t need to add to the pile. You might trust Isla, but I have no reason to. If I suspect she’s on the wrong side of this, I’m done.”

“You come home with me, and I’ll give you twenty-four hours to decide.”

“No time limit. I want this open-ended.”

“That’s out of the question. If I could help Isla myself, I would. But there is no way I’ll put her in a situation where you might bail on her at any moment. If you’re going to do this, then I need to know you’ll see it through to the end. You come with me, and you have twenty-four hours to change your mind. Then, you decide if you’re in or out. Or walk away now.”

“There’s no point arguing with you, is there?”

“Nope. Take it or leave it.”

“Okay. Twenty-four hours.” Jay held out his hand. “Deal.”

Chapter 7

THE CANOPY of tree branches that arched over the long, rutted driveway gave Jay the impression that they were entering another dimension.

It should have made him nervous, going into such a secluded property with a man he'd just met, but the anxiety wasn't there. Maybe it was the words he'd spoken to God back at the beach before he'd agreed to come with Peter. He didn't know if he was doing it right. Praying was never something he'd attempted until today, but his fumbling words must have been heard because he'd received such a strong sense of peace about coming here that he'd had little choice in the end.

After Peter parked the car at the side of the house, Jay got out, brushing his seat off.

"I think I may have ruined the upholstery."

"Don't worry about it. We're close to the same size. You can have a shower, and I'll find clothes you can change into."

"This is a nice place you've got here."

"Thanks. This has been our home for a lot of years."

"Our?"

"My wife and I."

"Kids?"

"We would have liked to, but it didn't work for us. That's not to say there aren't a lot of people out in the world who we

love like they're our kids. God's given us those He entrusted us to look after. Isla's one of them."

"No wonder you're so protective of her."

Jay followed Peter up to the porch and looked out across the property.

"Who's that? Is that Isla?" he said when he spotted a figure sitting on a blanket at the edge of the far side of the lawn.

Peter looked. "No, that's Jemi. My wife. She shouldn't be out there." He unlocked the door, then jumped off the porch. "Go ahead and make yourself at home. I'll be back in a minute."

Jay watched as he jogged across the lawn. The woman turned and waved.

If God was behind this whole thing, He'd dropped Jay into a very odd situation. This cozy house in the woods with a DEA operative on one side and a frail-looking woman lounging on the lawn on the other. Maybe he was still on the beach, unconscious, and stuck in a dream he couldn't get out of.

He scratched at his torso, itchy with salt water and sand. That certainly felt real. So did the headache. Dream or not, he was ready for a hot shower.

After brushing off as much sand as he could, he entered the house, and his eyes slid closed as the warmth hit him. The house smelled like pine and cinnamon. If cozy were a place, this would be it. He'd experienced nothing like this in his entire life.

But standing in the entryway wouldn't get him clean. He closed the door and wiped his bare feet on a rug.

"If I were a shower, where would I be?" he mumbled as he crept down the hall, taking in his surroundings.

The sound of crackling drew him to a door on the left where he found a living room lit by a fire in the hearth. A woman was standing in front of it, facing away from him. Isla.

“Jemi, what are you doing out here?” Peter refused to sit next to his wife when she patted the blanket.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Like what? Protective of the woman I love?”

“I needed the fresh air.”

“Then open a window.”

“You know what I mean. I wanted to see the trees up close.”

“Why?”

“Because, Peter, I need to. Do you know how suffocating it is to be stuck in that bed all the time? I’d rather be dead.”

“I can’t believe you said that.”

Her voice softened. “Sorry. But a few minutes outside won’t kill me.”

“You’ve had a few minutes. I’ll take you back inside.”

“Just a few more. Please. Sit next to me.”

Peter looked at his watch. “I’ll give you two minutes.”

“How many years have we been together? You haven’t changed at all.”

“Neither have you. You’re as stubborn as the day I met you.”

“The best day of my life.”

“That’s not what you said at the time.”

“That’s because I didn’t know you.”

“I think you could read me like a book. I was arrogant and full of my own self-importance. You saw right through me.”

She cradled his face with her palm. “We all have our weaknesses.”

He didn't bite when she gave him a cheeky grin. "I am who I am today because of you," he said, keeping the mood serious.

"That's sweet of you to say. But it's also dull. I wish you'd stop treating me like I'll break at any moment."

"That's not what I'm doing. I want you to know how much you mean to me."

"And I do. I don't need you to make grand romantic statements completely out of character to prove that." She frowned and looked back out at the forest. "But I do want you to promise me something."

"Anything."

"If the Lord calls me home, I don't want you to stop living."

"Jemi—"

"I'm serious."

"I know you are, but I don't want to talk about that possibility. We're walking in faith, remember?"

"I never forget, and I fully believe that God can heal me. But if it's my time, it's my time."

"No."

"Peter."

"No. It's not your time. I can't—I don't know what I'd do without you." He took her hand and squeezed. "Please come inside."

"You're afraid."

"I try not to be. You don't make it easy, coming out here on your own."

"Isla helped me."

"I know. I figured."

"She didn't want to. I guilted her into it. I want you to know that so you don't give her a hard time about it."

“She’s got enough on her plate.”

“She told me you refused to help her.”

“I need to be here with you.”

“I have friends who can stay with me if you need to go.”

“I don’t. I believe God has provided someone to help her.”

“The man I saw you arrive with?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“No idea. Only God knows.”

Jemi laughed weakly. “It doesn’t matter how long we’ve walked with Him, He continues to surprise us.”

“Yes, He does.”

“Then you better bring me inside so I can meet this new friend of ours. Was he part of special forces like you?”

“No. I’m pretty sure he’s been working on the other side of the law for a while.”

“Interesting.”

“Always.”

Isla forced the images of the friends she’d lost out of her mind as she stood watching the flames consume the wood in the fireplace. If she was going to get to the bottom of this, she’d have to remain clinical about the situation.

She’d always been good at keeping her emotions in check. Seeing the world in black and white gave her the strength to get through the hardest times. Knowing there was a right and a wrong made the world make sense. She’d become very good at coloring within the lines, but someone had scribbled all over her life, and she needed to set it right.

Her unfocused gaze lifted to the framed pictures on the mantle. They were full of people she'd never met.

One had a picture of a couple at their wedding. It looked like it was inside Peter's barn, but she couldn't tell from where she was.

On closer inspection, she saw the barn had been decorated for the occasion. It was a beautiful candid photo of the couple laughing hysterically about something. It must have been a time of great joy. Isla couldn't ever remember laughing like that. She lifted the picture, studying it and wondering what had been so funny.

She breathed in, intending to let out a long sigh, but held her breath when she heard a noise from behind. Moments before, the front door had opened and closed. She'd assumed it was Peter returning empty-handed, but he would have announced himself by now.

Her muscles tightened as she quickly turned and, in a moment, assessed the situation. The man she saw standing in the doorway was a mess of matted hair and clothes. A madman who had been hired to find and kill her. How did they know where she was? She thought of Jemi outside, and, unwittingly, an image of her lying dead on the blanket with a bullet in her head appeared in her mind.

Anger surged through her, and when the man reached a hand out toward her, she hurled the picture frame at him, but he caught it one-handed almost as a casual gesture.

"How?" She shook away her confusion and grabbed the fire poker beside her, swinging at him.

"Hey, whoa—" He caught the poker before it cracked him in the head.

She yanked back, but he held onto it, using her grip on the weapon to spin her around. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, holding her tight, but she bucked, and his hold loosened enough that she got free, elbowing him in the stomach from behind as she moved toward the fire, still with the poker in her hand.

They faced off, and she lunged at him again, this time trying to land a hit on his leg to immobilize him, but he anticipated it and dodged. They faced each other again.

“You’ve got the wrong idea here,” the man said.

“Oh yeah? You a friend of Baker’s?” she said, breathing hard from the encounter. “He tried and failed, so now they’ve sent you? Did you hurt Jemi too? Because if you did, I’m going to tear you apart piece by piece.”

“No, I don’t—”

“Hey,” Peter said from the door.

The intruder turned at his greeting, and Isla took the opportunity, swinging for his head. The man saw it at the last second and tried to dodge, but she still hit him, and he dropped to the ground.

“Isla, no!” Peter rushed to the fallen man. “What are you doing?”

The man grunted and lifted his hand to his injured head.

“Thank goodness he’s still alive,” Peter said. “You’re lucky you didn’t kill him. What were you thinking, attacking him like that?”

“He came here to kill me.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Isla looked up to see Jemi at the door, leaning on the frame for support. She looked concerned, but a hint of amusement danced in her eyes.

“You’re okay?” Isla said.

“Of course,” Jemi said. “I’m sorry to say, Isla, this man was invited here by my husband. But Peter forgot to do the introductions.”

“He’s with you?” Isla said to Peter.

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s the man who’s going to help you. At least he was. He was undecided when we arrived. We’ll see what he has to say once he’s back on his feet. But Jemi’s right. I shouldn’t have let him come into the house without alerting you. I got distracted by my concern for my wife.”

“There’s no point in shifting blame,” Jemi teased. “What’s done is done.”

“I think you’re enjoying this a bit too much.”

“Hey guys,” Isla said. “Can we stick to the issue at hand? Who is this guy, and where is he from?”

“No idea,” Peter said flatly. “I found him at the beach, like I said I would.”

“From the looks of him, you dug him out of the sand.”

“I kind of did. He hasn’t had a chance to get changed yet.”

“Wait, you’re serious? Is he a homeless person? Why would he be in the sand? And how do you know he hasn’t set all this up to get to me?”

“That’s the whole reason I did what I did. *I* didn’t even know where I was going until I got there, so how could he have known? And why would he come dumped on the beach by the waves?”

Isla took a step back. “Wait a minute. You’re saying he came out of the ocean?”

“Yeah. Why do you think he looks like this?”

“So he’s insane. You’ve brought an insane person to help me get justice for my team?”

“He’s not insane.”

“You don’t know him.”

“I know enough. We talked a bit at the beach and then on the drive back.”

“I can’t believe this,” she mumbled.

“I told you what I was doing. You’re just mad because he’s not an old lady with a dog.”

“No, I’m mad because you think this guy can actually help me.”

“He can.”

“Random crusty guy from the beach can help me solve a conspiracy?”

“Isla, even you can tell by looking at him that he knows how to handle himself.”

“I think she figured that out from their encounter,” Jemi said.

“I don’t need a bodyguard. I need someone who has some intelligence to offer.”

“He does,” Peter said.

“What’s his experience?”

“No idea.”

“Peter, I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.”

“You need to trust me.”

“You said you prayed, and God told you to visit the ocean.”

“Yeah, and I met Jay.”

“How can you be sure God sent him?”

Jay moaned. “Don’t I have a say in this?”

Peter helped sit him up. “I should get you something for that cut.” He stood up and put his hands on his hips and gave Isla a chastising look. “Now you have matching injuries.”

Jay pulled his hand from his head and looked at the blood that was there, then looked at Isla. “Is yours from the DHS guy?”

“You know about that?”

“Peter told me. My name’s Jay, by the way.”

“Uh-huh.” She looked at Peter and huffed before marching for the door. “I’ll get you something for your head. Peter, where’s your first-aid kit?”

“I’ll show you,” Jemi said. “Then you can help me get back upstairs.”

Chapter 8

JEMI SAT on a stool in the kitchen while Isla pulled a bandage and some ointment from the kit.

“Do you have any thoughts about this?” Isla said.

“I always have thoughts. The trick is to know when to keep them to yourself.”

“Is this one of those times?”

“I trust my husband, but sometimes his emotions can steer him a little off track.”

“Like now?”

“No. I don’t think now is one of those times. Not with Jay, anyway.”

Isla frowned. “He’s mad at me for bringing you outside, isn’t he?”

“No. He’s mad at me. He’ll get over it.”

“You really think this guy Jay is trustworthy?”

“I have no idea.”

“But you just said—”

“I believe Peter is trustworthy. He has always been very attuned to the voice of God when it comes to things of this nature. And I do believe he heard clearly. I also know he’d never put you in harm’s way. I think it’s safe enough to at least hear them out.”

“Maybe I won’t need to. After cracking Jay over the head, he’ll probably be out that door as soon as he can stand.”

“Maybe.”

Peter knocked on the cupboard by the door. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’ll get Jemi settled upstairs if you think you can have a look at the wound once he’s out of the shower? And try not to pick another fight. I think it would be better if you two had a chat about your situation.”

“I’d rather not,” Isla said, closing the kit and walking up to Peter. “But I have the feeling you won’t give me any other choice.” She patted his arm as she walked past.

Jay stopped at the threshold to the living room when he found Isla watching the door intently.

“Permission to enter?” he said.

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“I’m trying to lighten the mood, yeah.”

She hadn’t been what he’d expected. The look she gave him was one of curiosity, but it wasn’t devoid of coldness. She didn’t trust him.

“I’m surprised you’re even still here,” she said.

“Do you wish I wasn’t?”

“Honestly? I have no idea what to think. But I am sorry for giving you a concussion.”

“It’s not the first one I’ve had.”

She stood. “Do you mind if I have a look?”

“Will you hit me again if I say no?”

“A few people have tried to murder me recently. I hope you can appreciate that I’m a little on edge.”

“That’s why I’m still here. You’ve proven you know how to protect yourself.”

“You too. You caught that picture.”

“What picture?”

She pointed to where she’d returned it to the mantle.

“Oh, right. The one you threw at me.”

“That wasn’t an easy catch. You’re good at anticipating.”

“I’ve got good reflexes.” He touched his head. “Not good enough, apparently.”

“If you sit down, I’ll clean it up for you.”

“I think it’s okay.”

“Still, let me have a look.”

“I told you it’s fine.”

“Will you sit down and let me check it?”

“Fine. I didn’t know you were so passionate about nursing wounds.”

She huffed in annoyance, but when he finally sat, she didn’t hesitate to get close to him. Her touch was softer than he’d expected.

“It stopped bleeding.”

“That’s goo—” He hissed in a breath when she dabbed at the cut with disinfectant. “I thought you said it stopped bleeding.”

“It has. I’m making sure it doesn’t get infected. You need me to blow on it?” She leaned sideways so he could see the taunting look on her face. She was warming up to him. He could work with that.

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

She called his bluff. Her breath on the wound did soothe the sting. “Huh.”

“What?”

“I didn’t know that actually worked.”

“Are you serious?”

“My mom worked a lot.”

“Oh. Well, this cut at least will heal up fine.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s the least I could do. I really am sorry for hitting you.”

Jay shrugged. “Peter mentioned you were in trouble. You want to tell me about it?”

“Look, Jay, I don’t know if you know this, but Peter believes God led him to you.”

“I know.” If she was trying to scare him away, she wasn’t doing a good job of it. Her resistance only made him more determined to prove himself.

When she moved to a nearby chair, he stretched out on the couch.

“So, a random guy turns up at the beach, tells you God sent him, and you get in a car with him? That’s not brave. That’s stupid. Or demented.”

“Which do you think I am? Stupid or demented?”

“Judging by the way you looked when you first came in, I’d say you were a raving lunatic.”

“Understandable. I had a swim.”

“Fully clothed?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t it a bit chilly for a swim?”

“I almost drowned.”

“On purpose?” The concern on her face was undeniable. She had a tough exterior, but she couldn’t hide her heart. Maybe he could get along with her after all.

“No. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I was running away.”

“From who?”

“Myself. And I swam out so far I couldn’t make it back.”

“But you did.”

“I know. You may not believe that God sent Peter, but God saved me from drowning, and when I came out of the water, Peter was there. Sent from God. It’s hard for me to deny, even if you don’t want to believe it.”

“Peter has a different relationship with Him than I do.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I think God’s got better things to do with His time than drag some guy out of the ocean so that I have help.”

“Lucky for me, you’re wrong.”

“No, that’s not—” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t mean He’s too busy to save you. What I mean is, He’s got the entire world to run. He’s given me the brains and the training to work things out for myself.”

“He’s God. You don’t think He can look after you and the world at the same time?”

“How long have you believed?”

“It’s a recent thing.”

“How recent are we talking?”

“I’m still counting in hours.”

“So, you’ve been a Christian for a few hours, and you think you’ve worked out that God is intricately involved in our everyday lives?”

“He saved me from drowning and got me back to shore where He had Peter waiting. So, yeah, I’m probably siding with Peter at this point.”

“If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be here.”

He’d told Peter he would need time to make up his mind, but he’d done that before they’d arrived. Even after being attacked by Isla. Sitting here now, he knew he was in this. But that didn’t mean she was.

“What about you? I’m here offering my services, but you still have to accept my help.”

“Did Peter give you all the details?”

“He told me what happened to your team. I’m sorry for your loss. He told me you were almost killed a couple of times.”

“I’ll mourn them later, when I have time. So, you understand this is dangerous?”

“I worked that out.”

“And what exactly is your experience? Special forces? Law enforcement?”

“I’m more of a contractor.”

“What’s that mean?”

“People hire me to get different jobs done.”

“Such as?”

“Finding people, getting information—”

“You’re a private detective?”

“No. I’m more of a fixer. If someone has a problem, I’m good at coming up with solutions. Those solutions require a range of skills similar to the ones you have, as well as some you probably don’t. Growing up on the street, I learned to think on my feet and not cower under pressure. I learned to read people and use the cards I’m dealt to overcome just about any situation.”

“But you do all those things for criminals?”

“Sometimes.”

Peter entered the room. “Jemi’s tucked up in bed. How about you guys? You getting along?”

Isla stood. “I’m sorry, Peter. This won’t work out.”

“What?” Jay said. “I thought that was going well. What happened?”

“I spend all my time trying to stop criminals, and you help them get away. No thanks.”

“Your FBI buddies have hired me a time or two. I don’t only work for the bad guys.”

“Great, that makes it all better then.”

“Hang on,” Peter said. “Can we take a step back?”

“From what?” Isla said. “He admitted to it.”

“Can I speak to you a minute?” Peter moved backward into the hall. He jerked his head sideways and disappeared.

Isla shook her head and followed. “Excuse me for a minute.”

Jay sighed. *God, if my past disqualifies me to do this, then what was the point of bringing me here in the first place?*

“There’s nothing you can say to change my mind about this,” Isla said when she joined Peter in the kitchen. “I can do this on my own. I won’t work with someone on the side of the very thing I’m fighting against.”

“I understand your concerns, but have you stopped to think through this for a moment?”

“Think through what?”

“He knows how to think like a criminal. That could work in your favor.”

“That is the weakest argument I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth.”

“Then how about this one—Did you consider why it was he swam out into the ocean in the first place?”

“He said he was running away.”

“From what?”

“Himself.”

“That’s right. And he encountered God while he was out there. God saw fit to save him and bring him along my path. That must count for something.”

“Maybe, but I don’t know what.”

“Then give him a chance. At least hear what he has to say. Then, you can decide. If he has nothing to offer, I’ll give him a lift home.”

“I don’t know.”

“Please. For me. What could it hurt?”

“That’s what you said when you went to the shore in the first place.”

“Okay, you’re right. But Jay got hurt, not you.”

“Funny. Fine. But I get the final say on this.”

Jay stared at the floor, jiggling his leg. He should go. Why subject himself to a woman who thinks he’s beneath her?

He stood, then sat, unsure of what was keeping him there.

“You up for a chat?” Peter said when he and Isla returned to the room. Isla didn’t look happy.

Jay stood again. “I should go.”

Peter looked at Isla. “Should he go?”

“You think you can help me?” She crossed her arms. “Fine. I need to speak to Lloyd Whitlock.”

“Pardon me?” Jay said.

“Isla,” Peter said under his breath.

“What? I’m trying.”

“Not very hard.”

“Look,” Jay said. “I’m obviously not the help you’re looking for. You think I’m nothing more than an outlaw incapable of good, and maybe you’re right. Either way, I’m going to give this a miss.” He shook Peter’s hand. “Peter, it was great to have met you. Thank you for your help. I’ll send your clothes back once I’ve washed them.”

“No. Wait.” Isla sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

She pressed her lips together. “I am. You came all the way out here to offer your services, and I’ve been rude. I’m sorry. None of this is your fault.”

He still wanted to walk out, but instead, he indulged his curiosity. “Who’s Lloyd Whitlock?”

“The attorney general.”

“You work for the DEA. Why not ask for an appointment?”

“Because I don’t know who I can trust. Making an appointment puts me out in the open to too many people.”

“What makes you think you can trust the AG?”

“I don’t know for sure, but Harris Baker, the one who tried to kill me, said they didn’t bother with anyone in the highest positions of power. There’s no way I can speak with the president, but I’m hoping Whitlock is high enough. He may be able to help or at the very least alert the right people to what’s happening.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You said you fix problems. My problem is, I have no way of speaking to him safely.”

Jay had a solution for her, but he also had an insatiable desire to make her squirm right now. “Hmm. That’s a tough one.” He could tell by the smug look on her face that she thought she had him. She may have felt bad for being rude, but she still only saw him as a criminal. “It’s close to impossible. All that security. And you’d want to speak to him somewhere where no one would notice you doing it. Or if they did, no one could do anything about it. Then, you’d have to get away safely.”

“I agree. And yes, it is impossible, but it’s what I need. So, if you can’t do it, I guess we’re done here.”

“I didn’t say it was impossible.”

“Yes, you did. You just said—”

“I said it was close to impossible.” Jay noticed Peter trying hard to keep a straight face.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to do here,” Isla said. “If you have a solution, I’d like to hear it instead of playing games.” She looked at Peter for support and noticed his smirk. “I’m glad you find this amusing.”

“Can you blame him?” Peter said. “You’re not making it easy, and you’re also not hiding the fact that you want him to fail. What do you expect him to do?”

Her face fell, and Jay gave in. “If I remember correctly, there’s a fundraiser coming up that the attorney general is expected to attend. Black-tie event. But it’s a very tight invite list. You can’t get tickets, but it would be an easy way to get beside him and have a chat without drawing suspicion.”

“Let me guess, *you* can get the tickets.”

“Oh good, you’re catching on.”

“And where do these tickets come from, exactly?”

“I told you, I fix problems. I’ve built up a large network of providers over the years.”

“Other criminals?”

“This criminal thing is really a problem for you. I’m not sure you’re going to be able to get past it.”

“I just want to know what I’m in for.”

“You can take the criminal out of the boy but not the boy out of the criminal.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

Maybe not, but he was getting to her. “What will it be? Should I arrange tickets? Or do you want me to leave you alone?”

“Fine. Get me a ticket. Now, I just need a dress. Know a good tailor?”

“I think we can fix that,” Peter said. “Jemi will have a dress that will fit you. And I’m sure I can find something for Jay.”

“Jay’s not coming.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You said you’d get me a ticket. I don’t need you to be there.”

“I think it would be a good idea if Jay went along,” Peter said.

“Well, I don’t. I can do this on my own.”

“Isla, going in there will be like an undercover operation.”

Peter gave her a look like there was more to the story.

“All I need to do is find Whitlock,” Isla said.

“And remain unnoticed.”

She grunted. “Jay, I take it you have undercover experience?”

“I do.”

“Fine. You can come. I’m going for a walk to clear my head.” Isla left the room and slammed the door when she went outside.

“Don’t make any snap judgements,” Peter said. “She’s under a lot of pressure.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can see it on your face. I’d be disappointed in her myself if I didn’t know what she’d been through.”

“Maybe, but she’s already made up her mind about me.”

“Give her time. She has a tendency to see the world in one way and doesn’t do well in the gray areas of life. She grew up with a lot of uncertainty. Her way of making the world make sense isn’t always the right way, but she can learn. You’ll be good for her. Thank you for sticking around.”

“Let’s just say Isla’s not my worst client ever. I went to the ocean for a reason.”

“You know what they say about opposites? You’ll make a great team.”

“Or the worst. Let’s hope God knows what He’s doing.”

“He does. But that doesn’t mean we get it right.”

“That doesn’t fill me with a great deal of confidence moving forward.”

“Just stay focused on Him, and you’ll be fine.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll figure it out as you go along.”

“I sure hope so. Hey, what was that look you gave her about this fundraiser being an undercover operation?”

“That’s not for me to tell.”

“So there is something.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Chapter 9

ISLA PACED BACK and forth across the living room, pressing the pads of each of her fingers against her thumb and then back again. The swish of the dress was a distinct sound that reminded her of how her gear sounded when she was at work. Except her gear made her feel confident, and right now, she'd never felt so naked.

She'd stared at herself in the mirror for a solid ten minutes before getting used to her unusual outfit enough that she could venture downstairs.

"You look different," Jay said, leaning on the door frame.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It was a compliment." She saw his eyes slide down her body and back up.

"Oh. Well, you clean up pretty nice yourself."

"Why are you so nervous? Is it the dress?"

She stopped and looked down at herself. "I never dress like this."

"I can tell. But it suits you. Shows off your physique."

"I'm not interested in showing anything off. You're lucky you get to fully cover yourself."

"I'd offer to swap, but I think that would attract too much attention."

She smiled. He was being nice to her. Trying to cheer her up despite the way she'd treated him. "It's not the dress that's making me act this way."

"Really? Is this how you behave before you go on an operation?"

"No." She pressed a hand on her stomach. "If we were going to this party in SWAT gear with assault rifles, I'd be fine. Undercover is a completely different animal altogether."

"You get stage fright?" He rubbed a hand over his mouth to hide his smirk, but she saw it.

"Undercover is not what I was trained to do."

"It's not that hard."

"Easy for you to say."

"Why? Because I'm a criminal?"

"That's not what I meant."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"There's really not a lot to it. Just be yourself."

"That is exactly my problem. Going to a fancy party in this ridiculous dress is not me."

"That dress is not ridiculous."

"It is on me."

He scoffed in disbelief. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to hold my ground on this. You and that dress were made for each other."

She tried several times to counter his opinion but couldn't come up with anything suitable to say. "My point is, there's nothing about what we're doing that is remotely me."

"You've never wanted to get dressed up and go to a nice dinner?"

"I've never had occasion to."

"Okay, what about a date?"

“I’ve never gone on a date like this.”

Jay stood in front of her and took her hand.

“What are you doing?” She looked at her hand when he ran his thumb across the back of it.

“Isla. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I’ve got this fundraiser I’m attending, and I’d love if you’d come as my plus one. What do you think?”

She tried to keep a straight face, but she finally laughed. “Nice try, but I don’t think it will work.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not real.”

“Come on, I’m not that bad-looking. There must be at least some part of you that finds me the smallest bit attractive and wouldn’t mind letting me take you out. I promise I won’t try to kiss you goodnight.”

Attractiveness wasn’t the problem. “Just promise me you won’t leave me on my own.”

“You really are uncomfortable with this.”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I promise I won’t leave you alone. But we should get going. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. I’m assuming you can sit in a car without too much trouble?”

“I think I can manage, yes.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Look at you two,” Peter said, entering the room. He had Jemi on his arm.

She smiled at them both and said, “You guys are gonna do great. We’ll be praying.”

“I know you will,” Isla said. “Thank you. I’ll definitely need it.”

Isla and Jay said little on the drive. Jay tried to make conversation, but Isla could only offer one- or two-word answers. She focused out the window trying to figure out what to say to Whitlock when they met.

She'd shaken his hand once and saw kindness in his eyes, but you couldn't always tell with people. And despite what Baker had said, no one could be fully trusted. She could be making a big mistake. But that wasn't the only thing bothering her.

"What if he doesn't believe me?" She hadn't meant to say it out loud, but it was too late to take it back now.

"Who, Whitlock? You're not some nut off the street telling him these things. Not just anyone can get into this fundraiser, remember?"

"No, only salt-encrusted lunatics who take long swims in freezing cold water."

"Exactly." He smiled. "Isla, you're a beautiful and confident woman who was there when your team died. He'll have no reason not to believe you."

"He won't care about how I look, and I'm far from confident."

"You're confident about what happened the other night. He'll believe you."

"I hope so. Because if he doesn't, I don't know what to do."

"You need to stop stressing yourself over this. All we can do is try. And I'll be right by your side. If this doesn't work, we'll figure something else out."

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Should I not be?"

"I haven't exactly treated you that well."

"That is true. But you've been through a lot. I'm trying to give you the benefit of the doubt." He rested his hand over hers. "Stop fidgeting."

“I can’t help it.”

“You really have nothing to worry about. As far as undercover work goes, this is a straightforward job. You don’t have to pretend with Whitlock, so you only have to do enough to sell your presence. It’s not the sort of gig you need any experience with.”

“But I do have experience.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have any. I thought that was why you were nervous.”

“No. I did it once. It didn’t go well.”

“By that you mean...”

She looked out the side window to hide the flush that warmed her cheeks. When he chuckled, she knew he’d seen it and misinterpreted.

“It’s not like that,” she said.

“Why don’t you tell me about it, then?”

“Why?”

“It might make you feel better.”

“It won’t.”

“You are really painful, you know that?” He squeezed her hand. “I’d like to know what happened.”

She hadn’t seen this kindness in him before. “You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“I was supposed to go in as a buyer. I was really cocky about it,” she scoffed. “We were all boasting about how it would go down and the look on the perps’ faces when they realized they’d been taken for a ride. I had my character all worked out. I’d done well in the training and was so sure I would ace it.” She shook her head. “But when my partner and I arrived in the parking lot and met with these guys, I blew it.”

“How?”

“They asked me a question, and I froze. Then, I overcompensated.”

“That’s it? Things like that happen when you get too cocky. It’s a blessing in disguise. You needed to be brought down a notch.”

“It did more than that.”

“Isla, you messed up one job, and you now consider yourself incapable? It was your first time out. You can’t be that hard on yourself.”

“I can when they shot my partner because I couldn’t do my job properly.”

“Oh.”

“It took the ambulance fifteen minutes to arrive. I held my hand on his wound to stop the bleeding, exactly like I did for Fogarty. Doesn’t do much good. My partner was dead before he could get any help. So, you can dress me up in these fancy clothes, but when I walk in there, I can’t pull off the part of some wealthy philanthropist. I’ll get it wrong. So make sure your life doesn’t depend on it.”

“Our lives won’t be at risk in there. The worst that will happen is we’ll get kicked out.”

“That’s not the worst thing. Whitlock could be in on it and have us murdered and our bodies chopped up so they’re never found.”

“That would be bad. But if that happened, it wouldn’t be connected to your acting abilities. Besides, you’ve got me, and I’m excellent undercover.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Wait till you see me in action.”

“Are you sure that being cocky is the best thing right now?”

“It’s not cocky. It’s confident.” He gave her a million-dollar smile, and she laughed.

He kept doing that to her, making her laugh. Somehow, it came easily to him, and he brought it out of her.

But there must be a dark side in there somewhere. He didn't swim out into the middle of the ocean for nothing.

Jay handed the keys to the valet, then held out his arm for Isla.

She looked at it but didn't move.

He took a step closer. "You don't have to pretend to be someone you're not, but you do have to take my arm."

"I'm nervous."

"I know."

"Everyone else will too."

"I don't care." He took her hand and pulled her arm through his. "Do you need me to walk for you too? Because I can."

She didn't laugh as he'd intended. Instead, she looked around for any sign of danger.

"Isla."

"What?"

"Relax. No one knows you're here. You're safe."

"There's no way for you to know that for sure."

"Actually, yes, there is. How would anyone know? I didn't book the ticket under your name. Well, not your last name."

She ignored him and continued to scan the crowd.

"Isla."

"What?"

He took her chin in his fingers, leaned down, and kissed her.

She jerked away, but not before responding to his touch.
“Why did you do that?”

“Hey, you kissed me back.”

“Only because you caught me off guard.”

“That was the idea. You needed a distraction. Did it work?”

“Wipe that smile off your face, and I’ll tell you.”

His smile grew. “No need. We can go.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

She allowed him to pull her forward only because she had no other choice since her arm was still wrapped in his.

A man with a checklist stood to attention at the door.
“Good evening.”

“Jayden and Isla Parker,” Jay said.

The man checked the list. “Welcome.” He nodded them in.

“Mr. and Mrs.?” Isla whispered as they entered the building.

“If it makes you feel better, you can pretend you’re my sister.”

“That would make the kiss back there rather strange, would it not?”

“As strange as you flinching at your husband kissing you?”

“Maybe I don’t like public displays of affection.”

“If you say so, wifey.”

“Okay. If we’re married, that means I can tell you what to do.”

“Not if you’re *my* wife you can’t.” She baulked, and he laughed. “You make it so easy for me. I didn’t think I’d enjoy this so much.”

“What, having fun at my expense?”

“No, keeping your mind preoccupied.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not grateful.”

She would have been angrier with him if he wasn’t right. But being annoyed with him was better than being anxious. “I’d prefer if you could find another way.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

“What about small talk?”

“I’m not a fan.”

“Me either, but we should try it anyway.”

“I could always kiss you again.”

“No.”

“You don’t have to be so resolute. Small talk it is. It’s nice weather we’re having today.”

“How about telling me if Jayden is your real name? Is that what Jay is short for?”

“Yeah.”

“I like it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You don’t?”

“It’s complicated and breaches the realm of small talk.”

“But it would be a distracting conver—” They entered the ballroom, and she stiffened. “Whoa.”

“Are you having a panic attack?”

“No. It’s just more than I expected. Beautiful, but it’s a lot. I shouldn’t stare.” She looked at the floor. “It will be too obvious if I stare.”

“Staring at the floor makes you look nervous.”

“I *am* nervous.”

“You’re a highly skilled agent. Would I be right to assume you have a gun hidden under that dress somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“Focus on that.”

“And then what?”

“Then you can relax and let me do the talking.”

“Until we locate Whitlock.”

“You’re the boss.”

“I’m glad you recognize that.”

He gave her a look then pulled her into the room. “Follow my lead.”

Chapter 10

ISLA PULLED BACK when she realized Jay was leading her to a group that didn't contain the attorney general.

"Whitlock isn't there."

"I know. But if you want this to work, you have to blend in."

"Right."

"Don't forget to smile." He looked at her and winced. "Not like that. Show some teeth."

She relaxed her closed-mouthed smile, and Jay nodded approvingly.

When they reached the group, he addressed a distinguished older man. "Tomas, it's so good to see you again. You remember my wife Isla?"

Tomas reached for her hand and kissed it. "How could I ever forget such a rare beauty? How are you? I trust you are doing well?"

"Yes."

Jay laughed. "Lost for words, as usual. You know how she is."

"Of course."

"And you're well? I heard you had a health scare last month."

“Word gets around quickly. But it was nothing. The media loves to blow things out of proportion. It was only a simple virus. All clear now.”

“Glad to hear it. And I’m pleased to see you looking so well.”

“Thank you. I’m feeling the best I have in years. And how’s business been for you?”

“We’ve had a very good year so far. Next time I’m in your neck of the woods, I’ll stop by, and we can talk about it.”

“Sounds like an excellent idea. Make sure you bring your wife.”

“I will. Now, I’d better keep doing the rounds. I see a few people who will roast me if I don’t go say hi.”

“It was nice to see you again,” Tomas said to Isla. She nodded as they moved away.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Jay whispered as they crossed the room.

“But he doesn’t know me. I’ve never met him before.”

“Neither have I.”

“What? But you knew him. He knew you.”

“I know his name is Tomas Perez, and he’s the ambassador for Argentina.”

“How’d he know you were in business?”

Jay laughed. “What business would that be?”

“You mean he made it up on the spot?”

“Exactly like I did.”

“What if he called your bluff?”

“He wouldn’t. He’s met so many people in his line of work, he couldn’t possibly remember them all, and it did the trick. Now, you and I fit in because we’re old friends with the ambassador.”

“I still think it was risky.”

He pulled Isla to a stop. “You may have lost someone in an undercover operation, and I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for you to recover from that, but I know what I’m doing. You have to trust me.”

“I’m trying.”

“I want you to know, I chose the least risky person in the room.”

“How is the Argentinean ambassador the least risky person?”

“That health scare I mentioned is rumored to be connected to dementia. He can’t afford to forget anyone, so he has to pretend he knows everyone, just in case. But I don’t know why you’re worried about the danger. If we were coming in here with guns blazing, you wouldn’t be worried about it, and that would cause a lot more difficulties for us than this.”

“Maybe, but I’d be much more at ease in combat gear.”

“I’ll try to come up with a plan that involves flack jackets next if it would help.”

She laughed. “It would. Listen, I want you to know how thankful I am for your help with this. Peter was right to bring you in. I’m sorry if we got off on the wrong foot. I haven’t been very considerate of your feelings, and I certainly didn’t expect you to worry about mine so much.”

“You’re surprised that I care?”

“I’m surprised at how quickly you’ve gotten over the way I treated you.”

“It hasn’t been easy.” He dramatized his drawl, and she bumped his shoulder. “But what can I say? You’re a beautiful woman who hurt my ego. It’s painful, but I suffer in silence for the greater good.”

She snorted. “Your ego only gets hurt by beautiful women?”

He grinned at her, and her heart skipped a beat. It was a wide, amused smile that said she was the only one who could bruise his ego.

She turned her attention to the room, focusing on anything but him. He was charming, and she trusted him more than she'd expected to. But she couldn't afford to get caught up with a man she could end up putting in jail one day.

"I don't know you very well either," he said, clearing his throat like he was as uncomfortable as she was. "We should probably not make any rash judgements one way or the other."

"Probably not," she said for lack of anything else to say until she looked to the side of the room. "Oh no." She bowed into him, huddling into his chest. The fire she'd felt being close to him moments ago was now extinguished with alarm.

"What is it?" His arms instinctively wrapped around her.

"That man over there. He's the one from Homeland Security who tried to kill me. The one who killed Fogarty."

His arms tightened, and he drew her into the crowd. "There's a lot of people in here. I'm not sure which one you mean."

"Over by the bar. He's in his forties. Hair parted on the left side. About five foot eleven. He's wearing a shawl lapel tux. I don't know what he's doing here. I don't know why he would be invited to come to something like this."

"You never know what contacts people have. So, a shawl lapel? I don't even know what that means. I thought this whole dressing up thing was completely out of your realm of understanding."

"I learned it on a stakeout once. The collar isn't notched. It wraps around."

"Oh. Look at that. I never noticed that before. I see him."

He released her and turned, sliding his hand across her back.

"If you'll follow me this way, please."

He led her away from the bar, and they weaved through the dancing couples. Then, he stopped and took one of her hands, placing it on his shoulder before taking her other hand and holding it.

“What are you doing?”

“This is called the waltz. We’re on the dance floor. There’s music.”

“But why are we doing it?”

“It’s the simplest way to get us across the room. We can’t walk through all these people. That would be disruptive.”

“That’s what you think. I don’t know how to dance.”

“You already are. Keep following my lead. You’ve done a good job of it so far.”

“What if we bump into someone?”

“If you let me lead, we won’t. Stop looking around.”

“But what if someone notices us?”

“They won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Isla.”

She looked at him. “What?”

“You’re the only one looking at someone besides their partner. No one else is interested in anyone except the person they’re dancing with.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Don’t break eye contact with me. Stay focused right here.”

Isla found herself stuck in the moment. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. She was supposed to be in control, but he held her gaze as they drifted across the floor.

When the song ended, he spun her out the other side of the dance floor. “There, see? That wasn’t so difficult, was it? And we’ve just put a whole lot of people between us and Baker.”

“We have to make sure he doesn’t see me.”

“Let me worry about that. You keep your eyes out for Whitlock.”

“I haven’t seen him yet.”

“He’ll be here somewhere.”

Jay took her hand, and they walked together, checking the attendees.

“Bruce,” Jay said to a sloppy-looking man as they went. “It’s good to see you. You’re looking good.” He slapped Bruce on the arm, and they continued past.

“A friend of yours?” Isla whispered.

“Nope. That’s Bruce Hopkins. He’s a senator.”

“Him?”

“It takes all kinds—there he is.”

Isla followed Jay’s line of sight and spotted Whitlock. “Thank goodness.”

“Remember what we talked about? You need to tell him exactly who you are and why you want to speak to him.”

“I didn’t expect there to be so many people around. What if someone overhears?”

“You’re only giving him enough detail so he knows it’s serious but doesn’t know what it’s about.”

“I keep thinking he won’t believe me.”

“He may not. But that’s not what we’re trying to find out right now. I’ll watch for his reaction so we can see if he already knows more than what you tell him. That’s the most important part.”

“And if he does?”

“We get out of here and make a new plan.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“That’s when we try to speak to him privately. Most importantly, be yourself.”

“Okay, I can do that much.”

They walked over together, and Isla stepped forward. “Excuse me, sir?”

Whitlock turned to her. “Yes?”

“I’m, um.” She looked at Jay, and he nodded encouragement. “My names Isla Taylor. I’m an agent with the DEA.”

“Agent Taylor.” He reached out a hand to shake hers. “It’s a pleasure. I’m sorry I don’t recognize you. Have we met?”

“Not really. I shook your hand once. One of a long line of people.”

He looked at Jay. “Are you with the Administration as well?”

“No, sir. I’m just her date.”

“It’s good of you both to come.” After an awkward pause, Whitlock said to Isla, “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Actually, yes. Sir, I was part of a taskforce within the DEA that recently attempted a mission. It failed.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He straightened. “But I’m not sure how I can help. Have you spoken to your supervising agent?”

“Briefly.”

He nodded. “Agent Taylor, I can understand why a failed mission can be difficult to process, but I’m not equipped to discuss this matter. I haven’t been briefed and have no idea of the specifics.”

“I understand that, sir. But this is a significant issue.”

“If you have a problem with how the operation turned out, I think it would be best if you spoke further with your supervising agent. Or if you’ve found him to be insufficient, there is a chain of command.”

“I understand that, sir. But this matter is quite delicate.” She looked at Jay to see if he’d ascertained Whitlock’s involvement.

“Sir,” Jay said. “Perhaps it would be best if we spoke somewhere private.”

Whitlock looked at Isla. “He’s just your date?”

“Not exactly. Sir—” She leaned closer to him so she could drop her voice. “My team was ambushed. I’m the only one who wasn’t killed. When I went to see my supervising agent, Ian Fogarty, he had also been shot.”

Whitlock’s face hardened. “I was told his death was the result of a home invasion. A robbery gone wrong.”

“No, sir.”

“I think you’re right. I think it would be best if we continued this conversation somewhere more private.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Whitlock went to one of the men who was standing guard and spoke to him quietly. Then, he nodded to Isla and Jay to follow him into a large library.

The guard closed the double doors behind them.

“You can understand why I’d like Beldane to be present?” Whitlock said, referring to the guard.

“You’re afraid we’re a threat,” Isla said.

“I don’t know what you are. But I would like to know why you thought I was the best person to speak to about this matter. There are others easier to approach.”

“Before Fogarty died, he incriminated himself.”

“You’re saying he was a part of this?”

“Yes, and he said there were others. I already know of one within Homeland Security. You were my best chance at not speaking to the wrong person and getting myself killed.”

Whitlock squeezed his forehead. “I was briefed about what happened on that mission. But I was also told no one survived.”

“They weren’t meant to,” Jay said. “Isla’s been in hiding. We’re trying to discover how deep this goes.”

“You said you’re not with the DEA?”

“That’s right.”

“Then who are you?”

“A friend.”

“A friend...So let me get this straight. Agent Taylor, you're the only one to survive the ambush, and you were present when Fogarty was murdered?”

“Yes.”

“And you claim that Fogarty implicated himself before he died, but you were the only one to hear.”

“I know how it sounds, but if I was guilty, would I be standing here now?”

“I've seen a lot in my years. You'd be surprised how some people act.”

“I didn't kill him. And I promise you, everything I've told you is accurate. ”

“Then I trust you can appreciate the severity of this accusation?”

“That's the only reason I'm here. It would be easier for me to disappear than try to fix it.”

The door opened, and Harris Baker walked in.

Isla was never one to yield in the face of danger, but she staggered back a step before she could stop herself.

“Lloyd, there's someone—” Baker said before his attention turned to Isla. “Agent Taylor. This is unexpected.”

Before she could regain the ground she'd given, Jay moved forward. “Is it?” he said, positioning himself between Baker and Isla. “Or did you see us enter and decide you had to take action?”

“That's about right.” Baker nodded to the guard as he walked slowly toward Whitlock. “Lloyd, I don't want to alarm you, but we have a situation.”

Beldane pulled his weapon.

“What's going on?” Whitlock said.

“Agent Taylor is a wanted fugitive. Has she threatened you in any way?”

“No.”

“Not yet,” Baker smirked.

“What are her charges?”

“I take it you’ve been informed about the massacre on a recent DEA mission?”

“I have. Agent Taylor was telling me about it.”

“And the supervising agent? Did she tell you she’s wanted in connection with Fogarty’s murder?”

“She told me someone in your department was responsible.”

“In the DHS?” He looked at Isla. “That was the best you could come up with? It was me, wasn’t it? I’m the one who killed Fogarty, not you. Right? That would be convenient.”

Implicating him now would only make her sound desperate. Unfortunately, she was.

Whitlock looked confused, but he didn’t distance himself from Baker, who’d called him by his first name. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Lloyd, I don’t know the extent of what she told you, but I will say we’ve been searching for her. It is believed she’s not only involved in a coverup that led to the deaths of her entire team but also that she’s the one who murdered Fogarty at his house. Her DNA was at the scene, and we found her fingerprints on the murder weapon.”

“That’s because you put the gun in my hand while I was unconscious.”

Baker laughed. “Is that so? Then why didn’t you kill me? Why kill Fogarty?”

“Why don’t you take off your jacket and show the attorney general the gunshot wound on your arm?”

Baker sighed and looked at Whitlock. “Lloyd, would you like me to show you my arm? I wouldn’t normally indulge such a ridiculous request, but if you have any doubt about the validity of what I’m saying, I’ll cooperate.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Whitlock said.

“Sir—” Isla tried.

“No, this has gotten out of hand. I don’t know what’s going on here. We’re going to get to the bottom of it, but not here.”

“I agree,” Baker said. “I’ll take Isla down to headquarters, and we can question her there. If I’m wrong about what I say, then we can clear it up down there, and you will be free to go.”

“While we appreciate the offer,” Jay said, “I’m afraid we will have to decline. Isla’s not going anywhere with you.”

Beldane stepped forward, aiming his weapon at Isla.

“I think it would be better for everyone if you cooperate, Agent Taylor,” Whitlock said. He looked at Jay, “I’ll make sure she’s safe, but this is not the right place or time to do this.”

“All right,” Isla said. “I’ll go.” She turned to Jay and mouthed, “Save yourself.”

“Excellent. I’m glad we’re all in agreement,” Baker said. “You can bring your friend too. Jay was it?”

“He’s got nothing to do with this. He’s just a friend who got me into the party.”

“He can tell us all about it down at headquarters.”

She knew she’d be dead before the end of the day, and if they brought Jay, he would be too. She wouldn’t die with his death on her head too.

Slipping her shoes off, she widened her eyes at Jay before sprinting for the door. Baker took off after her, followed by Beldane.

Chapter 11

JAY HAD BEEN TEMPTED to follow Isla out the door, despite the look she gave him that said she wanted him to save himself. She ran because she wanted to give him time to escape, not because she thought she could get away. But his decision to remain with Whitlock had nothing to do with his own best interest. He'd made Peter a promise that he wouldn't back out of helping her, and the best way he could save her now was to get the attorney general's cooperation.

"You may as well go," Whitlock said. "I can't subdue you. And I have no interest in trying."

"We were telling you the truth. If you let Baker take Isla, he'll kill her. He really was the one who killed Fogarty."

"I've known Harris for years."

"And?"

Whitlock sighed. "What do you expect me to do?"

"You're the attorney general. You can do whatever you want."

"You think because I hold this office I have the power to act on every whim? In some ways, I'm probably more restricted than you. You don't even have any proof. I'm going off the word of a woman who's accused of murdering a federal agent, not to mention being a part of her team's demise. I hate to tell you this, but Harris's evidence is stronger than yours."

“You could have asked Baker to remove his jacket and show you the bullet wound.”

“And what would that have accomplished? He could blame that on any number of things. He’s a field agent.”

“So you won’t do anything?”

“I hope you realize you’re putting me in a very difficult position.”

“People were murdered, and an innocent woman will probably not see the light of day tomorrow, and you want to ignore it because it’s uncomfortable?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Then do something.”

“Says the man who is still here, not chasing after his friend.”

“Out there, I’m powerless. What am I going to do? Attack Baker in public? I’ll do what I can, but right now, I need you to stand up for what is right.”

“And what is that supposed to look like?”

“Save her life.”

“How?”

Jay took a turn around the room, considering their options. The most important thing they had to do right now was stop Isla from going anywhere with Baker.

“Do you know any local police captains?”

“I do.”

“Then I’ll need you to make a call.”

Isla thought for a brief moment when she reached the front door that she might get away. Then, she was tackled.

It created a flurry of activity as bodyguards charged into protective action for whoever it was they were looking after.

Isla struggled to breathe as the guard's heavy bulk pressed her into the ground while he handcuffed her.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Baker shouted to the crowd. "We apologize for the disruption. The threat to your safety has been resolved. We have the suspect in custody. Please enjoy your evening."

As the guard pulled Isla to her feet, she saw the ambassador she'd met earlier. He looked confused, but she surprised herself by smiling at him apologetically. He quickly pivoted and disappeared into the crowd.

Another guard joined them, and each took one of her arms, walking her to the sidewalk where Baker now stood, waiting for his car.

"Why are you doing this?" she said. "Why kill so many innocent people?"

"You tell me. We're going to find out who's behind this. You're going to pay for your treachery."

She looked up at one of the guards. "Is this performance for them?" she said to Baker. "You're pathetic."

"No." He got in her face. "You're the one who's pathetic. Killing your team. You disgust me. I'm going to personally see to it that you're punished for your crimes."

She disregarded his lies. "My team didn't deserve what they got. They had no chance. No warning. You're a barbarian."

"You should have thought of that before you set them up."

Baker's car arrived, and the guards shoved her forward, but she resisted.

"Please. Someone help me. I was set up." She yelled to the onlookers. Most of them took a step back as she looked around the group. It was useless. There was no one to rescue her from this and no way she could rescue herself. She was as good as

dead. Baker wouldn't wait this time. He'd kill her and dispose of her as soon as he could.

A heavy hand shoved her head down, bowing her into the back of the car until a voice called out.

“Hang on.”

She pushed back when the weight lifted from her head and turned to see Whitlock rushing down the steps.

He didn't look at her but addressed Baker. “I've called for a police escort.”

“That's not necessary. I have my car right here.”

“I'd hate for anything to happen.”

“It's under control. I can handle Agent Taylor.”

“Still. I have a duty of care. I can't let you take responsibility for her from here. You may have saved my life in there, so I want to help in any way I can. I have a friend down at the local PD. They're on their way.”

“They're not equipped.”

“For what? Questioning a suspect? I think they do okay. Besides, with all the crossing of departments, I think it's best if we bring her somewhere neutral. Somewhere she won't have any friends who can cause any trouble.”

Baker's smile bordered on a grimace. “Lloyd, I appreciate your help, but you have a fundraiser to attend to. You don't need to bother with this.”

Whitlock stepped closer. “I may be near the top of the food chain, but a lot of good men were murdered recently, and if this woman is part of it, I don't want anything to happen that a lawyer can use to get her off. If we don't do this by the book, we put ourselves in a precarious situation. And that's important to me. More important than having a fancy meal. This woman will pay for what she did. She'll be punished for her crimes.”

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

Whitlock continued to ignore her, but he waited until the police cruiser turned up before speaking in private with the officer. Then, he shook Baker's hand and went back inside.

Whitlock's behavior had been strange, but she had no way of telling if he'd done it for her or not. At least she hadn't seen any sign of Jay, giving her confidence that he'd escaped. He could go back to whatever life he'd left. No one would find him.

What future she now faced was uncertain. Being taken to the police station would buy her time, but Baker would already be working to gain custody of her. She was sure he'd been telling the truth when he said she was now a fugitive. It wouldn't have been hard for him to spin that story once she'd gotten free from him in the woods.

If she were in his shoes, she would do exactly the same thing.

Isla had fallen asleep in the interrogation room with her head resting on her hands. They'd given her a jacket to wear over her dress, so at least she was warm.

She woke when the door opened, and a tall, slim man entered.

"Who are you?" she said when he took a seat across from her.

"I'm Lieutenant Michael Bloomsbury. I heard we have an unusual fugitive in custody. It's not often ladies get dressed up so fancy when they're brought down to the station."

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"I understand we're holding you until the feds get here?"

"Probably DHS. I'm surprised Harris Baker isn't out there right now, demanding for my release into his custody."

"Oh, that guy? He put up a fight, but he's gone to get his paperwork in order. I don't like being pushed around in my

own station.”

“I don’t suppose you could simply refuse to let him take me?”

“Do you have a good reason?”

“I’m innocent?”

“Nice try.”

“The attorney general was responsible for getting me sent here. Does he have anything else to say about it?”

“Due process, from what I understand. Doesn’t want to give you any legal loopholes.”

“If I even make it that far.”

“What about God?”

She straightened. “What did you say?”

“I said, what about food? Have you eaten?”

“Oh, I thought you said—never mind.”

“You look like you could use a bite to eat. I can get you a sandwich or a bagel or something if you’re hungry.”

“No. I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“Candy bar? Coffee? I don’t know how much longer it will be. You could still have hours to wait.”

“I’ve already waited hours.”

“Then what will you have?”

“Nothing, I’m fine. But thank you.”

“Suit yourself. I’ve posted an officer outside the door, so if you need anything, just ask.”

If talking her way out of here was possible, now was the time.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Didn’t know I was.”

“Did they tell you why I’m in here?”

“Not the specifics. I know you’re a federal agent, and whatever you did constitutes a federal crime.”

“I really am innocent.”

“Then I hope you get a fair trial.”

“I won’t.”

Bloomsbury crossed his arms. “That’s very fatalistic. You have so little faith in our judicial system?”

“No. I have little faith in making it to trial alive.”

“Like I said, I’ve posted an officer outside your door. You’ll be safe in our custody.”

“What about when I’m not anymore?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, shall we?”

“Sure.”

He could do nothing for her, but it was a nice thought.

After he left the room, Isla stood and leaned on the table. She could hear Peter telling her to pray. Jemi had said they would be.

“There’s no point.”

Peter’s words came to mind. *I don’t know how to get it into your head that God cares about you more than you realize. He knows every single hair that is on your head. He knows the birds and cares for them, but he cares for you more.*

He’d said it to her on a number of occasions. But she still didn’t believe it. How could she be special enough to God that he’d be working for her right now to save her?

Hopefully, when she turned up missing or dead, it would spook Whitlock into investigating further. God didn’t need her alive to get her team justice. He didn’t need her for anything.

Isla paced the room, shaking out her hands as she went. “Okay, God. I don’t want to die. I want to be free and find out what’s really going on.”

She squeezed her eyes closed, but all she could see was God’s back to her. He didn’t want to hear her problems. With

everything that was going on in the world. He didn't need her bothering Him.

“Never mind. I'll take whatever you give me. If this is the end for me, so be it. I don't expect you to come down here and open the door to let me out like you did in the Bible stories. I'm grown up enough to know that's not how this all works.”

She sat back in the chair and slouched. She was on her own from here on out. It didn't make sense to hold on to hope. According to the Bible, she should, but it sounded like torture.

Fatigue hung heavy behind her eyes, and she laid her head on the table to rest, falling into an uncomfortable sleep.

When the door clanged open, she jumped to her feet from her sleep, reaching for her hip.

The lieutenant looked startled. “You okay?”

“Sorry. I was asleep.”

“My apologies for startling you.”

“What time is it?”

He checked his watch. “Half past seven.”

She rubbed her eyes and collapsed back into the chair. “You weren't kidding when you said I'd be here for hours more.”

“I'm glad you got some shuteye.”

“What can I do for you? Is Baker back?”

“No. Not yet. That's best for both of us, I presume. I can't wait to see the look on his face.”

“I'm not following.”

“I've had a rather unusual meeting. The police captain paid me a visit a few moments ago.”

“Okay.”

“My original understanding was that we were holding you until the feds turned up. Or until that other guy Baker got back.”

“Yes.”

“But it turns out my information was incorrect. Apparently, we had an error in the paperwork.”

“What kind of error?”

“You said you were innocent, and I thought you were doing that thing guilty people do. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Such as?”

“The truth. That you were a witness, not a suspect.”

“Right. Would you have believed me? I did tell you I was innocent.”

“You were behaving like a suspect. Not a witness. But now we’ve kept you here all night for no reason. You’re free to go with my sincere apologies. I like to think we’re allies with the federal agencies.”

“You are.” Isla stood slowly. “I can go?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

She shrugged the jacket off, but Bloomsbury stopped her. “Keep it. It’s still chilly out there.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s the least we can do.”

A million thoughts ran through Isla’s head, but the most invasive and insistent was questioning whether this was God’s way of opening the door for her. It had never occurred to her that He’d actually do it.

She controlled her breathing as she made her way down the hall, following the officer to the front door.

He left her in the waiting room, and she walked cautiously outside, waiting for someone to pounce, but no one did.

She squinted at the sun that peeked its way between two buildings across the street. She'd have to find her way back to Peter's and regroup.

"What are you doing out here?"

Baker appeared before her on the steps. He pulled his gun but held it to his side.

It hadn't been God setting her free after all. This wasn't her freedom. This was her death.

"Answer my question," he said when she didn't respond.

"They let me go." What else could she say?

"Why?"

"Because I was being held unlawfully."

He smiled. "You really are something. How'd you do it? How'd you convince them to release you?"

"I have no idea."

"Then it's a good thing I got here when I did. And don't get any ideas. There's no way I'll let you get away from me again. You are a woman not to be underestimated."

"You're going to go down for this. One way or another."

"No, I won't. You've made it so easy for me. Let's go. My car's just around the corner."

She looked at his gun, but he kept himself at a safe distance from her, which meant she had no choice but to obey.

"You're making a big mistake."

"And you sound like a broken record."

He followed several paces behind her down the sidewalk. When she turned, he raised his weapon. "Keep moving. It's around the corner up here."

They turned onto a nearly empty side street.

"It's not too late to let me go," she said.

"Yeah, sure. Go stand by the car."

She walked slowly, wondering where he'd take her to kill her.

A loud clang was followed by a grunt, and she spun around. Baker was on the ground, and Jay was standing there holding a metal pipe.

Someone screamed for help.

“Jay? What are you doing?”

“Saving your life.” He tossed the pipe aside and dragged her down an alley.

Chapter 12

“THIS WAY,” Jay said to Isla as he crouched to climb into an open window to a basement.

She followed behind him. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll find out when we get there.” He moved away from the window into the dark. She clung to the back of his shirt so she didn’t lose him.

He opened a door and kept moving forward, but it was still too dark to see. She was completely at his mercy as he took several turns.

“Do you even know—”

“Shh.”

It wasn’t until they climbed a staircase that the light returned. Jay opened a door, and they found themselves in an empty room.

“This way,” Jay said, opening a heavy door that led into an alley.

They climbed a tall fence before going into another building, where they found themselves in a room stacked with boxes. Jay didn’t stop.

Through another door, they entered a small shop full of gifts. Jay waved at the woman standing behind the counter. She offered her own weak and confused wave as she watched them exit out the front.

After crossing the street, Jay led Isla into a parking garage where he didn't stop until they'd climbed the stairs and finally paused on the second floor of the building.

"Wait here," Jay said before walking up the first couple of rows of cars. When he returned to Isla, he dropped to the ground.

Isla crouched down beside him. "What are you looking for?"

"Signs of life. I don't want to get snuck up on. Looks like we're clear."

"I don't think anyone could have followed us through that maze you took us through. I don't even know where we are."

"We're safe." Jay closed his eyes, and his lips moved. Then he looked at her. "You okay? You're not injured?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. Baker will be back on his feet by now. We'll have to keep a very low profile. No more fundraisers for you."

She blinked. "What are you even doing here?"

"I thought I was saving your life."

"You did. But why?"

"That's an odd question."

"The reason I ran at the fundraiser was so you could escape."

"I did. I just gave Whitlock some tips before I did."

"Why are you here?"

"Should I not be? Would you rather I left you with Baker?"

"No. What I don't understand is why you came back. Why risk your life for me? What if we were caught back there?"

"So, you're upset because I came back to save you instead of saving myself?"

"I'm not upset. I'm confused."

“Wouldn’t you have done the same thing if *I* was the one in trouble?”

“Well, yeah, but you’re—”

“What? A criminal incapable of doing anything good?”

Her lips flattened. “I was going to say you’re mixed up in this because of me. You had no reason to help me past the fundraiser. If you were the one who’d been caught, I would have had an obligation to rescue you.”

“You would have been obligated.”

“Yeah.”

He scoffed and walked in a circle before coming back to her. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

“What did I say?”

“I save you, and you can’t say, ‘Thanks, Jay. That was really nice of you to come back for me.’ No, you’ve got to question my motives, and then you have the audacity to tell me that obligation would be the only reason my life would be worth saving.”

“You’re twisting my words.”

“You sure about that? Or maybe Peter was right.”

“About what?”

“You have a nasty habit of looking at everything in black and white.”

“What’s wrong with that? It keeps things simple and straightforward. Everything we’re facing now is because of me. It was my duty to make sure you got away unharmed. You had no reason to put your life on the line for me again.”

“Maybe it’s because I care. Your way sucks the life out of everything. I don’t want to live my life like that.”

She shoved her hands onto her hips as both of their voices were raising. “Letting your emotions interfere with your actions when under pressure only puts you at greater risk. Besides, you’re telling me that all that work you did for the

criminal underworld is because you care so much about them?”

“I knew it. You’re never going to get past the things I’ve done. To you, I will always be an outlaw incapable of good, no matter what God has done for me. You may as well damn me to hell.”

“That’s not true.” The volume of her retort didn’t reflect how she actually felt. His words had knocked the wind out of her. She could deny it all she wanted, but everything he said was right. She did believe his motives couldn’t be driven by good. She thought it made things easier to believe a man like him would never change. Especially when he was beginning to break through her defenses.

“I’m not proud of the things I’ve done over the years.” He shifted on his feet and kept his eyes on the ground. “But the best thing I ever did was when I nearly drowned in the ocean the other night. Giving my life to God, even though I still don’t fully understand what happened, was the most important thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. Now, I’m trying my best to do things His way.”

“You’ve been a Christian for like five minutes,” she mumbled, then winced. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean it like that.”

“You keep saying that. One more time, and I won’t believe you anymore.”

His sarcasm bit deep.

“What I’m trying to say is, it’s not you. It’s me.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“You’re making jokes now? I thought you hated me.”

“I don’t hate you. I’m frustrated because you have this tendency to use my past to keep me at arm’s length, and it’s irritating.”

“That’s just it. I’m not good at letting people close. It’s the way it is.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Aren’t you close to Peter and Jemi?”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because it is. Can we change the subject, please?”

“Okay. What would you like to talk about?”

“How about what we’re doing here in this parking garage?”

“No idea.”

“How can you have no idea? You’re the one who brought us here.”

“No, I didn’t. God did.”

“God?”

“Yeah.”

She huffed. “There you go again. You talk about God like He’s not only transformed your life but like He’s here now, with you, leading you in the way you should go.”

“That’s what’s bothering you right now? Am I doing it wrong? I mean, I could be. I have no idea how you’re supposed to talk to Him.”

“Not like that. That’s not how it works.”

“That’s a bit odd, then.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, that’s exactly how Peter explained it to me, and after God saved me from my little swim, it made sense.”

“But that’s what I mean. You barely know God. Besides almost drowning, what else has God done for you?”

He smiled and spread his arms. “How about this?”

“Running to a parking garage was not God’s idea.”

“It must have been. I’ve never been here before.”

“That’s your evidence? You sure you didn’t come up with this as a good hiding place because it actually is?”

“I’m the baby Christian, and you need *me* to explain it to *you*?”

She crossed her arms. “I guess so.”

“God led me to wait at the police station.”

“You wouldn’t need God for that. If you wanted to help me, it was the right place to start.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you going to let me talk?”

“All right. I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“I kind of don’t want to tell you now.”

“Seriously?”

He grinned. “When we went into that basement, I had no idea where we were. You said no one could have followed us through that maze. You were right. God led me the whole way. Each step I had to trust Him. Especially in the dark.”

“That’s not true. It can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“You had to know where we were going. Maybe you don’t remember being there, but you knew the way.”

“I didn’t. I’m sorry that you think I’m such a bad guy that God wouldn’t want to do that for me.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“I told you if you said that one more time, I wouldn’t believe you anymore.”

She grunted and kicked a pillar. “I’m not good at this.”

“What? Apologizing for being judgmental?”

“No.” She faced him. “I’m not good at being vulnerable.” Her mouth snapped shut. That’s what happened when you got emotional. You said and did things you never meant to.

Jay stepped up to her so he was standing so close it was hard to breathe.

“What about this makes you vulnerable?” he said, tipping his head to the side.

He wasn't touching her, but he may as well have been. She had to step back to catch her breath. "You want to know the truth?"

"It's a good place to start."

"I've been a Christian for a long time. Since I was a kid. You've been doing this for a few days, and you already have ___"

She was surprised at the tears that pushed into her eyes. She squeezed them closed before she continued.

"Sorry. I told you I'm not good at this."

"You're doing just fine. What is it you think I have that you don't?"

"I trust God, but He's always been far away from me. My whole life, I've explained it away by making excuses about Him being too busy with more important things. But deep down, I wonder. Peter talks about letting God get close, but I've never been able to."

"You think Peter's not telling you the truth?"

"I look up to Peter and Jemi. They're heroes of the faith, so it makes sense that God would be close to them."

"But not me."

"Not because of your past but because you're new. If God is close to Peter and he's close to you, then where does that leave me?"

"Isla, I'm probably not the best person to explain how God works, but one thing should be clear to you. God used me to save your life. I'm pretty sure that makes you the focus of this little jaunt through the city, not me."

"Then why didn't He tell *me* how to get away to safety?"

"I don't know. Maybe you're not a good listener."

She laughed. "That can't be it."

"Seriously though, if you don't expect Him to speak to you, then that would make it hard to hear when He does. Or

maybe He wants you to know you can trust me.”

“I—” She did trust him, despite her best efforts. And she knew it wasn’t fair to him for her to try so hard to see him through the eyes of his past. It might keep her safe from him, but that didn’t make it right. “I’m sorry.”

“For which thing?”

“Hey, I’m trying to be serious here.”

“I accept your apology.”

“And I do trust you. Thank you for coming back for me.”

“I never left. And I won’t. You can count on me to be in this thing until the end.”

And then what? “All right. So, do you have a car stashed around here?”

“Nope. I didn’t know we were coming here, remember?”

“But God knew.”

“Listen to you.”

“I’m trying.”

“Well, you *are* a federal agent. You could commandeer one of these vehicles, couldn’t you?”

“Do you know how much paperwork that would require? We’ll just get an Uber.”

“Suit yourself. But that Corvette over there is calling my name.”

She scrunched her nose. “Really? You’re a Corvette guy?”

“What’s wrong with a Corvette?”

“They’re pointy.”

“I see. You’re a Mustang kind of girl, aren’t you?”

“When I was a little girl, my dad had a 1978 T Top Pontiac Firebird Trans Am.”

“Trans Am, huh? What color?”

“Black, of course. He would take me through the McDonald’s drive-thru to get a soft serve cone.”

“Sounds like a great dad.”

“Not really. That’s the only good memory I have of him.”

“Oh.”

“He didn’t abuse me or anything. He was just never there.”

“Is he still alive?”

“No idea. The day he left us for good was the last I heard from him. He called my mom a couple of times for money, but when she didn’t give him any, he had no more interest in us.”

“You ever think of trying to find him?”

“Why?”

“Never mind.”

“Did you know your dad?”

“No. He died in a construction accident when I was a baby.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s life, though, isn’t it? My mom worked three jobs, and I found a family for myself on the street. In case you were wondering how I got mixed up in a life of crime.”

“I wasn’t.”

Chapter 13

ISLA SUCKED up the dregs of the vanilla milkshake she'd gotten before they'd arrived back at Peter's. She was lounging on the couch in sweatpants and a baggy shirt, and Jay thought she couldn't get any more adorable. If circumstances had been different, he wouldn't be sitting in a chair across the room.

"Do you really have to do that?" he said after an extended slurp.

"I'm almost done."

"Almost? From the sounds of it, there isn't anything left in that cup. All you're doing is removing any remnant of moisture from the cardboard."

"I'm not wasting a drop. Do you know how long it's been since I've had a milkshake?"

"That's what you said when you bought it. I'm surprised you didn't go for soft serve."

"I haven't had one since my dad."

"So, the attorney general helped you escape from jail," Peter said as he entered the living room. "Mission accomplished. Even if things didn't turn out how you expected. You've at least gained Whitlock's trust."

"I sure hope so," Isla said, setting her empty cup on the floor.

"I think we've moved past hope," Jay said. "Whitlock isn't a part of the conspiracy, and he's on our side."

“But it doesn’t bring us any closer to getting answers,” Isla said. “And I don’t want to risk contacting him until everything settles down. The last thing I want to do is get him in trouble. Or worse, get him killed. Baker will try to find out how I got set free from the police station.”

“I don’t think he’d make a move as big as killing him. That would draw too much attention. He’ll wait to see how things pan out.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have time to do the same. If we’re going to bring these guys down, we need to find names and evidence now. My team was murdered to hide something. Now that I’m free, they’ll do what they need to in order to protect themselves.”

“One thing we know is there’s no one left in the DEA to get information from,” Jay said. “Tell me about the members of your team. How were they chosen?”

“The team itself was already put together. Hugo, the team leader, stumbled across some intel. When he brought it to Fogarty, Fogarty immediately brought Baker in. We were told it was a matter of national security, so we didn’t question his involvement. And we were told that keeping it confidential was of the utmost importance. So we spoke to no one else. That’s when Baker began putting together the operation. He set us up.” Isla’s shoulders slumped. “And Fogarty went along with it.”

“So Baker was sent in to fix it.”

Jay looked at her, but when they made eye contact, she looked at the fire.

“Isla, I hope you know I would never be a part of something like that. I know I said I get hired to fix things. But not things like that.”

“I know you wouldn’t do anything like that now.”

“Not now. Not ever. That’s not what I used to do. That’s not who I’ve ever been.”

She nodded but continued staring into the fire. “All we have is dead ends.”

“Not necessarily. We won’t get anywhere with Baker, but tell me more about this operation. Who was it you guys were after? What was the intel?”

“It doesn’t matter. Baker would have already destroyed the file.”

“I’m sure he has, but maybe we can come in from the other side.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whoever it was you were after, they’re connected to federal agents.”

“And you think they’ll tell us if we ask nicely?”

“I don’t know. You haven’t told me who they are yet.”

“Not that it makes any difference, but they’re a group working out of the docks. They’ve been known to police for years, but Hugo had an informant that told him they’d recently stepped up their game. That got our attention.”

“Why?”

“They’ve always been into small stuff. Small drug arrests. A few weapons charges. Then they came under new leadership, and things changed. They began bringing in and cutting the drugs, then selling them. No middle men. Their product was cheaper, but we suspected there was more going on because deaths from drug overdoses have increased in the area.”

“And you think it’s their product that’s responsible?”

“That’s what we found out, yes.”

“Can you remember the name of the leader of the group?”

“A man named John Sharpe.”

“Sharpe?”

“You know him?” Peter said.

“I know of him. He’s a businessman. He tried to hire me once. I turned him down.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t do what he wanted me to do. He’s a dangerous man, but I wouldn’t expect him to lead a gang. Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Isla said. “Maybe he’s diversifying his portfolio.”

“You may be kidding, but you’re probably not far off. What gang is he leading?”

“They call themselves the Red Wolves.”

Jay stiffened. “The Red Wolves did this?”

“You know them too?”

He stood and walked to the fire. “I know the man who used to lead them.”

“You did work for him?”

“Yes. But I also considered him a friend.”

“A drug dealer is your friend?”

“That’s not—forget it. Murdering an entire unit of federal agents would have never happened under his command.”

“This friend of yours, do you think we could talk to him?”

“He’s not a part of this. He’s running a bar downtown now. Sharpe’s the one who ordered it.”

“But he knows the guys in the gang. If he’s still connected to any of them, he might offer us a way in.”

“I doubt it. He’s not a big fan of the feds.”

“I wouldn’t expect him to be, but I take it he doesn’t approve of what the Red Wolves did to my team?”

“It wouldn’t affect his sleep at night, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Please, Jay. He’s our only lead. Can you at least ask?”

“I can ask.”

“Great.” She stared at him for a second. “You need to borrow my phone?”

“I don’t have his number.”

“Then how’re you going to ask?”

“I thought I’d pay him a visit.”

“Even better. We can go to his bar tomorrow.”

“No. There’s no *we*. I told you, he’s not a fan.”

Isla looked at Peter. “Are you going to back me up here?”

“You guys are handling everything very well. I’d prefer to stay out of it if I can. I’m just glad you’re both here alive and well. What you do next is up to you.”

“Come on, Jay. I won’t bring my badge. I can be there as your plus one. He doesn’t have to know I’m a fed.”

Jay’s laugh made Isla scowl. “My plus one?” he said. “Are you kidding?”

“What’s so funny?”

“Have you already forgotten the fundraiser? I thought maybe you were exaggerating about your lack of skill, but I’ve seen it with my own eyes. You are terrible undercover.”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut. And I don’t need to pretend. I can be myself. When I go home, I’m not an agent. I’m Isla Taylor.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ve gotta side with Jay on this one,” Peter said. “Even when you’re at ease, you don’t have the air of a civilian.”

Isla looked down at herself and held her arms out. “You’re saying I look like a federal agent in this?”

“You would wear that?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“No. He’ll want to know why you’re there.”

“You can’t come up with a good cover story?”

“To explain you? No.”

She glared at him. “This is very unfair.”

“Isla, you can’t tag along into the lion’s den without a good reason. If you want this to work, you’re going to have to trust me.”

“Fine.”

“Really? That was easier than expected.”

“I can be reasonable. We’ll fix you up with a wire, and I can monitor you from outside.”

Jay looked at Peter, who smirked.

“What?” Isla said. “Why is this so difficult for you two?”

“I can’t wear a wire. That’s the first thing he’ll check.”

“I thought you said he’s a friend. I don’t have any friends who check me for a wire.”

“I haven’t seen him in a while, and he’s always been a cautious man. If you want me to ask him about contacts within the Red Wolves, he’s going to be suspicious.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“I’ll go in and talk to him and let you know what he says.”

“No.”

“Then you can forget it.”

“Why are you being so hardline on this?”

“Because, despite what you think, there are times when you don’t know best.”

Her mouth opened and closed. She looked at Peter, but he was looking at the floor.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way. But I’m driving there with you.”

“Isla.”

“I promise I won’t get in your way. But I want to at least be there. That way, I won’t have to wait for you to come back.”

“Fine. But you’re staying in the car.”

“I’m glad you guys got that settled,” Peter said. “Jemi and I will be here doing our usual.”

Jay pulled to the curb and turned off the engine.

Isla noticed a homeless man tucked into a doorway. “You sure the car won’t get stolen in this part of town?”

“Not with you in it.” He smiled.

“I still think you should let me come in with you.”

He undid his seatbelt and turned so he faced her.

“Isla.” He took her hand and held it in both of his.

She frowned. “What?”

“There is no possible scenario where I would ever take you into that bar with me. Do you understand? And if you get out of this car, I will leave you here.”

She yanked her hand out of his and slapped his arm. “You don’t have to be sarcastic.”

He laughed as he got out of the car. “It’s the only way to keep me from shaking sense into you.”

She drummed her fingers on her leg while she watched him walk halfway down the block to a door with a neon sign over the top. He reached for the handle, then gave her one last grim look before entering.

She checked her watch, then set the timer for five minutes. That should give him enough time to find this guy and preoccupy himself so she could have a look for herself. She had promised to stay out of his way, but she’d said nothing agreeing to stay in the car. His leaving her here was a risk she was willing to take.

Today wasn’t about going undercover. It was about being covert and gathering information. Those were both things she was excellent at.

When her wrist buzzed, she got out of the car and dropped a twenty-dollar bill in the lap of the homeless man.

He picked it up and looked at her suspiciously. “What’s this for?”

“I was wondering if you knew who owns the bar down there.”

“You a cop?”

“Do I look like a cop?”

“Yeah.”

She slumped. “What gives me away?”

“It would be easier to tell you what doesn’t. Who else but a cop asks for the name of a bar owner?”

“There are easier ways to get that kind of information.”

“Then why pay *me* for it?”

“I’m paying for the convenience. So, are you going to tell me?”

“Nope.” He tucked the bill into his shirt. “And I ain’t giving the money back, either.”

“I didn’t expect you to.”

She pulled her hair out of its ponytail and shook it out, then untucked her shirt. “Do I still look like a cop?”

“I like the ponytail better.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He held out his hand. “I’ll tell ya for another twenty.”

“Forget it. Have a nice day.”

He cat-called her as she walked away.

She ignored him but tucked her shirt back in and peered through the window of the door with the neon sign. It was packed.

Perfect, she wouldn’t be noticed.

Chapter 14

INSIDE THE BAR, the music that was only slightly irritating on the street was now a suffocating mix of beats and raised voices. Isla paused among the clanking of glass and the press of bodies before venturing farther.

She scanned the sea of faces, noting Jay was not in her immediate line of sight, so she moved deeper into the long narrow room, continuing her perusal. She had to spot him before he did her. Then she could get a visual on his contact. If Jay couldn't get the job done, she could always come back and try to persuade his contact in some other way.

Two men in a booth at the back stood. Isla dropped out of sight when she recognized Jay, who was facing her, but kept a visual on his companion, who she couldn't get a clear look at besides the back of his head.

She scooted between two people and watched as Jay followed the other man through a door at the back.

From his posture, it didn't look as though Jay had been forced. For now, Isla would take that as a good sign, although she hadn't yet ruled out kicking down that door if she thought Jay's life might be in danger.

For now, she'd have to wait it out.

Sliding onto a stool, she drummed her fingers on the bar while she waited to be served so she could order a Coke. She had to at least look like she was there to drink.

The man next to her propped his elbow on the counter when he turned to face her. His meaty hand rested close to hers.

“What are you drinking tonight?” He had a scruffy beard and sounded like he’d already had a couple.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

He smirked. “I bet I can guess.”

“Oh yeah?”

He got the bartender’s attention. “White wine for the lady.”

“No, thanks,” she said.

“Come on. You’re a white wine drinker, and you know it.”

“What I know is I’d rather you didn’t buy me a drink.”

The guy ignored her retort and nodded to the bartender to get his order. “My name’s Mason.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You look like a Rachel.”

“I’m not.”

“Rebecca? I bet it starts with an R.”

“I didn’t tell you my name because I don’t want you to know it. Not because I want to play a game.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Are you trying to make me angry on purpose?”

He grinned, and she rolled her eyes. She knew guys like this who tried to control by ignoring anything you said they didn’t like.

“Your scowl is kinda sexy. And you look really familiar for some reason. Have we met before?”

“Is that a new spin on the ‘come here often’ line?”

“I know you don’t come here often. I would have noticed.” He looked her up and down. “You’re not the type to come into a place like this.”

“What type is that?”

The bartender put Isla’s drink in front of her. She smiled at him in thanks but didn’t touch the glass.

“The straight as an arrow type. You probably make your bed every morning and enjoy your routine, but it’s getting to you, right? You’re getting tired of doing things by the book. You’ve come here looking to get a taste of the dark side. Well, you’re in luck, Rebecca, because I can offer that to you and more.”

“It’s true, I do make my bed every morning, but I’m not here for the reason you think I am.”

“I’d love to hear all about it.”

“I’m not looking for company.”

“You say that, but if you wanted to drink alone, you could stay home.”

“I needed a change of scenery.” She scooted away from him as far as the stool would let her.

Mason laughed. “Playing hard to get, huh?” He slapped his hand on the bar, and she flinched. “Now I know why you look so familiar.”

Isla’s hand slid down to where her gun was concealed. “Oh, yeah?” She didn’t recognize Mason, but it was possible she’d arrested him.

“Rita Burn—Bunn—something or other. I can’t remember your last name, but I knew your name started with an R.”

“My name’s not Rita.”

“You went to Birmingham High, right?”

“No.” She released a silent sigh and retracted her hand from her weapon. “That’s not where I went to high school.”

“Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed. You played hard to get back then too.” He tapped his head. “That’s what shook it loose for me. You haven’t changed one bit.”

She checked the door where Jay had disappeared. If he didn't come back out soon, she'd have to go in and get him.

"I'm telling you, it wasn't me."

He leaned closer. "You kept pushing me away, remember? You kept telling me you weren't interested, but then you signaled to me to follow you into the girl's bathroom that day."

"You stalked Rita into the bathroom? Did she call the police?"

"No, *you* didn't call the police. You loved it. You told me so. There's no way you could forget. You have to be pullin' my leg."

"I'm sorry, but you definitely have the wrong person."

"No, it was you. I wouldn't forget a face like yours. You were smokin' hot. Still are."

Isla slid off the stool. She'd had enough. "If it had been me, I would have sent you to jail with broken bones. Now, I've got better things to do. Excuse me."

She'd have to wait outside until it was time to make a move if necessary. She couldn't risk the attention, even if it meant doing what Jay had told her.

Mason grabbed her arm. "You can't go. I bought you a drink, and you haven't touched it."

"I told you I didn't want it." She pulled her arm from his grasp and pushed through the crowd until she felt a yank on her hair. It was hard enough to hurt.

She turned to face Mason, who stood with his chest out, spreading his shoulders as wide as they'd go. He was a big guy and took up a lot of space.

"I didn't say you could go, Rita. Now sit down and drink your wine."

She looked at the surrounding crowd, who were paying close attention, but no one was interfering. What was it about her that no one wanted to help her when she was in trouble? So much for a good citizen stepping into her rescue. Not that

she couldn't handle herself, but she was supposed to come in here unnoticed.

She used her finger to beckon Mason closer. He obeyed, and she said, "If you touch me again, you'll regret it."

He snickered. "I doubt that very much."

She was desperate to punch the self-satisfied look off his face, but she had to let it go.

"This is your last chance. I'm going to walk out that door, and you're going to stay right where you are. Do you understand?"

"Sure." He picked at his tooth with his fingernail.

"Good."

She took another second to stare him down and make sure he grasped the seriousness of the situation, then turned and headed for the door.

An arm slid around her waist as he pulled her against him.

She looked down to see his giant forearm across her stomach. This was not how things were supposed to go.

He let her take his hand, only because he didn't know why she did it.

After prying his fingers backward, he let her go with a howl before she twisted to face him, then she slammed the heel of her hand into his nose.

He staggered back into the bar with his hands pressed against his face, but she couldn't leave him standing and risk him following her out, so she advanced on him and kned him in the groin before shoving him backward. He knocked several people over as he went down.

It would take him time to rise, and if Jay came out, she couldn't let him discover who had caused all the commotion.

She turned to escape and got as far as the end of the bar before a hand grabbed her arm.

The punch she let fly was more because of the apprehension of being found out by Jay than a fear of Mason attacking again. But the man she punched wasn't Mason. Judging by his black T-shirt, cropped hair, and the fact that he was expecting her punch and dodged it, he was a bouncer.

He grabbed her arm and twisted it around her back to restrain her.

"Hey," she said. "You don't have to be so rough. All I was doing was protecting myself."

"Sorry, lady, but the disturbance in here suggests otherwise."

"I wouldn't have had to do that if you turned up in time to do something about it. Where were you two minutes ago?"

He turned her toward the back of the bar. "Doesn't look to me like you needed any protection."

When he shoved her forward, she tried to wrestle away from him. "What are you doing? I thought you were kicking me out."

He shook his head. "You'll have to come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere with you. I understand I caused some trouble. I'll go."

"Too late for that."

He had a hold of her weapon arm, so she wasn't able to reach her gun. "You have no right to detain me."

"Sure I do. Citizen's arrest. We've called the cops."

"No, you haven't. I know my rights. Trust me. You're only going to make things worse by keeping me here."

"I'll let my boss decide."

"I'm not going." If they connected her to Jay, they could both be dead. "Hey!" she yelled to the crowd. "What he's doing is illegal. Someone call the police."

"Sorry folks," the bouncer said in response. "I'll leave you in peace momentarily."

She continued to resist, but they were almost to the back when Mason shoved his way in front of them. Blood had dripped down his face onto his shirt, and one of his eyes was already turning color.

“Out of the way,” the bouncer said.

“Don’t listen to him, Mason,” Isla said. “You can take him.”

Mason wiped the blood from his nose and growled at her. “I’m not interested in him. I’m interested in you.”

“You want me to let her go so she can blacken the other eye?” the bouncer said. “Move!” The bouncer’s voice boomed over the music, and Mason stepped aside, muttering.

“That was a bit of a letdown,” Isla said, but she used the distraction to twist out of the bouncer’s grasp. She reached for her gun, but he was used to her kind of behavior, and he punched her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her.

He shoved her forward, and she slammed into the door.

Before she could recover, he opened the door and wrapped his arms around her, restricting her movement so he could pull her through and use his foot to slam the door behind them.

He pushed her down the hall, and she tripped, nearly falling.

She turned to him, unwilling to go any further, but he was pointing a gun at her.

“It’s not really a fair fight if you have a gun,” she said.

“Have you got one?”

“Don’t you think I would have used it already?”

“Lift your shirt.”

“Excuse me?”

“Fine. Arms up. I’ll look myself.”

“Wait.” She pulled her gun and handed it to him. She’d been stupid enough to bring her badge with her. It was bad

enough he had her gun, but if he found her badge, she'd be in real trouble. "I don't like being touched."

"No kidding. Down the hall. Door on the left. Move."

She shuffled down the hall and waited at the closed door until he ordered her to open it.

"This is your last chance to let me go."

"Open. The. Door."

God, I need to you make me better at pretending, quick, she prayed as she turned the knob and entered a dimly lit room.

Chapter 15

JAY WAS SITTING at a round table in the middle of the room. If he was surprised to see her, he didn't show it.

The other man with him was the one she'd seen earlier, but now she could inspect his face.

He had high cheekbones and vivid blue eyes, even in the low light. He could pass for sixties, but Isla guessed he was somewhere in his fifties but with the weathered face of a man who'd lived a hard life.

"Who's this?" the man said.

"A troublemaker," the bouncer said, still aiming his gun.

"Excuse me," Isla said. "I already told you, I was defending myself. Mason assaulted me. What was I supposed to do?"

"It was how she handled herself, Mr. Blanchet. Didn't feel right."

"I've taken self-defense classes. And it's a good thing too, since your bouncer here didn't offer any assistance."

Mr. Blanchet's eyebrows lifted. "Is that true?"

The bouncer shifted on his feet. "I was in a different area of the bar. When I heard what was going on, I went over to take care of it, but this lady had already laid Mason out flat. Then I found this on her." He handed over the gun.

Blanchet examined it, then laid it on the table. “What were you doing in another part of the bar that was so important?”

“I was dealing with another matter.”

“I see. So this young lady was forced to defend herself.”

“Don’t blame your bouncer,” Jay said after an exaggerated sigh. “It’s my fault, Carl. I shouldn’t have trusted her to stay in the car.”

Carl Blanchet considered Isla for a full minute before responding. “Leave her here with us. I’ll take care of it. But can you see to it that Mason is no longer allowed in this establishment? This isn’t the first time we’ve had an incident with him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Isla glanced down at her gun, then looked at Jay, who gave her an almost indiscernible shake of his head.

“Please have a seat,” Carl said to Isla.

“Thank you, Mr. Blanchet.”

“Please, call me Carl.”

“Thank you, Carl.”

“So, Miss...”

“Taylor,” she said. “Isla Taylor.”

“Isla. That’s a pretty name.”

“Okay.”

“Not one for compliments, noted. So, what brought you into my bar this evening?”

“She promised me she’d stay in the car,” Jay said.

Isla leaned forward, resting her arms near her gun. “I never said that.”

“You did.”

“No, I promised you I wouldn’t get in your way.”

“And yet, here you are. In my way.”

“All I wanted was a drink. Then Mason decided he was my new best friend. I tried to leave without making a fuss, but neither Mason or the bouncer would let me do that.”

“I’d like to clear one thing up,” Carl interrupted. “Did you really take Mason out?”

“Yeah. He deserved it.”

“I have no doubt. But he’s a big guy.”

“I think I may have broken his fingers. And possibly his nose.”

“I’m sure he deserved it.”

“He did. It turns out those lessons paid off.”

“Now that you’re here, you can tell me why it is you need my help.”

Jay shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“I never said that.” Isla’s eyes flicked to Jay and then back to Carl. “I tried to leave after things got out of control.”

“All things considered, I’m sure you can appreciate how all of this looks.” Carl leaned back in his chair. “She’s not a cop. What is she? FBI?”

Jay smiled. “You haven’t lost your touch.”

“I’m not law enforcement,” Isla tried, but Carl smirked.

“Of course you are. Federal Marshal perhaps?”

“No.”

“DEA?”

“No.”

“That’s the one. How long have you been with them?”

“I told you—”

“Isla, give it up,” Jay said. “Carl worked you out the moment you walked in.”

“You’re not helping. I thought he wasn’t supposed to know.”

“The reason I told you to stay in the car.”

“Can you at least tell me how everyone knows what I am so I can work on not doing it anymore?”

“That’s impossible,” Carl said. “There are so many small details. You should accept yourself the way you are. And maybe take Jay’s advice next time and stay in the car.”

“Well, I’m here now, and I want you to know that I’m not going to charge you with anything.”

Carl snorted and looked at Jay. “That’s a relief. I was worried there for a second.”

“I’m glad you two find this amusing.”

“That’s because it is,” Carl said. “You guys and your badges. You think you only see a world with two sides. But none of us do. Not really. There is no right or wrong.”

“You think you’re enlightened by removing the rules? They’re there for a reason. To protect the innocent.”

“A romantic notion.”

“It’s the way it is.”

“Oh yeah? What about murder?”

“What about it?”

“You would say that murder is wrong.”

“It is.”

“What about self-defense? What about when the government does it to punish someone who’s broken the law?”

“There are exceptions, yes.”

“The gray area. I use this bar to launder money.”

“You shouldn’t tell me that.”

“Why? You said you weren’t going to charge me with anything. I do what I do to get my daughter through college so she can be free of the life I’ve led.”

“There are other ways. Legal ways.”

“Are there? Are you going to pay her college fees?”

“She could get a scholarship, a job, a payment plan.”

“She got a scholarship. She’s also got a job.” He leaned forward. “My daughter works very hard and still struggles to cover her costs. My business means she’ll graduate debt free. Not many can say that.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“No? What about what you’re doing here right now? Jay told me what happened.”

“So you already knew I was DEA?”

“Not specifically. But how far are you willing to go to find the truth? Will you break the rules?”

“Some rules can be bent, some can’t.”

“And who decides that?”

“It depends on the situation.”

“Of course it does. And who gets to decide what’s okay and what is not? You?”

“That’s what the courts are for.”

“Is that why you’re here? You want to find out what I can do for you and then go see a judge to check if it’s okay? Or is breaking the law okay only if the people you’re hurting are bad people according to you?”

“There’s a greater good to think about.”

“Just like the greater good of my daughter?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I know. That’s exactly my point. Life’s complicated.”

“And it’s too short,” Jay said. “Can we stop pretending to be philosophers and get back to the topic at hand?”

“If Isla promises to play nice.”

“I already told you I wouldn’t charge you.”

“Charge me for what?”

“Money laundering perhaps? Or kidnapping a federal agent?”

“Isla,” Jay said. “This is why I didn’t want to bring you in here.”

“He asked.”

Carl pushed Isla’s gun closer to her. “You can have this back. Jay, it’s been good to see you again. But I’m sorry. I won’t be able to help you. I’ll see to it that you don’t have any trouble leaving.”

He pushed his chair out from the table and stood.

“Wait,” Isla said. “I’m sorry. I’ve come here to ask for your help, and I’ve been disrespectful. If there’s anything you can do, it would mean a lot to me if you would help us. I just want to find out what happened to my team.”

“Will you make sure the feds leave me alone if I do?”

Her head dropped. She wanted to say yes. But she knew there were lines she couldn’t cross, even to bring justice to her team. Maybe Carl was right to a point, but not every area of the law was gray. Some things remained very clear, and this, for her, was one of them.

“I can’t do that.”

“I already knew you’d say that, but it was worth a shot. Okay, I’ve decided I will help you after all.”

“You will?”

“Yes, but not out of the goodness of my heart.”

“I would never expect that. But why the sudden change?”

“You apologized. A federal agent apologized to me for being disrespectful. I’ll think fondly of this moment for years to come—What? You’re not enjoying yourself?”

“No. I don’t find any of this amusing.”

“It’s a pity. People usually warm to me quite quickly. You could use with a bit of loosening up.”

“You said you’re going to help. Can we stick to that?”

“The truth is, I don’t like what Sharpe’s done to my guys. There are some good ones in there still, but he’s changed things. What he’s got them doing now goes beyond what even I would do.”

“I’m surprised you still care,” Isla said.

“We were like a family.”

“Then why did you leave?”

“Just because we’re family doesn’t mean being around each other is for the best. The truth is, the mother of my child died in the crossfire of a gun fight I was a part of.”

“You loved her.”

“As much as a guy like me can be in love with a woman. But my love for my daughter, that’s different. It broke her heart to lose her mother. She blamed me for a while, which she was right to do. That’s when I knew I had to make some changes.”

“But you still have connections inside?”

“Yes. They may be under the command of Sharpe, but he’s all business, and they’re his hired muscle. That’s it. Loyalty doesn’t disappear because of a change of career. I can talk to one of my guys and see what he knows.”

“Can he get us inside?”

“You want to get inside?”

“We need evidence,” Jay said. “I know it sounds crazy, but his word won’t be enough to take these guys down.”

“I can probably get you in, but I can’t guarantee you’ll come back out again.”

“We’ll take that chance,” Isla said.

He looked at Jay, who nodded. “If that’s what you want, sure, he can let you in. But, like I said, other than that, you’re on your own.”

“We got it,” Jay said.

“Jay, you know what kind of man Sharpe is. If they catch you in there, you’re dead.” He looked at Isla. “And you better make sure you don’t mention my name or the name of my guy.”

“We won’t. I promise.”

“You’re lucky I believe you’re a woman of your word. There’s a small, abandoned hospital in the east part of the city. That’s where their hideout is.”

“Sounds creepy.”

“You believe in ghosts?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll be fine. There’s a loading bay out the back. I’ll let you know when.”

“Who will we be meeting?”

“I won’t risk telling you his name.”

“And how do we know we can trust you?”

“Isla,” Jay said.

“It’s okay,” Carl said. “She’s allowed to ask me the question. It is both your lives at stake.”

“I don’t mean to sound rude,” Isla said. “But I’ve been ambushed once recently, and I don’t want to go through it again. I know you don’t like federal agents much.”

“I swear on my daughter’s life that I won’t set you up. But I won’t make any promises I can’t keep. Your life is your own.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll get in touch once I’ve set it up with my guy.”

“Thanks, Carl,” Jay said. “It was good to see you again.”

“You too. Isla, it’s been interesting. If you manage to not die, come back and say hello sometime.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Turns out I have a soft spot for the DEA. Who knew?”

Isla headed for the door, but Carl put a hand on Jay. “I hope she’s worth it. I never would have guessed you’d go for a fed.”

“It’s just a job.”

Isla was standing at the door. “You coming?”

“You sure it’s just a job?” Carl mumbled.

“Thanks for your help.” He slapped Carl on the back and joined Isla.

As soon as Isla stepped outside, she stopped and turned to him. “I’m sorry. That didn’t go as planned. I should have stayed in the car.”

“What you did in there—”

“I know. I messed up. Please don’t rub it in.”

“What I was going to say was, what you did in there was amazing.”

“Are you picking on me?”

“No. I’ve known Carl for a long time. There was a lot of speculation about why he left the Red Wolves, but no one really knew.”

“Why’d he tell me?”

“I have no idea. On some level, he must trust you. So don’t screw it up.”

“I don’t plan on it. But let me get this straight. You’re saying that if I hadn’t gone in there against your wishes, things may not have turned out as well as they did?”

“Don’t push your luck.”

“I’m just saying.” The corner of her mouth turned up in a teasing grin before she went to the car. It was alluring in a way that made him uncomfortable.

He let her get a few steps before walking to the car himself. She frustrated him at times, and at others, she was almost irresistible.

Chapter 16

THE OLD HEAVY metal door scraped as it opened, sending a reverberation back through the building.

The man on the inside looked over his shoulder until the lingering echo subsided, then nodded at Jay and Isla.

“If anyone finds you, I don’t know you.”

“We know,” Isla said.

“I’m only doing this for Mr. Blanchet because I owe him, but opening the door is as far as I’ll go. The rest is up to you.”

“How many guys are in the building?” Jay said.

“There are four of us here now. I’ll do what I can to keep them downstairs, but I won’t risk anything for you, and I can’t promise no one else will turn up. If you’re found, you’re dead.”

“Got it.”

“There’s a room on the second floor in the east wing where you might find what you’re looking for, but I can’t tell you more than that. I don’t go in there.”

“Sharpe keeps his paperwork in there?”

“I have no idea. What I can tell you is he wouldn’t keep them in his main office. It’s too risky. The east wing room is the only other place I know of that he spends any time on his own. But my information is not extensive. I’m not one of his

top-level guys. I think he knows my loyalty remains with Mr. Blanchet.”

“You’re taking a risk letting us in, and we appreciate it,” Jay said. “Thank you.”

The guy shook his head. “I don’t think you understand the risk *you’re* taking. I hope it’s worth it.”

“It is,” Isla said.

“When you’re done, leave the way you came in.”

Jay nodded, and they waited for Carl’s man to get clear before they moved farther into the building.

“Once this is all over,” Jay whispered as they crept down the hall, checking open doors before passing them, “I think I’ll go on a vacation.”

“Why?”

“Because, after this, I’m going to need it.”

“I thought you were used to this stuff.”

“Not this. Not like this. And then, when you add in my swim, I could use a break. What about you?”

“I’ll keep working.”

“After everything you’ve been through?”

“*Because of* everything I’ve been through. If I stop working, I’ll think too much. I’d rather focus on work. Like now. This probably isn’t the time to chat about our future plans.”

“Maybe not.”

Jay moved ahead of Isla, ducking his head around a stairwell to confirm it was clear. Then he nodded and hurried up the stairs with her following quickly behind.

The upstairs appeared to be empty. Hopefully, Carl’s guy could keep it that way.

“This must be it,” Jay said when they reached a closed door. He tried the handle, but it was locked. “This is definitely it. Would you like to do the honors? Or should I?”

“Be my guest.”

Jay quickly picked the lock. At the click, he glanced up to Isla to see if she was impressed. She wasn't even looking.

“It's open,” he said.

“What are you waiting for?” She pushed in front of him and entered the office.

“You're welcome,” Jay said as he pulled the door shut behind him.

“For what?”

“Never mind.” He scanned the sparsely furnished office. “This is not what I expected from a John Sharpe office.”

A plain pine desk with a metal chair was on one side of the room, and a couple of beat-up filing cabinets were on the other.

“What did you expect?”

“Sharpe is a man who enjoys the benefits of being wealthy. Even here, I'd expect more extravagance than this.”

“Do you think Carl's guy set us up?”

“No. Carl wouldn't have arranged this unless he knew the man could be trusted. He wouldn't put me in that position.”

“Maybe Sharpe made it look this way on purpose.”

“What would that accomplish?”

“If he has documents he wants to hide, this doesn't look like a place to hide it. Maybe that's the cover.”

“Maybe.” Jay pulled open the top drawer of a filing cabinet and removed a pile of papers, flipping through them before replacing them. “Inventory.”

“Of what?”

“Nothing we're looking for.” He tried the next drawer.

“I'm not having better luck at the desk,” Isla said as she riffled through a drawer. She lifted a ticket stub. “Opera. Madama Butterfly. I wonder if he liked it.”

“The bigger question is, why leave a ticket stub in this room?”

“I don’t know, but the only other thing I can find is a notebook.”

“You want to try the old pencil shading trick? See if something was written on the page above?”

“There are no indents. It looks like it’s never been used.”

“It would have been nice if he left us a list of the people he works with.” Jay was on to the next filing cabinet.

“Yeah. It’s very inconsiderate that he hasn’t written anything down to lead us to the evidence we need to convict him.” Isla ran her hand underneath the desk and along the edges, looking for a catch or anything to suggest a hidden compartment, but it was clean. “There’s nothing here.”

“I’ve come up empty-handed too. I’m not sure what he uses this room for, but it’s definitely not storing anything important as far as I can tell.”

“Maybe he keeps it in his other office after all.”

“I couldn’t see him doing that. He’d want to keep it somewhere unconnected to his official business.”

“If it’s not in here, it could be anywhere in this building.”

“I don’t know.” Jay looked around the room. “Now that we’re here, I wonder if we should have bothered coming.”

“I thought we both agreed it was a good lead?”

“It was, but standing here, it suddenly dawned on me that it’s unlikely Sharpe would leave anything valuable in the protection of the Red Wolves.”

“Why not?”

“These guys aren’t his trusted companions. He uses them to get what he wants, not to hide anything important.”

Isla went to the other side of the room and lifted a painting off the wall. “Our friend at the door said he never comes in

here because he's not important enough. Before we give up, we should at least give this place a thorough look."

She had no luck with the first painting, so she went to the only other piece of art in the room, lifting it off the wall.

"Nope. Nothing." She examined the floor and stamped her foot. "Concrete. And no rugs to hide anything. I think we're out of luck for this room, but this is a big building—" She turned to find Jay was pointing a gun at her. "What are you doing?"

Jay's eyes diverted to the floor, and he frowned.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The back of Isla's neck prickled. "For what?"

"For what I have to do. It wasn't always my plan."

"What wasn't?"

"Put your hands up." When she didn't respond immediately, he took a menacing step toward her. "Hands. Up."

She lifted her hands. "Why?"

The door opened, and a man with both arms covered in tattoos stepped slowly into the room. He held a gun pointed at Jay. When he noticed Isla, he faltered for a second but continued to hold it on the man with the gun.

"Simmo?" Jay said. "No way. Hey, man. It's been a long time. I didn't know you were still with the Red Wolves."

"Jay? What's going on? What are you doing in here?"

"You've got extraordinary timing. I was about to bring her down to you guys."

Simmo looked at Isla and squinted. "Who's she? And you still haven't said why you're in here. Does Sharpe know you're here?"

"Not yet. It's long story."

"I have time."

"You could start by pointing that gun at her and not me."

Simmo looked undecided but complied. “So, what’s the story?”

“It probably wasn’t my best plan, breaking in here, but it was the only way I could get her inside. I wanted to make sure I caught her in the act for you guys. I was going to come find whoever I could once I’d nabbed her, but you beat me to it.”

“And who is she?”

“DEA.”

Isla’s heart pounded in her ears as she tried to make sense of what was happening.

“No kidding?” Simmo said. “How’d she know where to find us?”

“Jay,” Isla stepped forward.

“Don’t move.” He stared her down and didn’t break eye contact. “I’ll shoot you if I have to. Do you understand? I’d prefer to hand you over alive, but it’s not a requirement.”

Isla looked for any sign from him that he was only pretending, but all she could see was a dark hardness in his face, like a shadow had covered it. Or had it always been there?

“So, she knows you?” Simmo said.

“She thought she did. Didn’t you, Isla? ”

“Far out. How’d you get mixed up with the feds?”

“Not mixed up. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

“It’s right what they say about you.”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re a little crazy. If I were you, I’d be lying low, not taking my chances with a government official. I hear Shoemaker is baying for your blood.”

“Probably. We had a little misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding? I heard you killed his nephew.”

Isla took another step forward while the men were distracted, but Jay noticed. “I said don’t move. And yes, Simmo, I did kill his nephew. Have you ever met Spider?”

“I only know him by reputation.”

“If you knew him, you’d understand. I did the world a favor.”

“Who’s Shoemaker?” Isla said, unwilling to believe this was real. He couldn’t have played her so completely.

“Isla, I understand you’re confused. But you’re the captive. You don’t get to talk or move.” Jay looked at Simmo. “There’s always two sides to a story. That’s why I’m here. I have a lot of respect for your boss, and I believe he’ll listen.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s her side of the story?” Simmo asked, nodding at Isla.

“Her name’s Isla Taylor. You can check it out if you want. She got into some trouble and came to me for help.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Apparently, the Red Wolves and some government officials are working together.”

“What do you know about that?”

“Me? Nothing except that you guys set up an ambush and killed her team. But you screwed it up because Isla got away.”

Simmo’s eyes widened in rage as he looked at Isla. “You were the one? You killed Mansfield and Willis?” He charged her.

Isla planted her feet, ready to disarm him when he got close enough. She could use him as a human shield from Jay. Unless Jay really was pretending.

“Wait.” Jay shoved Simmo to the side, out of Isla’s reach.

Simmo scrambled backward, pointing his gun at Jay. “What’re you doing?”

“Saving your life.” Jay kept his eyes and his gun on Isla. “She killed your pals. You don’t think she’s good enough to

take you on?"

"She's gonna pay for that."

"They killed my whole team!" Isla yelled. "They deserved what I did to them."

"Ignore her, Simmo, or you'll screw this up. She'll pay. Don't worry. You think Sharpe won't let you have a piece of her later? But you have to let me bring her in."

"Why?"

"I thought if I brought her in to Sharpe, I would receive his good will and have the opportunity to get back in the game despite Shoemakers' current aversion to me. I thought maybe Sharpe could smooth things over for me. It wouldn't be that hard. Shoemaker must be secretly relieved to get rid of his nephew who's been nothing but trouble."

"That's a big ask from Sharpe."

"That's why I brought him a big gift."

Isla watched each man, waiting for any chance of escape. But the only window in the room was barred, and she was the one who was farthest from the door.

God, I think you helped me before. I don't know if I can ask you again, but if you could do something here, I'd appreciate it.

She swallowed hard against the fear that was rising. Jay's response to Simmo proved her fear that Jay was definitely not on her side anymore. Peter had been wrong about him.

Maybe Jay hadn't been a part of the conspiracy in the beginning, but he was now. What she had thought was God saving her at the police station was nothing more than an elaborate setup by Jay to get what he wanted. He didn't save her from Baker to protect her. He saved her so he could bring her in himself.

"Sharpe's not an easy man to convince. He knows what he wants, and he's not into giving favors. But a DEA agent? I'd expect him to be impressed."

“That’s what I’m banking on.”

Simmo snickered. “I guess it’s worth a shot. But I want you to do something for me.”

“If I can.”

“I’ll make the introductions to Sharpe if you give me all the credit for the idea of getting her in here.”

“That loses me the credibility I need.”

“All right, not all the credit, but I want him to know I was instrumental. That’s the only way he’ll let me be a part of whatever he decides to do with her. Those guys she killed were friends of mine.”

“I can do that. You found me, after all. The scenario makes more sense if we were in on this together.”

“Then you’ve got a deal.”

“Fantastic. Now, what do you want to do with her? You got anywhere secure we can lock her up around here?”

“Sure. This way.”

Simmo left the room, and Jay used his gun to point Isla toward the door. “You heard the man.”

“Don’t do this.”

“Too late now.”

She shook her head in disbelief as she stepped into the hall. “After everything we’ve been through.”

He shrugged. “Don’t take it personally.”

“I do.”

“Well, it’s not. It was simply too good an opportunity to pass up. I’ve got a job to do, and John Sharpe is the kind of man who has a lot to offer someone in my line of work.”

“It won’t work. Now he knows you’re a traitor. If you’ve done it once, you’ll do it again.”

“We’ll see.”

Chapter 17

SIMMO LED Jay and Isla back down to the first floor, then down one long corridor before they entered a large room with a barred door on one wall.

“What is this place?” Jay said. “I thought it used to be a hospital?”

“It was. They kept all the goodies locked up in here. Too bad it was empty when we took over the place.”

“From what I hear, you guys got plenty to go around.”

Simmo snorted. “Ain’t that the truth? Don’t get me wrong, I always respected Mr. Blanchet, but Sharpe’s on a whole new level. It’s been a wild ride. Blanchet never would have had the guts to do half of what Sharpe will do. You’re smart getting in with Sharpe. He’s going places.”

“Why do you think I’m here?”

“You should let me go,” Isla said. “You’ll have a team of agents in here before you know it.”

“Oh, yeah?” Simmo said, stepping up to her, but not too close. “Let me guess. If I let you go, you promise not to tell anyone we’re here?”

“Better that than risking the black helicopters that will be hanging overhead soon.”

“I think we’ll take our chances,” Jay said.

“You think I’m lying?” She glared at him.

“I know you’re lying. Your mouth does this little twitch thing when you lie. It’s cute, but it means you’d make a terrible poker player.”

“Does her mouth really do that?” Simmo said, squinting at her face.

“Yeah, watch. Hey Isla, did you like that kiss we shared?”

She scowled and tried her best to mean it. “Not even a little.”

“I see it!” Simmo hooted. “You kissed her? Man, this keeps getting better and better.”

She wanted to protest but knew it would only make everything worse. “You disgust me.”

“I think I saw another twitch,” Simmo said as he unlocked the door.

“I promise you, there was no twitch, Jay,” she said as she was shut in the lockup. She calmly took hold of the bars. “Peter’s going to find out what you’ve done, and he’ll come after you.”

Jay swaggered up to her now that she couldn’t attack. “No, he won’t. He’s got a sick wife to look after. Besides, he won’t ever find out. Who’s going to tell him?”

“He has a way of finding out everything. He’ll find you. He has a lot of friends. You’re worried about being on the bad side of this guy, Shoemaker, but he’s nothing compared to Peter.”

Jay laughed. “Are you kidding? Have you forgotten that I met Peter? He’s a pussycat, and he loves me. I’ll tell him you got mad at me because of my past and said you couldn’t trust me. Then you left me behind and went out on your own saying you could do it all yourself. I never heard from you again.” He made a pouting face. “I’m so sorry, Peter. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn’t listen. I don’t know what happened.”

Isla’s hand flew out between the bars, catching him on the cheek before he jumped out of the way. He and Simmo laughed.

“If I ever get out of here, I’m going to kill you with my bare hands.”

He bit his bottom lip, restricting his smile. “I’m tempted to let you try right now, but I’d rather give you to Sharpe undamaged.”

Her skin vibrated in fury. “One way or the other...”

“What? You’ve lost, Isla. The faster you accept that, the easier this will all be for you.”

It was pointless to throw any more rage his way. “Don’t do this. Please. You’re better than this.”

“Wow, you sure change your tune when your life depends on it. When we first met, that’s not what you thought at all. I was a terrible person who could never be trusted.”

“I didn’t know you, and I was wrong.”

“You’re right, you didn’t know me. But you weren’t wrong. You should have listened to your instincts.”

“Jay.”

“Sorry. It’s just good business. And I’m not sure if we’ll see each other again, so...best of luck.” He saluted her, and he and Simmo left her alone.

She squeezed the bars until her knuckles were white, then shook them as hard as she could. She would have screamed but didn’t want to give Jay the satisfaction.

Anger coursed through her, and she embraced it. It was better than the other feeling that threatened. Betrayal was a much harder emotion to deal with. She had allowed herself to connect with Jay, and it meant she’d given him the ability to play her. He hadn’t hidden the fact that he was good undercover, but she hadn’t known how good until today.

Once she’d released some tension by throttling the bars, she stalked to the other side of her cell. Peter had pushed her to ignore her first impression of Jay. He had criticized her for being black and white, but he’d been wrong. She’d listened to him because he’d always been right in the past, but she should have known. Once a bad guy, always a bad guy. And whoever

Shoemaker was, Jay had killed his family member and didn't feel bad about it. He was a murderer and didn't try to hide it.

She paced the small room, going over every detail she could remember from her time with him, but all that did was bring her shame. She had fallen for it completely. But he couldn't be that good. He must have slipped up somewhere. Maybe Peter had seen it and he would remember.

God, remind him. Help him see. It would be too late to help her, but she couldn't stand the thought of Jay getting away with this.

"It's not fair," she said with clenched teeth. Her jaw ached with the tension, but she didn't let up. It offered a small bit of relief.

Don't despair when evil men prosper. The scripture filtered into her thoughts, and she scoffed.

"Easy for you to say. You're not locked in here."

Who the son sets free is free indeed.

"You have a scripture for everything, don't you?" She laughed at her own stupid joke. "I thought you helped me escape the police station and then Baker. I thought it was you moving mountains to keep me safe, but it turns out all I was doing was jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire."

She closed her eyes, close to defeat. "Is that what you wanted? I started to believe. I started to hope that maybe you really did care about the details of my life. I thought maybe you wanted to walk with me and lead me. But all along, was I building a false belief about you that you had to destroy? Was I getting too comfortable with this idea that you care? Now you're setting me straight. Okay. I've got it. But for the record, I would have preferred Baker killing me. Jay doing this to me is cruel. At least with Baker, I knew where he stood. He wasn't two-faced." She growled. "Actually, he was. And now, I'm talking to myself about which one of them I'd rather die at the hands of. This is what my life is coming to?"

But as reality sank in, she realized it wasn't Jay's deceit that hurt the most. It was the way he'd treated her like chattel.

If he had been mad at her for thinking he wasn't a good man and had therefore turned on her, she could have understood. But he'd made it clear that he had no interest in her beyond what he could get for her exchange. She didn't matter to him at all.

She thought back to how he'd distracted her to put her at ease at the fundraiser. How could that not be real? She had believed him. She had liked everything about him. The way he treated her and how he looked at her. She'd respected his skill and been impressed with how he handled himself. And, yes, when he'd kissed her, she *had* liked it.

Her hand went to her mouth where he'd said he could see a twitch. She'd allowed him to know her in a way no one else did, and he'd used it against her.

She kicked the wall too hard and hurt her toe.

"This is stupid. He did what he had to in order to get me to trust him. That's all. That's how it works. It's my own fault for falling for it. There's no point being mad at him. I should be mad at me."

She sat down and leaned against the wall. "So, God, I guess I shouldn't expect another escape from prison?" She waited for a response, but no more scriptures came to mind. "I don't want to die here. Just so you know."

After so many assignments she'd accomplished with control and skill, where was that competence now? Here, she was a lost little girl. All she wanted was for God to take her in His arms and tell her it would all be okay. But all she could feel was the cold wall through her shirt.

She was on her own. No one was coming to her rescue.

"You're not going to blindfold me?" Jay said as he drove with Simmo through the city.

"What for? We're not going anywhere secret. You already know where our base of operations is. What's there to hide?"

“But we *are* going to speak to Sharpe?”

Simmo looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “You worried I’m going to stab you in the back like you did to Isla?”

“It’s an occupational hazard you have to always be ready for. Otherwise, you get caught off guard like she did.”

“That was fun. She was totally shocked. I can’t believe she had no idea. She really trusted you, man.”

“Yes, she did.” Jay sighed. “I really am that good.”

“I can’t believe you got a federal agent to kiss you. You could teach classes.”

“It’s not a skill you can acquire, Simmo. It’s a gift. You either have it or you don’t.”

“Whatever it is, you’ve got nothing to worry about from me. I told Sharpe it’s worth his while to speak with you.”

“Did you have someone look into Isla? Verify that what I said was true?”

“Yeah, and you’re lucky you’re telling the truth.”

“I wouldn’t have brought her in if I wasn’t. I’m not an idiot. And it proves I’m worth taking a risk on.”

“That’s up to Sharpe to decide. But I told him about the twitch.”

“Twitch?”

“Isla’s tell.”

“That was probably more information than he needed.”

“He likes to know people’s weaknesses.”

“I bet he does. What do you think he’ll do with her?”

“How should I know? If I was him, I’d kill her since she’s supposed to be dead already, but he may have a better idea. His ideas are usually much grander than most. Either way, I’m sure he’ll be appreciative. Or he’ll kill you. I can’t say for certain.” Simmo laughed. “I’m kidding.”

“You say that, but I know enough about Sharpe’s reputation to know there’s a bit of truth in that.”

They pulled into a parking garage and didn’t stop until they were on the roof.

“Wait here,” Simmo said after he’d parked.

He walked across the lot to a limo parked on the far side. The back window lowered, and Simmo bent down, blocking any view of the inside.

A minute later, he returned. “All right. Let’s go.” He led Jay to the limo and opened the door. “Get in.”

Jay took one more look at Simmo, trying to read him, but he just looked bored, and Jay had little choice but to get in the car where he found himself sitting across from a fifty-something man with salt-and-pepper hair.

Chapter 18

“MR. SHARPE. Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice,” Jay said as he took in the interior of the limo.

“Jayden Parker, I presume?” Sharpe offered him a glass with an amber liquid inside.

Jay put up a hand to decline. “Please, call me Jay.”

“Jay. I’m surprised we haven’t run across each other before today considering our lines of work. Simmo tells me you’ve recently had an incident you need cleared up?”

“You mean with Shoemaker?”

“Are you asking me?”

“Just checking to see if we’re on the same page. But yes, I’m not Shoemaker’s favorite person at the moment.”

“I hope you understand, Jay, I don’t clean up messes. That’s your job.”

“That’s not why I wanted to meet with you. Not the main reason, anyway. I expect my situation with Shoemaker will become obsolete after you hear what I have to say.”

Sharpe crossed his legs and folded his hands in his lap, taking his time to respond. “You may be interested to know that I’ve considered contacting you on several occasions recently because of your reputation, but something always stopped me.”

“Actually, a little while back, you asked me to do a job for you.”

“Did I? I don’t recall working with you.”

“I didn’t take the job.”

“Yet you expect me to hire you now?”

“I didn’t want to turn you down, but I knew I couldn’t do the job as effectively as you wanted. It wasn’t in my scope.”

“I can’t even recall, so I suppose it was nothing too important. But what I can say is that my instinct never steers me wrong.”

“What’s your instinct telling you now?”

“You’re not dead, so that’s a good start. But I’d like to know why it was necessary to kill Shoemaker’s nephew.”

“I was hired to do a job, and Spider interfered.”

“Enough that you saw a need to end his life and threaten the relationship you’d built with his uncle?”

“Yes. It wasn’t my first choice, but he was about to kill me. I did what I had to do.” Jay leaned forward. “Sharpe, I know you’re the type of man who wants to hear it straight, and the truth is, Spider was a liability. He was rash and stupid. Shoemaker might not see it now, but I did him a favor. Spider was tarnishing his reputation, and it would be his downfall in the end.”

“That’s a possibility, but some things need to be discovered by experience. I don’t expect Shoemaker will ever see the good side of your actions.”

“That would be unfortunate, but I can’t let it dictate the course of my life.”

“Oh no? I heard you skipped town because of it.”

“Only to give things time to cool down. I needed to clear my head and reprioritize. Then, I saw an opportunity.”

“And what makes you think working with me will clear up your misunderstanding with Shoemaker?”

“If he knows I’m your guy, he won’t touch me.”

“My guy?”

Jay smiled. “I’m tired of working with people like Shoemaker. I want a real challenge. I want to work with someone who takes big risks with big payoffs.”

“You think I do that?”

“I know you do. I know firsthand. I’ve got a woman locked up back at the hospital who would like nothing more than to slit your throat. And I’m assuming Simmo already told you why.”

“He says this was all his idea.”

“We worked together on it.”

Sharpe smiled. “We both know that’s a lie. Simmo can barely tie his own shoelaces. I only keep him around because he does what he’s told without asking questions. But I’m willing to play things your way for now, if that’s what you want. It’s rather charitable of you to offer him a hand up.”

“It has nothing to do with kindness.”

“Charity never does. Now, tell me how you came across this woman. Sounds like a very lucky break.”

“She was looking for help. Couldn’t trust the feds, so she came asking for assistance on the dark side of the street.”

“And you were happy to take a job with a federal agent?”

“A job’s a job, right?”

“That’s not all, though, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Simmo told me she’s easy on the eyes. I looked her up. He’s right.”

“I don’t know what difference that makes, but yeah, she’s not bad to look at.”

“That couldn’t have hurt the appeal to help.”

“Are you concerned I’m emotionally involved?”

“No. I want to understand your motives.”

“She’s not really my type. I’m more interested in my paycheck. That’s why I’m here. And it wasn’t long into her story that I made my own plans.”

“She doesn’t pay well enough for your loyalty?”

“Her pockets aren’t as deep as yours. I go where the money is.”

“If you’re willing to betray her for an extra few dollars, how do I know you won’t do the same to me?”

“I’m a man of my word. I never gave her my word. I just said I’d help her if I could. And I did, to a point. I helped her get into the Red Wolves’ hideout.”

Sharpe smiled broadly. His straight white teeth gleamed in the low light. “I don’t believe you.”

“What’s not to believe? I don’t see how this could be spun any other way but the truth.”

“I don’t think you’re lying. I just don’t believe you’re telling me the whole truth. What happened? Did she turn you down?”

Jay sniffed. The best way to get what he wanted from Sharpe was to give him what he wanted. “Okay, you win. Not that it’s relevant, but yes, she got me at a low moment. She came to me all damsel in distress, and yes, I wanted to help her, but it turned out it was all a ploy to get my cooperation. When I found out she wasn’t interested in anything beyond my assistance, I used the situation to my advantage.”

“I take it you’ve learned your lesson?”

“I never waste a mistake.”

“Good. I appreciate your honesty, but what makes you think I want to work with you beyond accepting your generous gift?”

“You’ve heard of me. You know what I can do. I don’t need to sell myself. My actions have spoken. But if you have no use for my skills, then you can take miss Taylor as a token

of my appreciation for your impressive business acumen. I have no more use for her. If, however, you see in me some quality that would benefit either you personally or your business, I believe it would be best for us both if we came to some sort of arrangement.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you one chance with the understanding that I don’t give second chances. You want to prove your worth to me? I’ve got a job you can do to show me how valuable you really are.”

Jay rubbed his hands together. “Excellent.”

“Miss Taylor’s team was killed because they knew more than they should have. Her boss, Ian Fogarty, was my guy on the ground, so to speak. He didn’t know I was at the top of the food chain, but he still did my bidding.”

“I heard you had him killed.”

“Isla told you, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Did she tell you she was there when it happened?”

“Yeah. Your guy Harris Baker isn’t much chop.”

“He has his value. Trust me.”

“But why kill Fogarty?”

“He wasn’t a solid investment. He showed remorse despite the very hefty remuneration he received. I no longer believed he could be trusted. Once the job was done, I had no more use for him.”

“You’re not worried about his replacement in the position?”

“Not really. I have various defense personnel and a few high-ranking officials within the FBI and their counterparts working for me.”

“Impressive.”

“There’s always room for improvement. You brought me Isla. I’d like to know who else you can get me.”

“You want me to kidnap someone for you?”

“No, but you never know when you need the port authority or a customs official to do you a favor. I’ll leave it up to you. You bring me something I can use on someone worth my while, and I’ll look for more work for you.”

Jay leaned back and locked his fingers together behind his head. “I can do better than that.”

“Can you?”

“What if I told you I could get the attorney general?”

Jay saw the muscles twitch in Sharpe’s face. He’d hooked him.

“You think you can get me Lloyd Whitlock?”

“I know I can.”

“Tell me what you have.”

“Nothing yet. But I know where the skeletons are buried.”

“Not all skeletons are created equal. Will it be enough? From what I understand, Whitlock is clean as a whistle. Believe me, I’ve looked.”

“Obviously not hard enough. By the time I’m done with him, you can make him your cabana boy if you like.”

“Fantastic.”

“But I will need to ask for a small favor.”

Sharpe laughed. “I like your style. Make the big sell followed by a favor. And not a small one, I presume?”

“You won’t miss what you never had. If I’m going to do this, I’ll need Isla. You can have her back when I’m done, but I need to borrow her momentarily.”

“Why?”

“Whitlock has a soft spot for her. She’ll make the perfect bait.”

“Baker told me about the fundraiser. He also said someone attacked him from behind when he had Isla at the police

station after she was released. I take it that was you?"

"I took advantage of Whitlock's affections. Convinced him to set her free. My intention was never to harm Baker. He just got in the way."

"It's a good thing for you that I hold no interest in him beyond how useful he is to me. Same as you. It's also enough to convince me that what you say about Miss Taylor and Whitlock may just lead to something very interesting. But what makes you think she'll help you after you handed her over to me?"

"Same way she's helped me all along. She'll do it because she won't know she is."

Sharpe had been holding his glass of liquor without taking a sip. He finished it off, then said, "Okay. I've decided to trust you to a point. But please be aware that, if you cross me, I won't kill you. I'll make you suffer. I'll find out about all the things you care about most, and I'll make you watch while I cause them great suffering. And don't think I won't enjoy every second of it."

"You have nothing to worry about. Your reputation precedes you." Jay wasn't kidding. He knew what Sharpe was capable of. "A reputation that I look forward to working with into the future."

"You get me Whitlock, and you'll find I can be quite a generous man. I may even let you help me decide what to do with Miss Taylor."

"I think Simmo would like to do the honors there."

"You don't want to watch her suffer after the way she treated you?"

"She's not worth it."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"If she was, I may have been tempted to do the deed myself before delivering her to you."

"I can work with that."

“Thank you very much, Mr. Sharpe. I look forward to a long and prosperous working relationship.”

Jay got out of the car, and Simmo waited to receive his next instructions from his boss.

Looking up at the sky as he walked back to the car they'd arrived in, Jay said a silent thank you to God. He didn't know if his plan would work, but it was the only way he could find to save Isla. If Sharpe hadn't agreed to his plan, his next move would have been to forcibly break into the hospital on his own and probably lose his life trying to save her.

Now, he could walk her out with Sharpe's blessing and maybe even solve all of her problems at the same time. He'd get Whitlock for Sharpe, or make it look like he had, and use that leverage to find out everyone who was behind the murder of Isla's team.

But before any of that, he'd make sure Isla was safe. He'd take her somewhere Sharpe could never reach her. It may mean his own life was forfeit, but he'd make sure hers wasn't.

Chapter 19

ISLA LIFTED her head from her knees when she heard the door. She scrutinized the man who approached the bars. It wasn't Simmo.

“They told me you were beautiful.” He swung the keys around his fingers to show off the power he had over her. “Your angles are a little sharp for my taste, but you're pretty in your own way.” He stuffed the keys in his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the bars, pressing his face against them. “We don't get many women in here.”

“You don't get out much?”

“That's not what I meant.”

Being uncivil with him wasn't going to get her anywhere. She didn't like using her looks to get what she wanted, and she wasn't sure if she could pull it off, but these were desperate times.

“I'm sorry.” She bit her bottom lip to look cute but then released it. She probably looked like she was grimacing. Jay would laugh—no. He wasn't the man she'd thought he was.

“Sorry for what?” The guy had greasy hair and a sallow face. He was also not much taller than her. If she could get him to open the door, it would be easy to overpower him.

“That you don't get many women in here. It would soften the place up a bit. It can't be easy being cooped up in here all the time with no entertainment.”

“What are you playing at?”

“I’m not playing at anything. I’m just making conversation.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m—lonely?” Now she *did* grimace. She really was terrible at this, but greasy-hair didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah, well, I’m only here because I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.”

“Now you’ve seen. What’s your name?”

“Why?”

“It’s smart to be cautious, but I’m locked up in here. There’s nothing I can do to you. I’d simply like to know who I’m talking to.”

“Tag.”

“Tag. Is that your real name?”

“No. Nickname.”

“Okay. It’s nice to meet you, Tag.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“What?”

“Trying to make friends with me.”

“What’s wrong with being polite?”

He squinted at her. “What’s your deal?”

“My deal? I can’t have any in here. I told you, there’s nothing I can do.”

He shook his head and turned to go.

“Wait,” she said. She’d have to come up with another plan. “I don’t know how you usually treat prisoners in here, but could I get a drink? Are you allowed to do that?”

“What’d you mean, am I allowed?”

“I don’t know where you are on the totem pole. You can get permission if you need to, but I’m really thirsty.”

“Permission?” He spat. “To get a cup of water? What do you think I am?” He dangled the keys in front of her. “I have the keys to your cell. What do you think about that?”

“I didn’t mean to sound rude. I actually thought you looked like one of the guys in charge.” She was getting better at lying. “But I didn’t want to assume anything and get you in trouble.”

“I can get you a cup of water without getting in trouble.”

“Would you mind? I’d really appreciate it.”

He looked her over. “Sure.”

Isla crossed her arms while she waited. Her plan was working. She didn’t need God to save her. He’d given her the brains to work stuff out for herself.

When Tag returned, carrying a chipped mug, she approached the bars as calmly as she could.

“Thank you. That’s really nice. I didn’t expect any of you to be nice to me.”

“Don’t get used to it. ’Cause I’m not a nice guy. You understand?”

“Right. I do know that. But I always thought the toughest guys were those who could behave with a certain amount of benevolence.”

He grunted, impressed with himself, then passed the mug through the bars.

“Only the strongest can afford to be,” she said as she reached for the drink.

“Exactly.”

With a smile on her face, her hand shot past the cup, fastening to his arm instead. She yanked him toward her, smashing his head against the bars.

The mug shattered on the floor before the guy joined it, unconscious.

Isla dropped to her knees and tugged his body around so she could get access to the keys in his pocket.

Maybe she wasn't so bad at this undercover stuff after all.

"Come on. Hurry," she said to herself as she wiggled her hand into his pocket, hooking her finger on the key.

"Hey!" Another man entered the room as she pulled at the keys. They had gotten caught on the pocket, and she had to abandon them when the newcomer stormed toward the cell.

She scooted back. "I don't know what happened. He just collapsed."

But this guy wasn't as easy to fool as the last. "What'd you do to Tag?" the man yelled, dragging his friend backward and retrieving the keys for himself.

Isla stood and pressed herself against the back wall as the man unlocked her cell.

"You think you're a clever little FBI agent?" he said, flinging the door wide. "Well, let me show you what we do to clever girls."

This guy was bigger than Mason, and it was a smaller space than the bar. But the door was now open. He'd be slower than her, so, if she could get past him somehow, she had a chance.

When he reached out to hit her, she blocked him, but the weight of his punch still felt like a blow.

She heaved her knee up, but he twisted, taking the hit in the leg. Then, he smashed himself into her body, plastering her against the wall and knocking all of her breath from her body.

She struggled to inhale, her diaphragm paralyzed from the force.

He took a couple steps back, smiled, then charged her again. She tried to duck out of the way, but his bulk was too massive, and he still caught her shoulder, pinning it to the wall before grabbing her by the shoulders and throwing her sideways against the other wall where her head bounced off the concrete and she was knocked out.

Jay looked almost bored when he and Simmo arrived back at the old hospital, but inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. And it wasn't just because he would get Isla to safety. As far as she knew, he'd betrayed her. He could see on her face that she'd fallen for his ruse as much as Simmo had.

But it had been his intent for her to believe it. If she got any sense he was faking, he couldn't be sure she'd be able to play along with the ploy herself, and he couldn't risk that. So, he'd gone in hard, and she'd believed every word he'd said. But soon, he'd be able to reveal what his true motives had been—to protect her. He'd do anything to make sure she was safe.

“I told Sharpe about your part in all of this, by the way,” Jay said when they got out of the car.

“Yeah?” he said. “Thanks for that.”

“No problem.”

“How do you want to do this? You think she'll go with you?”

“Not 'cause she wants to.” He laughed, and Simmo joined in.

“What are you going to do with her once you leave here?”

“Sharpe didn't tell you what I'm using her for?”

“No, he said to let you have her. That's all.”

“I'll let him tell you then. I don't want to step on any toes.”

“Ah, come on. Can't you give me a hint?”

“I'm using her as bait.”

Simmo's eyes widened in glee. “You need any help? You always get the best jobs.”

“Sorry. This is a one-man show, but I'll keep you in mind for future projects.”

“I’d appreciate that, man.”

Jay followed Simmo down the hall to the lockup, but they both ran when they heard the yelling.

Simmo reached the door first. “Hulk, what’re you doing!” He raced into the cell where a big man stood over Isla’s unconscious body. Jay noticed another man lying against the wall outside the cell who was beginning to stir.

“Get off her,” Simmo yelled at Hulk but didn’t engage.

“Aren’t you going to stop him?” Jay said. “He’ll kill her.”

“No way, man. Not my job.”

Jay pushed past him and locked his arm around Hulk’s neck, dragging him backward.

“What’re you doing?” Simmo said, tripping out of the way as Jay removed the big man from the cell.

“I need her alive,” Jay said, wrenching his head out of the way of Hulk’s flailing arms.

“You’re gonna kill him.”

“No, I’m not,” Jay grunted as Hulk dropped to his knee. When he was on all fours, Jay released him and leapt out of the way, hurrying so Simmo was between them.

Hulk jumped to his feet, roaring, and Simmo pulled a gun. His hands were shaking, but he kept it pointed at the big guy. “You can’t touch him.”

“Out of my way.”

“No. Mr. Sharpe’s cleared him. You can’t hurt him.”

“He almost killed me.”

“He needs the girl alive. Now stand down.”

Hulk growled. “She tried to escape. Look what she did to Tag.”

“What do you mean, she tried to escape? What was Tag doing opening the cell?”

“He didn’t. I did.”

“How’d she hurt Tag if she was locked in there?”

“How should I know? When I came in, I found him like that.”

Simmo looked at Jay. “If she’s dead, will your plan still work?”

“If she’s dead—” Jay clenched his teeth from saying what he wanted to. “Let’s just say she better not be or Sharpe’s not gonna be happy.” He went to check Isla for a pulse. “She’s alive. What’d you do to her?”

“What I needed to.”

“Simmo, I’m gonna get her out of here. You keep the gorilla where I can see him.”

“You sure Mr. Sharpe knows what he’s doing?” Hulk said as Jay carried Isla to the door.

“If you have a problem with me, you can take it up with him.”

Isla moaned as Jay carried her toward the front door, glad he didn’t have to sneak her out.

“What...” She blinked, but her eyes looked at nothing.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

He carried her around the block to where he’d parked the car.

She moaned again, and this time, when she blinked, she looked at him. “Jay?”

“You were locked up, but I got you out of there. Unfortunately, the big guy got to you before I did. Try not to move. I haven’t checked you over yet, but I’d say you got a nasty bump on the head.”

“Where are we?”

“We’re at the car. I’m gonna put you down for a second, okay?”

He dropped her legs to the ground but continued to take all of her weight as he opened the door. Then, he set her as gently as he could onto the seat.

When he lifted her legs to put them in, she stopped him.

“No.” Her eyes were wide in fear.

“It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Let me go.” She tried to push him away, but she had little strength. “Don’t. Please.”

“Isla, you have to believe me. I’m helping you.”

“No. Leave me alone.” She pushed him in the chest, and he backed off.

“I had to let them think I was on their side. But I wasn’t. I was only trying to protect you.”

He crouched down so he wasn’t towering over her but kept his distance.

“Please. I can explain. But we need to get out of here first. I’ll take you back to Peter’s, then tell you everything. You have to trust me.”

“I don’t.” She kicked her leg, catching him in the chin.

When he fell back, she dove from the car but ended up on her hands and knees.

He spit blood. “You made me bite my tongue. Come on, Isla. You’re not well. You can’t fight me on this, and I don’t want to force you.”

He lifted her, but when she got to her feet, she thrashed to get away from him. “Let me go.”

She’d hurt herself worse than she already had if he kept pushing, so he did as she asked and stepped back.

She stumbled sideways into a brick wall and stood still, breathing hard. “Don’t touch me.”

“I won’t.”

After a minute, she looked at him. “Why are you still here?”

“If I was your enemy, I would have forced you into the car or killed you.”

“You are my enemy.”

“I told you, I had to make it look like I was working for them—otherwise, we’d both be dead.”

“I may have hit my head, but I remember what you did.”

“It was my only option. There was no other way for me to keep us safe.”

“Maybe it kept *you* safe. But not me. You pointed a gun at me.”

“I heard someone coming. I knew we would be found. I had to do something.”

“What about when that guy Simmo came at me in the office? I could have taken him. You stopped it from happening.”

“I couldn’t be sure it would work. I didn’t know who else was around. I made a split-second decision to reinforce my position so Simmo believed I was really on his side.”

“It was very convincing.”

“It had to be. I couldn’t risk you blowing my cover.”

“Then how do I know you’re not still playing me?”

“You don’t. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

“No.”

He threw his hands up in the air. “Well, I guess nothing has changed.”

“If you’re really on my side, why’d they let me go with you?”

“Because I met with John Sharpe.”

“How’d you get him to agree to meet with you?”

“He wanted to meet the man who’d brought him his missing DEA agent.”

“Why would he let me go?”

“I told him I could use you to get him Whitlock.”

“He wants Whitlock?”

“He didn’t think he did, but when I told him I could get the AG for him, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. That’s when I told him I needed you to do it. And it’s a good thing too, because Hulk was going to kill you.”

“Hulk?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I was trying to escape.”

“That’s what he said. How’d you take the skinny guy out while you were locked in the cell?”

“I asked him to get me a drink. When he passed it through the bars, I smashed his head into them. Hulk found me before I could get the keys.”

“Really? You did that?”

“You’d know if I was lying.”

“How?”

“Did my mouth twitch?” She stared him down with a cold, hard look.

His lips tightened to hold back the smile. “I made that up.”

“What?”

“I was building camaraderie with Simmo.”

“But he said he saw it.”

“Suggestion can be a very powerful tool.”

“So that thing about the kiss? You couldn’t really tell I was lying?”

“I didn’t need to. I knew you’d lie.”

“If you don’t get that self-satisfied look off your face, I definitely won’t come with you.”

“Sorry.” He kept the smile but reached out a hand toward her. This time, she took it.

“You’d better not be lying to me.”

“I’m not. I’m sorry for deceiving you.”

“You were probably right to,” she said as he helped her to the car. “I would have blown your cover if I’d known.”

“But it sounds like you did all right fooling that guy back in the cell.”

“Yeah, him, but not Hulk, unfortunately. I wasn’t quick enough to come up with a plausible reason for Tag’s nap.”

“Good thing I turned up when I did.” He waited until she was settled in her seat before he got in. “Let me know if you need to throw up,” he said as he started the car.

“I’m not going to.”

“It’s a side effect of concussion.”

“I know. I’m fine.” She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

“It would be better if you stayed awake,” he said as he pulled onto the road.

“I’m really tired.”

He turned on the radio, then buzzed down her window. “You can sleep later. Once the doctor gives you the all-clear.”

After glancing into his rearview mirror, he took the next left. “Get that seatbelt on, would you?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the law.”

“Since when do you care about the law?”

He played along with her insult. “I don’t. I said that for your benefit. What I *do* care about is physics.”

“What?”

“We’ve got a tail, and I need to lose him. Physics says that, if you don’t have your seatbelt on, you’ll get hurt.”

“So does the law.”

“Two sides of the same coin. An interesting point of philosophy that we can talk about later. Right now, I have to focus.”

“Are you sure we’re being followed?”

“Would it make you feel better if you had a look for yourself?”

“Actually, yes.” She shifted enough in her seat to look behind them. After turning another corner, she righted herself in the seat. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Looking backward while you’re driving makes me queasy.”

He reached behind the seat and pulled out an empty plastic bag. “Here. I can’t stop until I lose this guy and my driving is about to make you queasy.”

Chapter 20

“HOW’S ISLA?” Jay said when Peter came back into the living room.

“The doctor said she’ll be fine. Just needs to rest.”

“Thanks for calling in that favor.”

“Dr. Phillips is always happy to help. And I wouldn’t trust anyone else under the circumstances.”

“He’s good at discretion?”

“He understands the delicacy of the situation. Especially when I call him for help. I have a tendency to need discreet help. Do you want to go in and see her?”

“No. It would be better if she rested.”

“You sure?”

“If you say she’s okay, I can see her later.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I didn’t ask how you were doing.”

“I’m not the one who’s injured.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh.” Jay rubbed his hands over his face. “You’re checking on my head space.”

“A lot has happened for you in a small space of time.”

“I had no idea what I was in for when I agreed to get into your car at the beach.”

“Do you regret it?”

“I should. I’m crazy not to.”

“This can’t be the most dangerous thing you’ve ever done.”

“It’s not.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t really know. This job is different. It’s a lot more consuming. I tend to be quite disengaged from my work. Maybe because I usually get paid.”

“You can send me an invoice once this is all over if you want.”

Jay laughed. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do if it’s a paycheck you’re looking for.”

“It’s not. I don’t choose my jobs based on how much money I’m going to make. I don’t think I told you, but I’ve done work for different agencies like the FBI. They don’t pay as well as the others.”

“You did mention it. And I’m not surprised. You have a specific set of skills that would be valuable to many different organizations. And not just the crime ones.”

“But I’ve never worked for someone like you.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know if I can explain it. When I came out of the ocean, I didn’t comprehend how much everything had changed for me. I’m not the same man who went into that water. And when I came back out, the last thing I expected to find was someone to show me the way. But it’s not just that. I feel like I’ve known you forever.”

“Thanks for saying that. Sometimes, when you’re following God’s leading, you don’t always get to understand the full impact you have on people. But that’s not really down

to me. God did something profound for you in a short space of time. It doesn't always happen that way."

"But He was waiting for me, wasn't He? He had to wait for me to be ready."

"Yeah. A long time."

"If only I'd gotten there sooner."

"I don't think that matters so much to God. He just kept at you your whole life until it was time. That's not to say you didn't have other opportunities to reach out to him, but it looks like you were stubborn enough that He had to take you to the very bottom in order to lift you back out."

"That's crazy to think that God's been chasing me this whole time. I don't understand how Isla can't see that stuff. She thinks God is so far away. You'd think after being a Christian for so long, she'd get the hang of it."

"I've been a Christian longer than her, and I'm still learning things all the time. But one thing I have figured out is that the longer you're in it, the more boxed in you can become. Or the more boxed in God can become."

"You ever try telling her that?"

Peter laughed. "*You* ever try telling her that? Look, it's not up to us to fix her for God. He's on her case as much as He's on yours. And don't forget, she's got her weaknesses, but she also has her strengths, same as the rest of us."

"But I want—never mind."

"What?"

"It's stupid."

"I doubt it."

"I want her to have that joy that I've found knowing God is close to me."

"You care about her."

Jay leaned his head onto the back of the couch and looked up at the ceiling, following the swirl of the plaster with his

eyes. “That wasn’t supposed to happen. I don’t really know how it did. She drives me nuts a lot of the time.”

“The best ones usually do. But is it such a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. You know her better than I do.”

“You’re worried she’ll only ever see you as a criminal?”

“I know she will.”

“It takes her time to change her mind, which isn’t always a bad thing. She sticks to what she knows is right until she’s convinced otherwise. It can be an asset. But it means you have to be patient and persistent.”

“But what if she never changes her mind?”

“She may not. None of us is perfect. Sometimes, we get it wrong and we miss out.”

“I thought you were trying to make me feel better.”

“How would that be helpful? What I’m trying to do is speak the truth to you. Neither one of us can make Isla do or feel anything she doesn’t want to. You’ve got to trust that God will do what’s best for the both of you. And what’s best for us is not always what we think we want.”

“So, you’re saying I need to get over her?”

“I’m not saying anything. I won’t be culpable for you two either getting together or not. That is way too much responsibility. I love my wife, and I have no doubt that God brought us together. I know how amazing it is when you get to spend your life with the right person. But it’s hard enough when God’s been involved. I’ve seen too many people get married for the wrong reasons. It doesn’t mean they can’t eventually be happy, but it’s a much longer and harder road.”

“How do you know if it’s right?”

“Man, you do have it bad.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m even asking you all this. It’s not the best time to be talking about relationships.”

“It’s never the right time. If you want to know what God thinks, then you’re going to have to ask Him.”

“And He’ll tell me?”

“If you’re listening, yeah.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means, if you ask God, but you only want to hear one response, you may not hear him. If you want to hear him properly, then you need to be willing to give up whatever He requires, including Isla, if that’s what He needs you to do.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Then you have to live with the consequences. God can work with mistakes, but that doesn’t mean you won’t face the outcome of your actions.”

Jay nodded. He knew he’d be willing to give her up if it was what God wanted, even if he hated to think about it. But that was probably because he’d never had her in the first place.

What he wanted more than anything else was to make sure she got out of this alive. If he was a part of her life after that... but he couldn’t think about that. Now was enough. And right now, he was only desperate to keep her safe, even if that meant giving her up.

Isla stared into the blackness, alert. A sound had woken her. Now, she lay still, breathing slow, even breaths while she listened. It had sounded like whispering.

A weight shifted on the end of the bed, and her muscles tensed. If she had been a child, she would have thrown the blanket over her head and hollered for help. But even then, all she’d get for her effort was her dad yelling down the hall for her to go back to sleep. Then, after he left, she’d get no response at all because her mom took sleeping pills.

But the figure at the end of her bed wasn’t imaginary. And she wasn’t a scared little girl anymore. She also wasn’t

helpless.

Slowly, she drew her arms up across her chest, to keep them from getting wrapped up in the blanket if she needed to defend herself.

“What do you want?” She controlled her fear so it didn’t interfere with her voice.

“It’s Jemi. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Jemi.” Isla relaxed back into the pillow. “You’re the only person I’d admit this too, but I was a little scared.”

“I shouldn’t be sitting in here like this, but since I’ve been sick, I’m done worrying about the way things look. I couldn’t sleep, and I knew you could use some serious prayer.”

“That’s thoughtful. But shouldn’t I be the one praying for you?”

“I would love to have your prayers. Maybe later.”

“I’ve been praying for you since I found out you were sick.”

“Thank you. Right now, though, I think you could use them.”

“I have been hit on the head a few too many times.”

“That’s not what you need prayer for.”

“You sure? It still hurts. But you’re probably right. We’re having a tough time finding answers. We could certainly use God’s help in whatever way He can.”

“That’s not what I’m praying for either. Not in the way you think, anyway.”

“That sounds very mysterious. What are you praying for, then?”

“I’m praying because you have everything backward.”

“Backward?”

“God feels far away, and you don’t know how to bring him close.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to come in close.”

“You’re wrong.”

Isla pushed up in bed, moving the pillows so she could lean against the headboard. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“You believe God is near you at all times? That he is working in your life every day?”

“I do.”

“I trust you, Jemi, but I can’t understand why we see God so differently. Peter’s said similar things, and even Jay seems to believe it, but I don’t get it.”

“Tell me about your dad.”

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“You do?”

“That I view God the way I view my dad. I don’t. I don’t believe God’s like my dad. My dad abandoned my mom and me. I don’t believe God has abandoned me.”

“Really?”

“No. I’ve heard all that before. I’ve forgiven my dad for being an angry, distant man who finally gave up on us. This has nothing to do with that.”

“Okay. Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the middle of the night. Indulge me.”

“Fine. They’re closed.”

“Now, picture God.”

“Done.”

“Go up to Him and climb in his lap. Give him a big hug.”

Isla opened her eyes. “I’m a grown woman.”

“Why do you resist?”

“Because I’m not five.”

“What if I do it first?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. My eyes are closed. I see God. He has his arms open wide.” Jemi laughed. “He gave me a big hug and is holding me close to him. It should hurt because my body is failing me, but it doesn’t. Nothing about him hurts. He’s telling me how much he loves me and wants me to be well.”

Isla could hear the tears choking her words. “It doesn’t hurt your body, but does it hurt your heart?”

“What?”

“To hear Him say He wants you to be well, but you’re not.”

“But He does want me to be well. I can’t understand God’s timing or His reasons, but I know that, no matter what happens, I am in God’s hands. Right now and always.”

“Is that how Peter feels?”

“It’s harder for him.”

“His mind is clearer than yours.”

Jemi chuckled. “You think so?”

“I do.”

“Your mind can’t be clear when it’s fogged with fear.”

“Is Peter afraid?”

“He’s afraid to lose me. Yes.”

“You’re not afraid to die?”

“I don’t want to go yet. I don’t feel like I’m ready. But I trust God to do what is right. Peter only wants one outcome, whether it’s God’s or not. That makes it harder. Either way. It’s the same with you. Fear makes it hard to see things from God’s perspective.”

“I’m not afraid, and neither is Peter. I’ve never seen Peter afraid.”

“Fear is always searching for the weak spot. And once it finds it, it can be relentless unless you stand up to it.”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say.”

“You want to run away because it appears the easier route. But if you want real freedom, you need to face the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That you’re terrified to let God get close because you’re afraid He’ll abandon you like your father did.”

Isla’s throat tightened. “I told you I’ve forgiven him.”

“You’ve forgiven him for being angry and distant. Have you forgiven him for abandoning you?”

“Probably. I don’t remember.”

“I think you should try again.”

“It won’t make any difference.”

“Then prove me wrong.”

“Will you let me go back to sleep if I do?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. God, if I have anything left to forgive my dad for, then I forgive him.”

“Tell Him you forgive your dad for abandoning you.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You’re resisting again.”

“I’m not. I just feel stupid.”

“It will be over soon.”

“I forgive my dad for...I forgive...” She pressed her lips together, breathing hard through her nose. The word “abandon” refused to leave her throat.

The bed shifted as Jemi moved closer. She put a hand on Isla’s leg and prayed under her breath.

“Don’t do that.” Isla choked out as she squeezed her eyes closed against the tears. But Jemi didn’t move. “I—” Isla

tipped her head back as though her tears would slip back into her head. “I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can,” Jemi said, tightening her grip on Isla’s leg. “Release her, Jesus. Don’t let her fear of abandonment keep her chained any longer. Break its power over her.” She continued her indiscernible prayers, whispering as Isla fought for control.

“God, help me.” She focused on Jemi’s quiet words and let them give her strength. “I forgive him—”

Sobbing choked off her words, and Jemi’s arms wrapped around her. “Father God, set her free.”

Isla had never let herself be consumed by her grief. After her dad left, she’d allowed herself to succumb to the anger, but nothing else. Tonight, she let it wash over her while Jemi held her.

It could have been hours or minutes when Isla’s tears ran out. Her face was puffy and hot, but her heart was light.

“God,” she sniffed. “I forgive my dad for abandoning me. I forgive him for not knowing how to be a father and for running away from his family. I don’t want to believe anymore that you’ll do the same. Forgive me for thinking you would. Please show me the truth. I need to know the truth.”

She pictured herself as a bird soaring high above a city. Below her, she could see people going about their lives, but she knew the ones who were hurting. She could see people making choices in their lives influenced by the pain they felt, and she could see that God was close to them, waiting for them to call on Him the way Jay finally had in the ocean that night.

She thought of Carl Blanchet, who she only saw as a criminal but who was doing the best he could. He didn’t have God in his life so had no reason to do things differently. But he was supporting his daughter the only way he knew how. That

mattered to God more than the man-made laws he broke. Sure, consequences followed actions, but God judged people according to His righteous judgment and His perfect love. And more than anything, He wanted them to call on Him so He could rescue them. That was not something she'd ever considered before. Or had ever done.

"I don't know how He does it," Isla said.

"How who does what?"

"God. He understands the world so much differently than I do. I don't want to mess up and disappoint Him, so I focus on the rules. The world is easier to understand that way. People are harder."

"He is God."

"I know. That's what I mean. I can see it now, how He's so close to each one of us, but without the rules spelled out, how do I know how to do the right thing?"

"God wrote His laws on our hearts because that was the best way. You want to write it down in a book."

"What's wrong with that? At least then I know. I can't rely on myself to listen to the rules written on my heart. There's too much that can interfere, like it already has for so many years."

"But that's not what you've always been afraid of. Looking at the rules the way you have is what has protected you from needing to allow God to get close. You've broken through that fear now, and He wants to lead you. He wants to be the one to show you right and wrong and to reveal the motives of your heart. He also wants to show you how you can help those trapped in sin. You can't find that in a book."

"No."

"And now that you can work on drawing near to the Father, you can let Him speak to you and show you right and wrong from His perspective."

"That's easier said than done."

"It takes practice, following His lead."

“How do I do that?”

“Read your Bible.”

“I do.”

“Good. Then open your ears to hear Him speak into your heart. Let Him lead you every day. And when you feel like He’s far away, don’t listen to that lie anymore. Take a moment and draw close to Him again.”

“You really think that will work?”

“Maybe not overnight, but God will get you there. It’s a journey.”

“Thank you, Jemi. I didn’t know how much I needed this.”

Chapter 21

ISLA PRESSED her cold fingers against her eyes as she padded down the stairs and into the kitchen.

She'd woken with a pounding head, but her mind was at ease. A tightness inside had been released. She may have a journey ahead of her, but whatever had happened with Jemi last night, it had made an impact. Hope swelled in her chest like it hadn't in a long time.

"You're looking much better."

She hadn't seen Jay sitting at the table. "Oh. Jay. Good morning. I didn't see you there." She pressed the back of her hand against her cheek. "I don't feel like I look much better."

"There's coffee ready if you want some."

"Thanks."

"You're not feeling well?"

"I'm okay." She was unsure of herself after last night. It had been good for her, but now she felt exposed and vulnerable, and being near Jay was confusing.

She poured herself a mug of coffee and sat across from him. "I don't think I said thank you yesterday."

"There's no need."

"Yes, there is. That's the second time you've saved me."

"Is it? That's awful nice of me. I must be an all right kind of guy."

“A simple ‘you’re welcome’ would suffice.”

“What would be the fun of that?”

“Why is it you have to have fun at my expense?”

He put his hands up in defeat. “Sorry, I’ll stop. I’m sure you have some leftover feelings of betrayal you’re battling, and I’m not helping matters.”

“Actually—” She took a sip of her drink while scrutinizing him over the rim of the cup. “I think I’m over the worst of it.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Still. Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t promise that. If it’s what’s necessary to save your life, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“That’s fine. As long as you know I’ll never fall for it again.”

“You say that now...”

“I’m serious. I’ve figured out your tell. You can never lie to me again.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Your eye gets a glint when you lie.”

He laughed. “You’re probably right. But it shouldn’t come to that. Now you get to sit back, relax, and recover. Have some girl time with Jemi, and let me do the dirty work.”

“What?”

“I’ve got it from here.”

“No you don’t.” She slammed her mug on the table.

“Settle down. I’ve got it all worked out. While you recover, I’ll get what you need.”

“You can’t kick me out of my own operation.”

“I’m not kicking you out. I’m protecting you. I’ve got a plan. I can get the information we need without you.”

“You told Sharpe you needed me to get Whitlock.”

“That won’t be hard to work around.”

“Or I could be a part of your plan.”

“You don’t think I’m capable of pulling this off?”

“It has nothing to do with your abilities. I’m not bowing out of this.”

Isla looked down the hall when there was a knock at the door. She noticed Jay didn’t react.

“Who’s at the door?” she said.

“No one I know.”

“Then why do you look guilty?”

Jay stood, giving her an apologetic look before heading to answer the second knock.

She followed him out.

“I’m sorry,” he said before opening the door. “We needed more help.”

“Then why not use me?” As Jay pulled the door open, she stepped back and reached for her gun, still not on her hip.

The group outside was not what she expected. Two identical-looking women faced them. One was smiling. One was not. And a man paced in the yard behind them. He was on his phone.

“Who are you?” Isla said, crossing her arms.

“Who are you?” the frowning twin said.

The smiling twin gave her a nudge and said, “We’re here to see Peter Black. He asked us to come. I take it you’re Isla?”

Isla lifted her gaze to the man on the lawn. “And him? Who’s he talking to?”

The smiling twin said, “An old friend of his, Kelly. She’s had a rough life and needs encouraging once in a while. I’m Charlotte, by the way. This is my sister, Maddy. That’s Will back there.”

“You made it,” Peter said from down the hall. When he reached them, he put a heavy hand on Isla’s shoulder to hold her in place. “You got here sooner than I expected. I haven’t had time to explain. Why don’t you guys come in?”

The twins entered the house, leaving Will on the lawn with his phone call.

After Peter ushered them into the living room, Isla stood next to the fireplace while everyone else sat.

“I can’t help but get the feeling that I’ve been swindled out of my own operation,” Isla said, looking coldly at Jay.

“If we’re going to pull this off, I need help,” he said.

“I’m not good enough for you? Why the sudden need to take me out of the picture? You afraid I can’t do the job? I’ve been—”

“Hang on, Isla,” Peter said. “That’s not what’s happening. But when Jay filled me in on his plan—”

“*His* plan? What about *my* plan?”

“I thought we were working together on this,” Jay said.

“Apparently not,” Isla huffed.

“This has gotten bigger than we expected,” Peter said. “I thought you needed more hands on deck. These guys bring a lot of skills we need.”

“Such as?”

“They’ve had several very successful undercover operations.”

“That’s it? Because I’m no good at acting you’re kicking me out?”

“Ouch,” Maddy said under her breath.

“Shut up,” Charlotte said. “I thought now you were fully recovered, you wouldn’t be so grumpy.”

“Fully recovered from what?” Isla said.

“I was beaten to a pulp,” Maddy said. “Long story. I had a lot of broken bones that are now good as new.”

“‘New’ is probably not the word I would use,” Charlotte said.

Maddy shrugged. “Same difference. Listen, I realize there are some hurt feelings, but time’s wasting. You going to share what this elaborate plan is?”

“Hang on,” Isla said. “I haven’t agreed to this yet. I don’t even know who you guys are or if you can be trusted with this. You guys are acting like this has nothing to do with me, and yet, I’m the whole reason everyone is here right now.”

“What do you want to know?” Charlotte said.

“For one, I take it you guys aren’t connected to law enforcement in any way?”

The twins looked at each other.

“Peter, I told you—”

“I know, I know. But you can trust these guys completely, and they have promised not to speak to anyone about any of this. Also, they were available on short notice. You’ve gotten yourself in deep enough to garner some help if we’re going to pull this off.”

Will entered the room. “Hey, guys, sorry about that.”

Peter stood and shook Will’s hand. “Don’t worry about it. It’s great to see you again. Everything okay with Kelly?”

“Yeah, she just needs to be reminded of who she really is.”

“Who’s Kelly exactly?” Isla said.

“A woman I’ve known for a long time. She was kidnapped years ago into a sex trafficking ring. We rescued her recently.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Pretty intense. She’s got a strong mind though. Probably the reason she survived so long.”

“All right, listen,” Isla said, pressing a hand to her forehead to try to ease the headache there. “I’ll give you all a chance if you will not keep me out in the cold.”

“I made a deal with Sharpe,” Jay said. “I told him I could give him Lloyd Whitlock.”

“You mentioned that before. But you said you needed me to do it.”

“And I told you we can work around that.” He nodded toward the twins.

“What exactly do you mean when you say you’ll give him Whitlock? Does Whitlock know you plan on handing him over?”

“Not yet.”

“I assume you don’t plan to actually do it? My life’s not worth that.”

“I’m going to make it look like I have evidence that will give Sharpe the control over Whitlock that he wants. These guys are here to help me sell the ruse.”

“A ruse that involves me and yet I cannot be a part of?”

“I told you, you should take the time to rest and recover.”

Isla laughed in disbelief. “You really think that will happen while you guys are out putting your lives on the line? No way.”

“Isla, it’s too risky to keep you involved. I’m not going to put your life in danger again.”

Isla pressed her lips together and looked around the room. “Would you all excuse us for a moment?”

She led Jay into the kitchen and rounded on him. “What is it that you’re really doing?”

“Keeping you safe.”

“No. That’s not it. Is it because you don’t trust me? Okay, fine, don’t put me in undercover, but you can’t keep me here and force me to put my feet up.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing. You don’t think I can be a part of this, but three strangers can?”

“It’s not about that.”

“Then what is it about? You’re not being honest with me. I can’t believe you really think I’m so incapable. Is this because the Hulk almost killed me? Because my plan was working. I had a hiccup. Those things happen. Your plan was risky too.”

Jay sighed up at the ceiling. “It has nothing to do with how capable you are. But I can’t—I can’t work while you’re in danger.”

“Why not? What’s changed?”

“You. Or me. I don’t know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You matter more to me than I expected, and I don’t know what to do with that. But I can’t focus if I think you could get hurt.”

“Oh.” Isla looked at the fingernail she’d started picking. “Yeah...well...you get to know people when you work with them. That’s normal. It’s why it hurt so much when my team was killed. That doesn’t mean I’d sideline them for what might happen.”

He put a hand on her arm and slid it down to her hand. “That’s not what I meant.”

She looked up at him and held her breath, then pulled her hand away. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but she couldn’t handle the fire that ignited when he looked at her that way.

“You can’t,” she said.

“Can’t what?”

“Have feelings for me. You can’t.”

He nodded. “I realize this makes you uncomfortable, and I’m sorry for that. I know you don’t like me very much. I know I’m just a criminal to you. That was why I asked Peter to bring in the others. You may not trust me, but you can trust them. They’re on the right side of the law.”

“Jay, that’s not—”

“I swear to you that all I want to do is help you get through this. Then I’ll leave you alone. But let us do this. Let *me* do this for you.”

She walked to the window to escape from the moment and from the emotions that scrambled her mind. But there was no escape.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“For what? Not being able to reciprocate my feelings? Don’t worry about it. I already know. You feel how you feel.”

She turned. “No.” Every other word she tried to say next was terrifying. If she told Jay the truth, she could never take it back. She had never been so confused about a person before in her life, so she stepped around it instead. “This is my battle. I can’t stay out of it. Just because you—I won’t let you sideline me in my own fight.”

Jay sighed. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. You invited me to help you, and I’ve taken charge of the whole thing.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“This would probably be a good time to bow out.”

“What? No. That’s not what I meant.”

“You’ve got help now. I’ll tell you my plan, and you guys can carry it out without me. Or change it. It doesn’t matter. But you won’t have to see me again.”

“That’s not what I want either.”

“It will be easier for you.”

“How?”

“Because you don’t trust me, and I’ve bared my heart to you and made everything awkward.”

She had been afraid to tell him how she felt, but she didn’t think it would mean she’d lose him. “You can’t go.”

“Don’t worry. I can still meet with Sharpe if you need me to. I won’t bail on you guys. But I’ll stay out of your way.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what else I can do. I don’t know what you want.”

“You’re gonna make me say it,” she muttered. Her face was burning.

“Say what?”

“You think this is because I don’t trust you.”

“Isn’t it?”

She could feel the words holding in her throat and wanted to keep them there, but if she didn’t tell him the truth, she’d lose him.

“I trust you more than I’ve ever trusted any man before in my life, and that terrifies me.”

Jay stood stunned for a moment. “Wait. You’re—Wait, what?”

“I’m not pushing you away because I feel differently. I’m pushing you away because I feel the same, and that’s the scariest thing that’s ever happened to me before.”

“*That’s* the scariest thing?”

She could see the relief wash over him and couldn’t tell how that made her feel. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it changes the rules.”

He took a step closer. “And you like the rules.”

“Yes. So please don’t make me regret saying all of that.”

“By changing the rules?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, that makes things complicated.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t want to say anything. But you didn’t leave me much choice.”

“Okay.”

“So, we’ll keep things the same?”

“No, I’m changing the rules.”

Before she could respond, he kissed her. And this time, it wasn’t a quick one to distract her.

She whimpered against his mouth, then found she was clinging to him. His own arms wrapped around her, pulling her as close as he could. Then, her back bumped into the counter, and they moved sideways, knocking a chair to the floor.

Startled, they pulled apart.

Isla looked at the chair, then at Jay, then at the door in case anyone had seen. Then, she looked back at Jay again. “Why did you do that?”

He laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “Whoa. Yeah. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“What did you think was gonna happen?”

“I don’t know. That—um—that was...wow.”

She couldn’t disagree but would never admit it. When he looked at her, she knew he was working hard not to grab her again. She couldn’t let that happen.

“We’d better get back in there.” She picked up the chair and kept it between them.

“You’re right. We need to stay focused.”

“I hope you understand this can’t happen again.”

“What? But I thought you said—”

“I said we aren’t changing the rules. It doesn’t matter how we feel, we have a job to do. I’m not ready for this. I can’t do this.”

“You can’t tell me you didn’t just feel that.”

She’d definitely felt it. In the moment of haze, she had considered the possibility of giving up the fight. She hadn’t realized how dangerous falling for someone could be. How easy it made it to turn away from what needed to be done.

“It was just a kiss.”

“Just a kiss? Right.”

“I’m gonna get a drink of water. You go ahead. I’ll be in shortly.”

He shook his head and left the room while Isla leaned back against the counter, gripping it like her life depended on it. After a couple of deep breaths, she steadied herself.

No matter what else happened, she needed to make sure that never happened again.

Chapter 22

ISLA KNOCKED on the door to the third-floor office.

“Come in,” a voice boomed from within.

Isla smiled at Whitlock when she entered. “Good morning, sir.”

He looked nervous. “Is it?”

“I’m not happy about this either. But it’s what we need to do. I trust Jay explained the situation satisfactorily?”

“I wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t.”

“We appreciate your help with this, sir.”

“You may as well call me Lloyd, considering what we’re about to do.”

“I’d rather not.”

He laughed. “You want to know something funny?”

“Sure.”

“My wife’s less worried about this than I am.”

“Really? I feel sick to my stomach. No offense.”

“None taken, believe me.”

Isla went to the window and dropped the blinds but turned the slats so she could see out.

“It’s not better all the way open?” Whitlock said, pacing the floor.

“We need to at least look like we’re trying to be discreet.”

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “Where should I be? Should I sit at the desk?”

“Uh. I don’t know. Why don’t you stand?” She looked out the window, then back at him. “A little more my way, I think.”

He stepped closer. “Here?”

“Maybe. Let’s see.” She reached out to him and gave him an awkward hug. “I guess this will do. Now...um...kiss my cheek.”

After he did, her earpiece chirped to life.

“I can’t say I’m disappointed you’re so bad at this,” Jay said. “But you guys are both terrible. I think Whitlock may be worse than you at undercover work.”

She couldn’t see him, but she knew Jay was out there somewhere with a telephoto lens.

“Excuse me a second,” she said to Whitlock and walked to the other side of the room, whisper-hissing to Jay. “Do you know how weird this is for me? He’s my superior, by a long way.”

“I told you we can get one of the twins to pretend to be you. That was my original plan.”

“I can do it. Sharpe will know if it’s not me.”

“Then you’re going to have to do better.”

“Any ideas?”

“He did save your life at the jail. Let him know how grateful you are.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you what, have Whitlock sit down and you sit on his lap.”

“What? That is never gonna happen. There must be a way we can get the shot without it being gross.” She looked at Whitlock and mouthed, “Sorry.” He waved away her apology.

“A stiff hug and a peck on the cheek isn’t going to sell it.”

“Give us a sec. But keep taking photos. I don’t want to miss a chance and have to redo it.”

Jay groaned. “This is going to take all day.”

“You want to do it?”

He laughed but didn’t say anything.

Isla turned back to Whitlock. “We’re failing miserably.”

“That’s pretty obvious. So what do we do?”

She remembered the kiss she shared with Jay and scrunched up her face. That was a line she was unwilling to cross with Whitlock, and she was sure he felt the same. But there had to be a way to recreate that without actually doing it.

She could remember clinging to Jay when he kissed her. It carried a desperate longing she’d never experienced before.

Maybe that would be enough for now.

“Let me try something.” She walked up to him. “Just go with me on this.”

“I’ll do my best.”

When a knock came at the door, they stepped away from one another, embarrassed.

“Yes?” Whitlock said, smoothing his jacket.

The door opened a crack, and a white-haired woman stuck her head in. “Here you guys are. I went to your office, and your secretary said you were down here.”

Whitlock huffed. “Susan, come in.”

A sophisticated older woman wearing a pencil skirt and silk blouse with a blazer entered and shut the door.

“Isla, I’d like you to meet my wife, Susan.”

“I’m so sorry about this,” Isla said.

“Don’t be.” Susan took her hand and squeezed her fingers warmly. “Lloyd told me all about it. The fact that he’s old enough to be your father must be somewhat disconcerting.”

“This whole thing is disconcerting. We moved down to this office because it was the best window for Jay to get the picture.”

“My being here probably isn’t helping.”

“Actually, it might. I think we’re both feeling guilty even though we aren’t doing anything. Your presence lifts a burden.”

“Happy to help however I can.”

Jay spoke into Isla’s ear. “Who’s that?”

Isla pointed at her head. “Excuse me a sec. It’s Jay.” She turned toward the wall. “Weren’t you listening?”

“I had my earpiece out for a second.”

“Why?”

“Peter called.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, he was checking in.”

“It’s Lloyd’s wife, Susan.”

“Oh, it’s Lloyd now, is it?”

“You’re not helping.”

“Is she concerned?”

“No. She came to offer her moral support. I’ll make sure she stays out of the shot. Just give us a second.” She turned back around. “Susan, if you don’t mind standing over in the corner away from the window, that would be great.”

“Is that strange having someone talking into your ear like that?” Susan said, leaning against the wall.

“Comes with the job.”

“What now?” Whitlock said.

“I had an idea,” Isla looked at Susan. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to get your feedback since you’re here.”

“I’m ready when you are.”

“You look like you’re enjoying this,” Whitlock said to his wife, frowning.

“A little. I haven’t seen you this uncomfortable in a long time. It’s charming to know being with another woman is so repulsive to you.”

“I’m glad one of us is enjoying themselves.”

Isla returned to the window, and Whitlock followed. She grabbed him by the lapels. “How’s this?” she said to Susan.

“What? That? That’s your big move?”

Isla could hear Jay snicker, but she ignored it. “Yeah.”

“You look like you want to throttle him.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Isla, forgive my question, but haven’t you ever been desperate to kiss a man before?”

Isla cleared her throat, aware that Jay was listening. “I guess.”

“Do you remember how that felt?”

It still made her dizzy. “Yes.”

“Good. Stand in front of Lloyd. Take hold of him again like you did, but this time, I want you to close your eyes and remember that feeling. Then hold it, and open your eyes and don’t get distracted by the man you see before you. Pretend he’s someone else.”

“I feel as though I should be offended by that,” Whitlock said.

“Don’t worry. I’ve looked at you that way before.”

“Really?”

“You’ll recognize it when you see it.”

Isla took hold of his lapels again.

“Good,” Susan said. “Now close your eyes.”

Isla took a deep breath and complied. She thought back to when Jay had kissed her. She had fisted his shirt in her hands

in a frantic attempt to get closer to him. It was the moment she had wanted the rest of the world to vanish. Instead of being afraid of it, she let it wash over her, then opened her eyes as the feeling lingered.

Staring through Whitlock, she saw nothing but the fog of the memory.

Susan clapped, and Isla blinked.

“That was brilliant. Whoever he was...wow.”

“Whoever who was?”

“The guy you were thinking of.”

“Oh, it’s not—it’s nothing. Thanks for your help. Jay, did you get that? Jay?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I got it.”

Her face flushed, and she turned away from the window. “Good. That didn’t take too long.”

“Nope. But I will say that was enlightening.”

“It was nothing,” she mumbled so only he could hear her. “Because, like I said, we won’t do it again.”

“We don’t have to. I got the shot. It’s perfect.”

“Not the shot.”

“Oh, you mean the other.”

“Yeah.”

“Because it was just a kiss. Not because you were completely consumed by it.”

“You sound awful confident in yourself.”

“I know how I felt about it, and I did just see the look on your face. I even have photographic evidence.”

“We have work to do.”

“Work that will eventually finish.”

“I don’t—we don’t have time for this. If you have the pictures, then we can move on to phase two.” She pulled the

earpiece from her ear. “Thank you both. And I promise, these photos won’t get out.”

“If what you say is true about what’s happening, I think that’s the least of our worries.”

“Once you have the evidence we need to prosecute,” Whitlock said, “I’m ready to move on it.”

“Great. We’ll be in touch. Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

“And please let me know how you get on with everything else,” Susan said.

“What else? This is everything.”

“The guy. The one you were thinking of when you looked at my husband.”

“Oh. No, there’s no guy. I mean—it’s nothing. We’re nothing. There’s nothing more to that story.”

“Oh, but I thought—”

“Nope.”

“Okay, well, best of luck.”

“Thanks.”

When Isla joined Jay in the car, he turned off the camera. He’d been staring at the picture he’d taken. It was a shot he’d almost missed. When he heard Susan explaining what she wanted Isla to do, his heart had pounded as he waited to see what would happen.

Isla had pushed him away that day, but she couldn’t deny anymore that it meant as much to her as it did to him.

He smoothed the smile off his face as she settled herself in the passenger seat. She wasn’t ready. But he could be a patient man, and he wanted to make sure he treated her with the dignity she deserved. The dignity they both deserved.

The life he'd lived before wasn't one of purity, although he had never been the type of guy to take every opportunity that presented itself. But he knew his life had to be different now. That wouldn't be easy. It was hard to take his mind off that kiss and everything else he wanted to do with her.

He'd have to find a way to bring up the topic with Peter, as embarrassing as it might be. He couldn't ever remember a time when he'd talked to someone about it. But he was certain that taking Isla to bed wasn't what God wanted, no matter how much he did. The problem was making sure he stuck to his convictions. Peter must have insight into the struggle.

"So," Isla said, looking around as though distracted by their surroundings, but Jay knew she was using it as an excuse not to look at him. "Charlotte and Maddy are in place for the next step?"

"Ready and waiting."

"Good." She took the camera off the dash. "Can I have a look?"

"If you want." This should be interesting.

She brought up the image, and he watched for her reaction. The one he saw was confusion and dismay.

"That's how I looked?"

"The camera doesn't lie."

"I don't know what to say."

"Why do you need to say anything?"

"I should explain myself."

He had to tread lightly. "Isla, we don't have to talk about it right now."

"I think we do." Her voice had raised. "I mean, I look like I'm in love with Whitlock."

"Yeah, you do. It's perfect. It's exactly what we need to fool Sharpe."

“I’m not in love with you.” She was practically yelling now.

“Okay.” He kept his voice soft. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset.”

“We shouldn’t have done that. You shouldn’t have kissed me.”

“You kissed me back.”

“I didn’t want to.”

“I was there, and it was very clear that I wasn’t the only one hanging on for dear life.”

“You think this is a joke?”

“Of course not. Calm down. I don’t understand what you’re so upset about.”

“I’m upset because it was a mistake, and I don’t want you to misunderstand my feelings. You made a mess of everything.”

“I made a mess? Isla, what are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not in love with you.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time. I get it.”

“Do you? Because you’re not the sort of man I should be falling for.”

He couldn’t win with her. “We’re back to this, are we? The black and white? I’m an outlaw and you’re not? Is that it? There’s no room for the fact that everything you try to squash down into a nice tidy box that works only for you won’t stay there anymore?”

“We are what we are.” Her voice had dropped to a cold calm as she stared out the window. “Let’s just go. We have work to do.”

Jay scoffed but didn’t speak. There was nothing to say. It was clear she was determined to sabotage any chance they had because of his past.

When he had seen the way she looked at Whitlock, his hope had grown. He'd allowed himself to imagine a future with her. But he couldn't keep fighting against her preconceived ideas about him.

When this job was done, he'd be gone out of her life so she didn't have to fight against herself so hard.

Chapter 23

JOHN SHARPE WALKED through the halls to his office while perusing his messages. He stopped and smiled when he saw the one he'd been waiting for.

“Beth, could you hold—” He looked at his secretary’s desk. “You’re not Beth.”

“No, sir. Beth’s come down with the flu. They’ve sent me to fill in for her. My name’s Maddy Rochedale. I can assure you I come highly qualified.”

“Very well, Maddy, I’ve got an important meeting coming up. After that, I’ll be heading over to my other offices where I’ll need you to attend.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve been briefed.”

“Excellent. I expect a Mr. Jayden Parker to arrive shortly. When he does, will you show him in and hold all my calls?”

“Certainly.”

He started to his office, then stopped and turned. “Would you bring me a coffee? Milk, no sugar.”

“It’s on your desk. I made it when I was alerted to your return to the office.”

Sharpe smiled. “Very good. I have the feeling you’re going to fit in here nicely while Beth is recovering.”

“I hope so.”

After looking through the rest of his messages, he settled into his chair and swirled around to look out at the city. Jay had come through for him with the attorney general. He hadn't expected him to pull it off. He'd taken a risk allowing Jay to take back the DEA agent he'd given as a gift, but his entire business had been built around the smart risks, proven once again today. Having Lloyd Whitlock at his service would make several aspects of his business run a lot smoother. The drug trade he'd gotten involved in was already booming, but he had even bigger plans.

His phone buzzed. "Sir, Mr. Parker is here to see you."

"Thank you. Send him in."

When the door opened, Sharpe directed Jay to sit. "Thanks, Maddy. Remember, no calls."

"Yes, sir."

Jay looked back at her. "New secretary? I thought she was a blonde."

"Yeah, Beth's sick apparently. So, that was quick. When you promised me Whitlock, I thought it would take longer to deliver."

"Longer to deliver? Or not at all?"

"I'm a realistic man. Not too proud to admit I had my doubts."

"Lucky for you, I'm big on customer service."

"And Isla Taylor?"

"You'll understand in a moment the value of allowing me to borrow her. I've now got her detained and ready for delivery wherever you like."

"Can I expect this type of service in the future if we work together?"

"Whenever I can."

"I can't wait to see what you've got."

“I have a taste.” Jay stood and placed a photo in front of him.

“A taste?” Sharpe looked at the picture but didn’t touch it until he saw its contents. “My, my. You’re right. I’m pleased with the outcome of allowing our little captive her momentary freedom. When you said Whitlock had a soft spot for her, I didn’t know you meant this.”

“I think soft spot is an understatement.”

“So, Lloyd Whitlock enjoys dipping his hand in the cookie jar after all. It goes to show you can’t always tell with people.”

“No. You never know what’s really under the surface until you start digging.”

“How’d you arrange it?”

“I didn’t have to. I let her off on an invisible leash, and his building was the first place she went. I knew it would be. It’s not the first time I’ve spotted them together.”

“I hope this isn’t all you have?”

“No.” Jay laughed. “There’s a lot more where that came from. It got pretty hot and heavy from there.”

“Where’s the rest?”

“I’d like something from you first.”

“You want my guarantee that you’re hired? You got it.”

“Actually, what makes me so good at my job is that I know a lot about what’s going on behind the scenes. For example, with this favor. I knew of Whitlock’s dirty little secret from a reliable source, so I was able to deliver. What would help me out a great deal is if you’d let me see what you have on the others.”

“Others?”

“You must have a lot of dirt in order to get what you want.”

He shouldn’t have been surprised that Jay wanted to squeeze him for what he could. But he wouldn’t let Jay have

any power over him. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do. You’re not a man who pretends to be something he’s not. I want to see what you have. I want to know what I’ll have at my disposal to get your work done. It’s to your benefit that you show me. I can do a lot for you.”

“Sounds to me like you’re trying to manipulate me into sharing information.”

“Manipulation is such a strong word. I would simply like us to work together on a deeper level. This must be the most valuable asset you have. Would it hurt you to show me some of your lesser material?”

“I don’t blame you for asking, but no, I won’t share anything with you.”

“You’re making a mistake.”

“Thanks for your concern, but the only reason I haven’t kicked you out already is because you got Whitlock. If you keep pushing, the deal’s off.”

“That’s too bad. I’m sure there is a lot more I could have done for you with that information.”

“I’ll get over it. Now, I’d appreciate it if you’d hand over the rest of what you have.”

“You must have misunderstood. If you want the rest, I want to see those other files first.”

Jay was a hard negotiator, but *he* was harder. “That’s not the agreement.”

“It is now.”

Sharpe leaned forward, resting his arms on the desk while he pressed his fingertips together. “I don’t know if anyone has warned you about making an enemy of me.”

“I have no interest in making you my enemy, Mr. Sharpe. That is not my intention. But I’m an independent contractor. I don’t work *for* you. I work *with* you. I will continue to deliver above and beyond your expectations, but not for nothing.”

“I like you, Jay, so I’ll tell you what. If I have a job for you to do that requires the assistance of someone in a position of importance that I have sway over, we’ll discuss it then. In the meantime, bring me the rest of the photographs, or I’ll have you cut into tiny pieces.” He didn’t expect Jay to flinch, but he was surprised by the confident smile.

“That’s how you want to play this?”

“It is.”

“That’s your final offer?”

“That’s my only offer.”

“Very well. I have to respect that you play a hard game.”

“The best always do.”

“When should I return?”

“Not today. I have other engagements. If you can come back tomorrow morning, that would suit me just fine.”

“Then I’ll see you in the morning.”

Jay shook his hand and left the office, looking as though he didn’t have a care in the world.

It was all for show, of course. That’s how men like Jay played it. But he certainly had a knack for sniffing out dirt.

Sharpe studied the picture. Whitlock wasn’t the type of man who would leave his wife, but this picture made it clear that what was going on between him and Isla was more than a fling. Whitlock may even be in love with this woman. If that was the case, blackmailing him with exposure wouldn’t be the only course of action he could take. All he’d have to do is threaten Isla, who would soon also be in his possession. He’d initially intended to have her disposed of immediately, but keeping her captive instead would offer up alternatives if Jay didn’t deliver on the other photos.

He gathered his things, including the picture, and walked out of his office.

“Maddy, it’s time to go.”

“Yes, sir. I hope your meeting went well?”

“Better than expected. New doors of opportunity.”

“Wonderful news. Mr. Parker left looking very confident, but I got the impression you had to put him in his place.”

“Is that so?”

“I could be wrong. He had a falter in his step. It could have been anything.”

“Do you consider yourself a good judge of character?”

“I like to think so, but I’m sure you’re much better.”

“Perhaps.” He pushed the call button for the elevator. “But I have found that it’s those sitting in the background paying attention who have the most insight to offer. From what you said, it sounds to me like you pay attention.”

“I like to know where people stand.”

“Where do you think *I* stand?”

“You’re a powerful man who doesn’t take no for an answer. I imagine it’s not often that you don’t get what you want.”

“And what about Jay? What’s your take on him?”

“He’ll try to use you or, at the very least, influence you. But you won’t let him.”

Sharpe smiled and stepped into the elevator with Maddy. “You said you’re only working here temporarily?”

“That’s correct.”

“When Beth returns, I’d like to see if I can find a place for you here if you’re looking for a permanent position. I could use a woman like you.”

“That’s very generous, sir.”

“Does that mean you’re interested?”

“Definitely.”

“Great. I’ll set it up.” He pushed the button for the fifth floor.

“I thought we were leaving the building?”

“We are. I have to make a quick stop.”

When the elevator doors opened, they both got off.

“Wait here,” Sharpe said. “I won’t be long.”

The floor was full of vacant offices. At the end of the hall was a self-standing mesh wall that he moved aside to reveal a safe where he deposited the picture before returning to the elevator.

“I didn’t know you had offices on this floor,” Maddy said.

“I don’t. But it’s being renovated for future use, and I needed to check some of the work being done to make sure it’s up to my standard.”

After pressing the button for the lobby, he turned to her. “Space in this city is at a premium. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention this floor to anyone. I’d like to keep it for myself.”

“Absolutely.”

“Discretion is a highly prized asset in my company.”

“I understand completely.”

When they entered the lobby, Sharpe noted the guard, who was monitoring everyone entering the building. “Steven, glad to see you back on the job.”

“Thank you very much, sir. I’m much better.”

“Good.”

He continued toward the front door, Maddy’s heels clicking on the marble floor as she followed. He liked her immensely already. Beth was a competent secretary who he had no intention of firing, but he’d make a place for Maddy. And when she’d earned his trust, perhaps she could help him in his other businesses if she had the stomach for it, which he believed she did.

“My driver will be waiting,” he said to Maddy as a woman in a raincoat with the hood pulled over her head walked past

him into the building. He slowed and looked up at the cloudy sky. It wasn't raining, but it did look like it could start soon.

The driver opened the car door, and he and Maddy got in. Despite the heavy clouds, today was already turning into a very good day.

Charlotte entered the lobby bathroom and pushed her hood back before reaching into her pocket to pull out the keycard and folded note that Maddy had slipped her when they'd bumped into each other outside the building.

"Fifth floor," she said into her earpiece. "Maddy noted that it's on the east side of the building, but she wasn't sure which room. It's full of empty offices."

"Copy that," Will said. "See you up there."

After stuffing her coat in the garbage, she smoothed her skirt, identical to the one Maddy wore.

She looked at her watch, then exited the bathroom and watched the lobby, waiting for an opening when she wouldn't be noticed.

When a group of men entered the building and distracted the guard, she slipped out of the hall and curved her way around to appear as though she'd just entered from outside.

She waited in line, then scanned her card. The guard smiled at her.

"Ms. Rochedale, I didn't expect to see you back here so soon. Didn't I see you leave with Mr. Sharpe?"

"You did." She let out an exasperated breath. "As soon as we got into the car, Mr. Sharpe got a phone call. We were halfway down the block before he had to circle back and drop me off so I could rush back here to finalize the additional details that have come up."

"How'd Mr. Sharpe take it?"

“I’m too new here to gossip, but you probably know him better than I do and can guess what he thought of the disruption to his plans. If you’ll excuse me, I don’t want to keep Mr. Sharpe waiting.”

“Smart woman.” He nodded. “Keep up the good work. I hear he can be a hard man to work for, but if you get on his good side, you will be rewarded. At least that’s what I hear.” He winked at her.

“Thanks for the tip.”

“Anytime. And good luck.”

Chapter 24

CHARLOTTE GOT off the elevator at the fifth floor, checking each office as she passed until she found a mesh divider she nearly dismissed, but she pushed it aside and found the safe they were looking for.

“I’ve got it,” she said into her earpiece as she hurried to a different office that faced an alley. “By my count, you should find me eight windows left of center. I’ll meet you there.”

At the window, she waited until Will appeared before stepping back out of his way.

He moved the platform into position and waved, then set to work removing the window.

“You found me,” she said when Will set the glass on the platform and climbed inside.

“You were right. Eighth window.”

“It’s this way,” she said. But when she turned, he grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him.

She put a hand on his chest. “Don’t look at me like that. We have work to do.”

“I know. But can’t I savor this moment?”

“What’s to savor?”

“This is the first time we’ve worked together since that thing with Antonio.”

“Let’s hope and pray that this time things work out better.”

“They couldn’t have worked out any better back then. We got Kelly, remember? And you and your sister made it through safely.”

“Yes. And I’m thankful. But I’d rather not go through anything like that again. Can we get that safe open and get out of here? I have much preferred spending time with you under less dangerous circumstances.”

“Me too.” He kissed her, but she wouldn’t let him linger on it.

“Enough of that. Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

“Okay, but I’m taking you out after this is all done. I’ve barely seen you at all this month.”

“You’re the one with the crazy job. Now, are we going to get this safe open?”

“All right. I’m coming.”

Charlotte chewed on her nail while Will worked to crack the safe.

“I’ve got eyes on Maddy,” Isla said into the earpiece.

“Good,” Charlotte said. “Jay, you in position?”

“I’m ready and waiting. How’s the safe coming along?”

“It’s coming,” Will said.

“How long do you think?”

“It’ll take me at least another half hour.”

“You should have plenty of time. Isla, let us know if anything unusual happens on your end.”

“Will do.”

Charlotte crouched down next to Will to see what he was doing.

“Do you mind?” Will said.

“What? Am I crowding you?”

“No, you’re distracting. Do you know how good you smell?”

Charlotte tsked and stepped back. But she was enjoying working with Will a lot better now that they didn’t have to pretend they hadn’t fallen for each other.

Sharpe’s phone rang while they were still driving.

“This is Sharpe.”

“Hi, Mr. Sharpe, this is Steven, the security guard at your building.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. I don’t mean to alarm you. I had a spare moment, and I wanted to call you as a courtesy.”

“In regards to what?”

“I spoke to your secretary when she returned to your office.”

“Beth?”

“No, the new one. Ms. Rochedale, after you dropped her off so she could finalize those details for you.”

“Right.” Sharpe looked at Maddy.

“She told me something had come up. Not the specifics, of course, but I wanted to make sure that you had everything you needed.”

“I appreciate the call, but I have everything under control.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Don’t hesitate to let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“Thank you. I will.”

“Everything okay?” Maddy asked when he hung up.

“Everything is excellent.” He pulled his briefcase onto his lap and opened it. “However, I’m a touch disappointed to lose

your services.” He raised his gun from his case and pointed it at her. “Other than that, things are going well.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’d like to know who is accessing my office.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Today, I work for you. Last week, I was working at a paper manufacturing company. I thought you were happy with how I was doing my job. Is this how you treat all of your employees?”

“Only the ones who can be in two places at once. That was security on the phone. I was surprised to learn that he had let you back up to my office while you’re here with me in my car. So, unless you really do have a superpower, I’d like to know who is pretending to be you.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“No? I suppose you don’t know Jay Parker either? Never met him before today? Because I have a suspicion that it’s all connected.” He knocked a knuckle on the partition between them and the driver.

The screen dropped. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“He’s holding a gun on me,” Maddy said. “Call the police.”

“Franklin,” Sharpe said, ignoring her plea. “Would you mind organizing some men to search my office for intruders? And make sure they check the fifth floor as well.”

“Yes, sir. Is that everything?”

“That’s all for now.”

The screen rose, and Sharpe made a call.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon,” Jay said when he answered the phone. “I’m getting everything together now.”

“There’s been a change of plans. Meet me at the Red Wolves building in an hour so we can discuss what to do with

Maddy.”

“Who?”

“If you would prefer to make my life difficult, Mr. Parker, I could simply shoot her now. It would save us all some trouble.”

“I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Fantastic. And make sure you bring Isla and the photos; otherwise, I’ll be upset and you don’t want me to be upset.” He ended the call and laid the phone on the seat beside him. “You were right about one thing. Jay *was* trying to use me, but I’m not going to let him.”

Jay hung up the phone and threw a bottle of water across the room, then took a breath before turning on his mic for the earpieces.

“Guys, we have a problem,” he said to his team. “Sharpe’s on to us. He’s got Maddy, and he’s bringing her to the Wolves’ hideout.”

“How’d he find out?” Charlotte said.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“I’m tailing them,” Isla said. “You want me to run them off the road?”

“No. That would put Maddy at too great a risk. I want you to stand down. We know where they’re going.”

“Sharpe will kill her if we don’t do something.”

“He won’t kill her yet. We have time to figure out a new plan.”

“She could be dead before you get there. I’m going in.”

“No, Isla. I said stand down. You’ll only get yourself killed.”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“We’ve breached the safe,” Charlotte said.

“Good. Did we find what we need?”

“Oh, yeah,” Will said. “Looks like a lot of interesting reads. But we need to make sure Maddy’s safe.”

“We will. You two have to get out of there now. Sharpe will have a team headed your way already. And Charlotte, you’ll need to get out with Will. It won’t be safe to exit out the front.”

“I was afraid you’d say that. Just look after my sister, will you?”

“Maddy knows how to handle herself. We’ll regroup and make a new plan. Everyone is getting out of this alive.”

Isla pulled her earpiece out and threw it at the window before taking a hard left. There wasn’t time to regroup. She had to do something now.

After weaving her way through traffic, she finally came to a stop in front of a door with a neon sign.

The homeless man was still sitting nearby. When he saw her, he straightened. But she didn’t need his help today.

Inside, the afternoon crowd wasn’t as dense as when she’d come in before, but it was still loud.

She spotted Carl behind the bar, talking to the bartender.

“Mr. Blanchet,” she called out so he could hear. “Could I have a word?”

He frowned at her, then said something to the bartender before nodding for her to follow him to the back.

“I didn’t expect to see you here again,” he said once they’d left the noise. “Ever.”

“I’m sorry, but I need to ask you for another favor.”

He laughed. “The self-righteous princess wants to ask me for another favor? Where’s Jay?”

“He’s busy, and I need to get back inside the hospital.”

“Does he know you’re here talking to me now?”

“No.”

“Well, you’ve wasted your time. I can’t get you back in with or without Jay’s influence.”

“Why not?”

“My guy told me what happened.”

“We didn’t give him away.”

“No, but you caused a lot of trouble. Seems to be a thing with you. Misfortune follows you wherever you go.”

“It all worked out in the end.”

“Did it? Then why do you need to go back in?”

“Another friend of mine is in trouble. Well, she’s not really a friend, but she was helping me.”

“Out of her own free will?”

“I didn’t force her to help me.”

“No. You didn’t force Jay either. I’m not sure what people see in you, that they become so eager to please you. But I’m not like them.”

“Please. There’s no other way.”

“And why should I help? I know what you think of me. You think I’m a criminal who only wants to please himself. If that’s true, what’s the point of coming here?”

“You’re right. I did think that, but I was wrong about you. I was wrong about a lot of things. You live your life based on the cards you were dealt.”

He rolled his eyes. “How very generous of you. Look, princess, I don’t need your charity. And I certainly don’t need your trouble. You want help? Ask Jay. He’s much more accommodating than I am.”

“But he can’t get me back inside. If I don’t get in there to save her, she could die, and it will be all my fault.”

“So.”

“I know there’s more to you than what I saw. Yes, I made a snap judgement, but it was wrong. And I know there’s good inside of you. That’s why you want to help your daughter get out of this life. I just hope you won’t give up looking for it in your own.”

“Wow. That’s probably the most profound pile of garbage anyone has ever said to me.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He laughed loudly. “You flatter me, but there’s no good left in my life.”

“There is, but you have to be willing to receive it.”

“You’re talking about God.”

“I am.”

“You’re a Christian?”

“Yes.”

“That explains the self-righteous talk from before, but not this. You think God’s interested in a guy like me?”

“I know He is.”

“You’re not the first Christian to cross my path. I’ve had a few people tell me how much of a sinner I am and that, if I would only repent and turn to Jesus, my life would be perfect.”

“Your life wouldn’t be perfect, but you’d be a whole lot happier.”

“Oh yeah? Are you happy?”

She had no answer for that.

“That’s what I thought. If God doesn’t like the man I am, then why’d he make me like this?”

“Like what?”

“A sinner.”

“That wasn’t His plan.”

“That’s a cop-out answer.”

Isla dropped her head. She’d messed this up. Did she really think she could come in here and offer this man salvation and he’d lap it up? She had nothing to offer him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t come in here to preach at you.”

“Then why did you come? You thought you could waltz in here and ask me for a favor because Jay’s a friend of mine?”

“No. I came because of what you’re doing for your daughter. I came to make an appeal to that part of you that knows what’s right, not according to the law, but in the higher sense. I didn’t even intend to bring God into it. It’s just that I can see He’s reaching out to you.” She opened her mouth to say more but stopped. “I’m sorry. I’m doing it again. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of the mess that I got caught up in. You’re right about trouble following me. It’s all I can manage at the moment. That’s why I need to make it right.”

“You should tell Jay.”

“What difference would that make? He’s not the one who can get me inside. You are.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“I might.”

“You know why he’s helping you, right?”

“He got offered a job, and he took it.” How could Carl know about anything between them?

“Is that what you really think?”

She sighed. “No. But I don’t want him to know. He’ll try to stop me.”

“He wouldn’t be wrong to.”

“Yes, he would. He’d be reacting to his emotions, not to what is right.”

“Fine. I’ll call my guy. But I don’t want to see you again. This is my last favor.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Jay’s going to kill me when he finds out.”

“Then don’t tell him.”

Chapter 25

ISLA SMILED WARMLY at the man who stood in the door of the Red Wolves hide out. He looked annoyed.

“Thanks for doing this again,” she said.

He grunted.

“Has Sharpe arrived with a woman?” she added once she was inside.

“You have a death wish? I don’t even know what you’re doing here again. You won’t be lucky enough to make it out a second time.”

“I know. I’m the sacrificial lamb.”

“Second floor, further down the hall than the office. On the left, there’s a large open room.”

“Thanks.”

The guy shook his head and let her go first, leaving her at the stairs.

She climbed to the top and took a deep breath before heading down the hall toward the voices that she could hear.

God, I don’t feel you close, but I know you’re here. I don’t need to survive this, but can you make sure Maddy does? I don’t want her to have to pay for this.

Laughter from up ahead drew her back into the moment, and she walked to the room, rounding into view with her arms raised.

The talking stopped, and guns were pointed her way.

“I’m here to give myself up,” Isla said when she identified Sharpe. He was the only one not holding a gun, and he looked very pleased with himself. “But you need to let Maddy go.”

“What are you doing?” Maddy said.

“So this is Isla?” Sharpe said. “We haven’t met. But I recognize you from the photo. You and Whitlock, huh? Cozy.”

“Let Maddy go.”

“Why?”

“She can’t do anything for you. I’m the one you want. I’m the only one left alive from that operation. So, here I am. You can finish the job.”

“This is your plan? To come in here and hope for a swap?” He looked at the man next to him and nodded. “Brody, would you mind?”

Brody scowled at Isla as he walked past to check the hall for any uninvited guests who might be hiding there.

“It’s clear,” he said. “I’ll get a team and do a sweep of the building.”

“Report back when you’re done. Isla, I appreciate that you’re trying to make this simple for me, but your heroism is useless. The whole point of that ambush was to contain the problem. Letting Maddy go won’t do that. We have to come up with a new solution now. But thanks for coming in. It will save me hunting you down later.”

“There’s no way to contain it now. My team has everything from your safe. All I’m doing is offering my life for hers.”

“Or I could take both of your lives. How about that? Or even better, I’ll wait until Jay turns up—if he turns up—and add his life to the list as well. Shall I go on?”

“What if I made you a better offer?”

“A better offer?” He shrugged. “I’m listening, but I don’t expect much.”

“You let Maddy go, and I’ll get those documents back.”

“They’re useless to me now. But that photo of you and Whitlock? I’d like to know more about that. Now that I know this was all a setup, I’m inclined to think you were faking, but I’m not so sure. He was the one who pulled the strings to get you out of the police station. Perhaps you didn’t know Jay took the photo?”

If Sharpe still believed the picture could be real, it gave her an opportunity she didn’t know she had. But she’d have to convince Sharpe, and that wouldn’t be easy.

She pushed Whitlock from her mind and thought of Jay. “I believe he does care about me. Deeply.”

“Perhaps.”

“He’d do anything for me. If he knew I was here, putting my life at risk, he’d be furious.”

“Because he cares about you so much?” His face twisted in mock pity.

“Yes.”

“And what about you? Would you do anything to protect him?”

“That’s why I’m here without his knowledge. But I know he’d do the same for me if the tables were turned.”

“You think so? I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but Whitlock is not the type to leave his wife.”

“I know. We aren’t meant to be together. That’s why I tried to end it. I did end it. But that doesn’t change how I feel about him. Or how he feels about me. He’s so genuine and trustworthy. He’s the best man I’ve ever known.”

“Ah, love, it’s so manipulative. Delusions can feel so real.”

“Please. I’ll do anything. Just let her go, and leave Lloyd alone.”

“Okay. I’m inclined to believe you. And the truth is, I’m a businessman before anything else. I know a good opportunity when I see one. If you want me to let Maddy walk out of here

unharméd, then the first thing I need to find out is if Lloyd Whitlock cares about you as deeply as you believe. Because if he does, then we have a deal.”

“I already told you he does.”

“Why don’t we call and ask him?”

“You want me to call him now?”

“Is that a problem?”

Isla held her breath. She had no idea how Whitlock would respond. They hadn’t prepped him for this.

“How about I call him?” Sharpe put the phone on speaker after dialing Whitlock’s office number.

A woman answered. “Good afternoon, you’ve reached the Office of the Attorney General. What can I do for you?”

“Hello. This is John Sharpe, calling for Mr. Whitlock.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but he’s in a meeting. Was he expecting your call?”

“I’m sorry, my dear, but you’ll need to pull him from the meeting. Tell him I have Isla with me and it’s imperative that we speak now.”

“Unfortunately, Mr. Whitlock—”

“He’ll want to take this call. John Sharpe and Isla Taylor.”

“Sir—”

“Now!”

“You don’t need to yell, sir. If you’ll please hold, I’ll interrupt his very important meeting and tell him what you said, but I can’t promise he’ll come to the phone.”

“He will. We’ll wait.”

Classical music played while Isla fidgeted with the seam of her pants. She looked at Maddy, who made eye contact with her, then looked at the others in the room. Isla was certain they were both thinking the same thing. If this didn’t go their way, neither one of them would make it out of this alive. Everything now depended on Whitlock’s response.

Please, God. If you care as much as I'm trying to believe you do, then please make sure Lloyd responds the way I need him to.

The music stopped. "I have the attorney general for you. One moment."

The line clicked. "Mr. Sharpe? This is Lloyd Whitlock."

"Whitlock, how are you doing?"

"I've been better. I'd appreciate it if, in the future you would treat my secretary with more respect. I am a busy man. I have a lot of meetings. You can book an appointment if you need to speak to me in the future."

"You've taken a very strong stance for someone in such a vulnerable position. But I thank you for taking the time to speak with me. As your secretary would have mentioned, I have Isla here, and we have a minor situation that needs addressing."

"If I'm not mistaken, your tone sounds threatening."

"Does it?"

"Yes. I take it you are treating Isla respectfully?"

"I'm looking after her best interests, if that's what you mean. She's put herself in a rather precarious position, and she needs your help."

"I'd like to speak to her."

"I'm sorry, that's not possible."

"Then how do I know she's safe?"

"You'll have to take my word for it. Now, are you willing to help me or not?"

"Help you with what?"

"I've recently received a photograph of you and Isla in a rather compromising situation."

"You need to agree to ev—" Isla tried to get the message across, but Sharpe pressed the phone against his chest to stop her speaking.

“You don’t get to talk. Just listen.”

“But I can convince him.”

“He should already be convinced. If you speak again, I’ll shoot you.” He put the phone back out. “Sorry about that, Lloyd. As I was saying, I have a photograph of you and Isla that I’m sure would not be well received by the public. Or, if that doesn’t bother you, there are other things I can do. I hope you understand my meaning.”

“What do you want, Sharpe?”

“Your full and complete cooperation with whatever I require.”

“I’ll do whatever you need. Just don’t hurt her.”

“Excellent. First things first. You have a press conference in a couple of hours. I have someone I’d like you to appoint within your office. It helps keep things from getting complicated. You can announce the new position at your press conference so I know I have your cooperation, then we can talk further.” The line was silent. “Lloyd? You still there?”

“You let Isla go, and once I can confirm she’s safe from you, you have a deal.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not how this works. Isla will remain in my custody, but if you do as I have asked, I will allow you visitation rights. In the meantime, I’ll send the details for your chat to the press.”

“No. I’m sorry. I can’t do that.”

“That would be very unfortunate for Isla.”

“Is she listening?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t find me an agreeable pawn in your plans. I refuse to bow to your blackmail, and if you hurt Isla, I will make sure the full force of the law comes swiftly upon you. But when it comes to the American people, I won’t compromise. I can’t be bought or manipulated.”

“Lloyd, you don’t—” Isla tried again.

“Thank you for your time,” Sharpe said, then hung up. “Guess he loves the people more than he loves you. I can’t say I’m not disappointed. I thought for a moment that he’d do anything for you.”

“You don’t want to kill me or Maddy.”

“Don’t I?”

“I could help you.”

“We tried that, remember? Lloyd’s not interested. But don’t worry. I won’t make you suffer. In a way, I’m being merciful to you. Now you don’t have to live with the knowledge of a lost love. Not everyone is so lucky.”

He put his phone in his breast pocket and took a gun off one of his men. “It was nice to have met you.”

“Please, wait.” *God, do something.*

“What is the point of delaying the inevitable? I’m sorry, Isla. This is the end for you.”

She put up her hands as though she could stop the bullet; then, the air erupted in gunfire from the door.

Isla was about to dive for Maddy when Maddy moved first. Even with her hands restrained behind her back, she fell on top of Isla to protect her.

Isla pushed her aside. “We have to get cover,” she said, frantic, until she realized the shooting had stopped.

Sharpe was lying dead on the floor, along with all his other men.

Isla looked to the door where Carl Blanchet stood with Jay and two other men, including the one who’d let her inside.

“We’d better clean up the rest,” Blanchet said to his guys. “They’ll be coming from all over the building after the noise we made. You two ladies okay?”

Isla nodded and looked at Jay, who was frowning. “You guys go,” he said. “I’ll get Isla and Maddy out of here.”

“I think he’s got the keys to my cuffs,” Maddy said as she kicked the guy closest. “Front right pocket.”

Isla fished out the keys and released her.

“Glad to see you’re both still alive,” Jays said, his face tight with emotion.

“That was impeccable timing,” Maddy said. “Or was Isla here to distract them? In that case, you cut things pretty close.”

Jay looked at Isla and shook his head. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“I didn’t have a choice. Maddy’s life was on the line. I did what I needed to.”

“Oh yeah? So, you’re going to tell me you had everything under control?”

“Not exactly, but I wasn’t going to let Maddy lose her life for me. I had to do something.”

“That’s what we were all trying to do. You think I would have left her here?”

“It would have taken too long. I had to act.”

“You could have died.”

“So?”

Gunfire echoed from somewhere else in the building.

“Uh, guys?” Maddy said. “Maybe we should continue this elsewhere.”

“Yes,” Jay said in a low growl. “Let’s go.”

“What’s Carl doing here?” Isla said as she followed him to the door.

He checked the hall before waving them out. “He called me and told me what you were about to do—Wait here a sec.”

Jay hurried down the stairs and checked the adjacent halls, then nodded up to them.

“I understand why you’re here,” she said when she joined him at the bottom of the stairs. “But why is *he* here?”

“You’d know that better than I would.”

“Would I?”

“Whatever you said to him back at the bar, when he called me to tell me what you were doing, he offered his services. He said the Red Wolves needed new leadership.”

“He’s going back to them? I thought he was done with gangs.”

“He won’t lead them. He just thought it would be best to remove their current leader.” They heard more gunshots. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I can’t wait to read the newspaper articles on this one,” Maddy said from the back of the line. “Astute businessman gets caught in the crossfire of two rival gangs. He’s lauded as a fallen hero for his work to restore peace.”

“Sounds about right.” Jay opened the back door and waved the two women out. “Charlotte and Will are waiting for us. We’ll catch up with them and see what information they got. We should be able to help Whitlock clean house when we know who Sharpe was controlling.”

“Before we do that, Jay, can I have a word?” Isla said when they reached the car.

“There’s no time.” He got into the driver’s seat, leaving Isla and Maddy outside the car.

“Sorry about all this,” Isla said.

“Sounds like Jay’s taking it personally.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about that.”

“I won’t. It has nothing to do with me. I’m not that great at the interpersonal stuff anyway. Emotions make me itchy. I’d prefer to stay out of it.”

“Then we’d better get in the car and find out what your sister and Will have for us.”

Chapter 26

ISLA STOOD on the sidewalk in front of the federal building, watching the front door as people came and went.

Finally, Baker emerged. He didn't look happy until he noticed her standing there and smiled.

"Well, hello there, Isla," he said smugly. "You're pretty brave to be standing here like this. Did you forget there is a warrant out for your arrest? Whitlock may have pulled some strings, but he couldn't erase that."

"What's the warrant for exactly?"

"It's a long list that keeps getting longer. The latest is for assaulting a federal officer."

"You mean you? If I recall, you had me in custody when that happened. I would have to be very agile to pull off something like that."

"Turns out you are a very clever girl. At least you didn't have the chance to kill me. Not like Fogarty. You're going away for a long time." He looked around the sidewalk and waved at a nearby police officer who was talking to a woman carrying a baby. "I don't have any cuffs on me at the moment, so I'll have to borrow his, but don't expect the same treatment from the police as last time."

"Don't worry. I don't."

"Why are you here, anyway?" He glanced down at her hip. "You carrying?"

“Nope.”

“Because if you try to take me out in public like this, that would be very foolish.”

“I told you, I don’t have a weapon.”

He nodded. “I do.”

“Good for you.”

He looked at the officer, who was slowly approaching. “Was there anything you wanted to say before I take you into custody?”

“Yes. I wanted to congratulate you.”

“For what?”

“An outstanding performance. I’m no good at pretending to be someone I’m not, but you? You’re magnificent. I could learn a lot from a guy like you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Listen, Isla, I don’t know the real purpose of your presence here right now, but it’s a waste of your time and mine. It won’t keep you out of prison.”

“You mean it won’t keep *you* out of prison.”

Isla looked behind Baker, and he turned to see two more police officers approaching. He checked for the cop he’d called over. All three of them had their eye on him.

“What is this?” he said.

“You didn’t bring cuffs, and unfortunately, neither did I.”

“Agent Taylor,” one of the officers said. “Is this Harris Baker?”

“It certainly is. Would you mind cuffing him? But be careful, he’s armed. Harris Baker, you’re under arrest for conspiracy to commit a crime, for the murder of at least seven federal agents, the attempted murder of a federal agent...and a whole host of other things that you can hear about when you speak to your lawyer.”

The officer cuffed him.

“You have no evidence. They won’t be able to hold me,” Baker said. “You can’t do this to me.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but I *am* doing it to you. And not that I need to tell you this, but anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. If you’d like to confess, that would simplify the process.”

“You’ve got nothing.”

“No? I paid a visit to your friend, John Sharpe. Or should I say, the deceased?”

“Sharpe’s dead? I don’t believe you. I would have heard about it. I want to make a phone call.”

“You can do that later. And yes, I saw him die. It happened right in front of me. He was about to kill me when he got caught in the middle of a gunfight. Poor guy. We kept it quiet while we went through his personal effects.”

Baker smiled. “You’ve got nothing.”

Isla pulled a folded sheet of paper from her back pocket. “Let me see here.” She unfolded the paper and pretended to study it. “Looks like an email from you to Mr. Sharpe discussing the agreed amount that we found deposited into your account for taking care of Fogarty.” She looked at him. “He kept extensive details on those he worked with.”

“This is a setup. He never would have given you anything.”

“He didn’t. We found his stash. He’s had everything go so well for him for so long. I think he got cocky and careless. And you know what they say, pride comes before the fall. Thanks for your help, officers. I’ll let you take it from here.”

“I won’t go to prison for this.”

“Yes, you will.” She waved to him and walked away.

Isla hadn't intended to drive back to Peter's after watching Baker be arrested. But she knew Jay was still there. It would have been easier to go home and act like nothing had changed. But she couldn't leave everything up in the air. She couldn't forget about their unfinished business.

When she reached the house, Peter and Jay were sitting on the porch watching the sun go down.

"Isla," Peter said when she got out of her car. "We weren't expecting to see you."

"I know. But I left Baker and wanted to come here to say thank you both for all of your help." She climbed the stairs and leaned against the railing. "Since Sharpe's death, we've barely had the chance to say two words to each other. But I couldn't have done it without you."

"How did it feel to put him away?" Jay said. He looked uncomfortable.

"It was amazing. He had no idea. I got to wipe the smug look off his face."

"I wish I could have seen that."

"You could have come."

"No, that was yours to do."

"I'm just glad it's over. It's surreal being here under these new circumstances. It seems a million years ago when you turned up here, Jay."

"Yeah. It was a lifetime ago, that's for sure. Isla, are you staying with the agency after all that?"

"It's where I belong. I do a lot of good there, and now that we've got Sharpe's influence out of the picture, we can do even more. I heard the Red Wolves have been disbanded, so that's one less gang we have to worry about."

"Another one will take its place. It's a good thing the DEA has a capable agent to combat the next problem."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence."

"I wasn't talking about you."

She laughed. “Actually, I was thinking of going into undercover work for the agency.”

“Oh, great. Let me know when you need to be rescued again.” He started to laugh, but it died into a frown. “Well, I should get going.”

“Now?” Isla said. “It’s getting late.”

“And I’ve got a drive ahead of me. So—”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got some stuff to sort out. Helping you was a good distraction, but I’ve got real life to face and some cleaning up to do.”

“Oh. Right. Will we see you again?” She included Peter in her comment, but she really meant only her. She’d pushed Jay away probably for the same reason she’d made excuses for God’s distance. But now that everything was over, the thought of never seeing him again was a hard consequence to face.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “But I’m glad things worked out for you. I’m glad you got your team the justice they deserved.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for everything, Peter. We’ll keep in touch.”

The two men hugged. Then, Jay walked past Isla. “Good to see you again, Isla.” He didn’t touch her. “Maybe we’ll run into each other again.”

She reached out a hand when he turned his back but dropped it to her side when she thought of Peter standing nearby.

“See ya.” She waved, but Jay didn’t turn around.

Once his car was out of sight, Peter said, “He needs some time.”

“What?”

“Give him time. I was planning to have all you guys back next month. I’d like to debrief with you all about what happened. You learn a lot when you gain some distance from an operation. I thought it would be good to regroup and see what everyone thought.”

“Everyone?”

“You and Jay, Maddy, Charlotte and Will.”

“Oh. Okay. That sounds good.”

“I’ll organize it for a month or two from now. It will be best for all of you to have space.”

“You really think that will make any difference?”

“Jemi told me about praying with you the other night. You don’t need a relationship right now. It will only confuse you. You should take time and focus on learning about who God really is in your life without the distractions of dangerous missions and...other things.”

“You’re right. You’re always right.”

Peter laughed. “Not always.”

“Often enough.”

“I’ve got dinner in the oven. You planning on staying? I know Jemi would love to spend a little time with you.”

“How’s she doing?”

“The same.”

“She said you’re taking her sickness hard.”

“Did she say that?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s right. It’s hard to see her this way. She’s always been a strong woman. Stronger than me a lot of the time. I’m so confused about what to believe.”

“A wise man once told me that confusion is not in God’s realm. If you’re confused, it’s not Him doing it.”

“A wise man, huh?”

“A guy I know named Peter Black.”

“I can’t remember telling you that.”

“It was the first day we met. I was dealing with some issues in my team, and I had gotten lost in the drama. You helped pull me out of it. If you’re confused about Jemi, I’d say you’re letting fear get the better of you.”

“You sound like my wife. Annoying, but right.”

“She’s a smart woman.”

“Let’s go inside. I’ll finish up dinner, and you can keep Jemi company.”

“I wanted to say—” She stopped him before he went through the door. “Thank you.”

“You already said.”

“No. I mean, thank you for showing me what a loving father is like. Not everyone gets that chance. You’re always there for me, encouraging me and doing what you can. I know I can trust you and count on you, and that helps me see who God really is in my life. I struggled to see it before. But you show me what that looks like.”

He nodded, then went inside. Despite her disappointment about Jay leaving, she felt a great comfort knowing that God had good things in store for her future. She had a huge door open up in front of her to explore a life with God right by her side.

Isla knocked on the door, her heart in her mouth. It had been several months since she’d been back to Peter and Jemi’s house. It was only supposed to be a month before Peter gathered the group together, but with clashing calendars, it had taken almost three months before they could set a date. She hadn’t spoken to any of them besides Peter and Jemi in that time. She had thought she was over Jay, but knowing he was

close, she realized how much she had been looking forward to it.

The door opened, and Peter pulled her into a big hug. “You’re looking fantastic.”

“Am I? I feel a little frazzled.”

“Bad day at work?”

“Not bad, busy.”

“Well, come in and take a load off. The others are already here.”

“I’m late?”

“Nope, they were early.”

Peter led her to the living room, and she waved to the room. “Hey guys.”

“Isla, great to see you again,” Charlotte said. Will was sitting beside her, and she had her legs draped across his lap. “Come sit down. We were talking about when Will and I had to escape out the window after opening Sharpe’s safe. I’m not a fan of heights, but here we are. Peter said everything’s turned out really well since then.”

“It has. But I’m glad we have this chance to catch up. You guys left before I could say thank you properly.”

“No need,” Maddy said. “We enjoyed ourselves.”

“You enjoyed almost dying?” Isla said.

“Did you notice how quickly I got to you when the shooting started?”

“Yeah. You beat me to it. I should have been the one to cover you.”

“That’s what I mean. My reaction time was superb. I wasn’t sure if I was fully recovered since I had been hospitalized, but that was the perfect trial. Thank you so much.”

Isla looked at Charlotte. “Is she always like this?”

“Always. She loves that stuff. The riskier the better.”

“Glad I could be of service. So, uh, where’s Jay? He’s not here yet?”

“He couldn’t make it,” Peter said. “I was going to reschedule, but he didn’t want me to. Asked if I’d go ahead without him.”

“Oh. That’s too bad. So you’ve heard from him?”

“Yeah. He’s doing really well. He’s busy and thought it would be better to let us all catch up ourselves.”

“Wait,” Charlotte said. “Isla, I thought you guys were together.”

“No. We met when all of this began. He was here to help me find the truth. Now, he’s moved on.”

“So, what was that thing before?” Maddy said.

“What thing?”

“When we first got here, I thought we were brought in because, initially, he didn’t want you to be a part of it. That doesn’t sound like a guy who was just doing a job.”

“I don’t remember.” Isla had spent a lot of time trying to forget.

“Yeah, when we first turned up. You escorted him into the kitchen to set him straight.”

Isla stiffened, fighting against the warmth in her cheeks. “That’s right. We talked about it, and I set him straight.”

Maddy laughed. “No wonder you brought us in. Jay was right. You’re a terrible liar. You both came out of that kitchen in a head spin. We all knew what happened.”

“Maddy,” Charlotte said. “Leave her alone. They obviously decided to cool things off.”

“Hey, I’m only calling it like it is. If you saw the way Jay looked at her when he found us at the Red Wolves’ hideout, you can’t blame me for getting it wrong.”

“I...didn’t handle things very well, and so it didn’t work out.”

“But you were hoping to see him here?” Charlotte said.

“I thought I might—Look, I don’t want to talk about Jay, okay? Can we stick to the topic at hand? We’re here to go over the operation, so let’s do that.”

“I don’t know if it matters,” Peter said, “but I know where you can find him. In case you wanted to.”

“I don’t. It doesn’t matter. He’s moved on.”

“Okay. But if you change your mind, he’s working with his friend on a new project.”

“What friend?”

“Carl Blanchet. He’s got a program going on with kids in gangs or something. I know Jay’s been helping him out.”

“What’s Blanchet doing with gang kids?”

“Getting them off the street. It’s brand new, but it sounds like it’s started off strong. You should go check it out.”

“Or not. Jay didn’t come because he didn’t want to see me.”

“Isla, I’m not one for the girl chasing the guy, but if the guy doesn’t even know he has a shot, how’s he know to go after her?”

“Thanks for the advice, but what I’d really like to do right now is eat that meal you promised. I’m starving.”

It was late by the time they left the dinner table. Jemi sat beside Isla on the couch, holding her hand.

“I’m really proud of you,” she said. “I can hear in the way you talked tonight how much you’ve grown over this short time.”

“Thanks. Every time I have to remind myself that God is close to me, I think of you, and I thank God that He’s close to you too.”

“That means a lot. Knowing that you’re praying for me is special.”

“And how’s Peter doing with everything?”

“Better, thanks to you. He told me what you said before you left last time and admitted to me how afraid he was to lose me. We both knew it already, of course, but because he opened up about it, it gave us the opportunity to talk through it. It’s been a lot better since then. Now he’s bringing me out to sit with him in the yard instead of me having to get our guests to sneak me out.”

Isla laughed. “I’m so glad to hear that.”

“And how’s work going since everything that happened?”

“Really well. I’m part of a new task force they’ve created. I’m enjoying the work. It suits my strengths.”

“Does that mean no undercover work is required?”

“Not you too. No, no undercover work. But I’m in a really good place within myself now. I know myself better than I ever have before. And I’m trusting God in ways I never knew were possible. It’s changed the way I work, actually. I’m a much better agent because of it.”

Jemi rested her head on Isla’s shoulder, and the two friends sat in silence. Enjoying the peace.

Isla may not have gotten everything she wanted, but she knew above all that God was in control and wanted what was best for her, and she could be infinitely grateful for that.

Chapter 27

ISLA PARKED NEXT to the darkened neon sign. It was late morning, and she had changed her mind a dozen times before finally stopping the car.

After leaving Peter and Jemi's a couple weeks ago, she'd put Jay out of her mind, determined that they would both move on with their lives, but over the last few days, everything reminded her of him, and it was driving her crazy.

When she'd decided to find him, her intention was to see how he'd moved on with life so she could move on with hers. Even though she hadn't seen him in months, she was proud of the man he'd become since they'd first met, and she wanted to tell him that.

But now that she was here, all of that was obsolete, and she realized that the reason she wanted to see him wasn't for any other purpose than that she missed having him in her life. But allowing herself to hope for that was only going to bring her down.

She lied to herself that seeing him doing well with his life would be enough, and she forced herself to put the car into park.

If she didn't accomplish what she'd set out to do, she'd just keep going around in circles. She was determined to put an end to this today.

It took her several minutes to get out of the car, but from there, it was a quick walk to the bar door, which she found

locked.

She knocked, ignoring her disappointment but resigned to the truth that she'd never see Jay again. She'd find no one at the bar, and she had no idea where else to check.

The door opened, and she jumped back. "Oh, sorry. I thought no one was here."

"Then why'd you knock?" said an elderly man with a mop in his hand.

"I thought the bar would be open. I was surprised to find it empty."

"Bar'll be open tonight. Come back then." He started to close the door, but she put a hand out.

"I'm actually looking for Carl Blanchet."

"Carl? He's not here."

"You don't happen to know where I could find him? Or a man named Jay Parker?"

"Don't know any Jay Parker, but Carl could be down at the basketball courts. He's there most mornings, from what I understand."

"Great. And where are the courts?"

"Two blocks down that way, then hang a left. There's a park down that road."

"Thanks."

The man tipped an invisible hat, then closed the door.

Isla followed his instructions, and her heart pounded when she spotted the park.

"I can't wait to have this over and done with." She pulled the car over a block down the road and closed her eyes, steadying her breathing. "This is turning out to be more stressful than my job."

In her rearview mirror, she could see a group playing basketball on the court, but she couldn't make out any faces from that distance.

“Just double-checking, God, that this is a good idea?” She turned off the car but gripped the steering wheel. “I can leave. Please tell me to go. This probably isn't even you. I'm making a mistake.”

But even as she said the words, she knew she couldn't get out of this encounter. She'd made up her mind, and chances were that she'd only find Carl here, not Jay. It would be good to see Carl and thank him for what he did for her at the Red Wolves. It was the least she could do.

Her eyes remained glued to the ground as she approached the court. When she reached the fence, she scanned the players, spotting Carl at the same time he noticed her.

“Hold up, guys,” he said. “Give me a minute.”

She smiled as he jogged over to her, and the guys he'd been playing with made a bunch of *oohs* and laughed. Carl waved them off, then linked his fingers in the fence where she stood.

“Isla. You're the last person I expected to see. I hope you're not here to ask me for another favor?”

“The first time you helped me, you said, if I made it out of that hospital alive, I should stop by and say ‘hi’. Here I am. From what I hear, the Red Wolves have disbanded thanks to you. You didn't stick around long enough for me to say thanks for saving my life. You risked a lot doing that. It was... unexpected.”

“I didn't do it for you. I did it for me. I didn't like the direction Sharpe was taking the group, and I couldn't abandon those guys to a leader like that. It wasn't right. They were a bunch of good guys—I mean, not good, but, you know.”

“I know.” She smiled. “It just goes to show I was right about you.”

“How's that?”

“I knew you were a better person than you let on.”

“Don’t let those guys hear that.” He jerked his thumb behind him. “I need to uphold my reputation around here.”

“Oh yeah? Is that why you’re helping gang kids get off the street?”

“Kind of. These guys are a part of that. But don’t be too impressed. Just like the college tuition, I’m doing it for my daughter. More kids deserve a chance like her.”

“Sorry, but I’m impressed. I hear it’s going well too.”

“Yeah. So, is that why you came here? Just to say thanks and good job?”

“When I heard about what you were doing, I was curious.”

“Curious, huh? You know Jay’s been a big help, too.” By the way he looked at her when he said that, she knew he was fishing for something.

“Yeah, Peter told me.”

“He’s put in a lot of hours in helping me get this thing off the ground.”

“That’s good. I know he was trying to figure out what to do with himself after he worked with me. I’m glad you had a program he could sink his teeth into. It would have been good for him.”

“It is. Does he know you’re here?”

“No. I haven’t spoken to him in months.”

“He’d probably like to see you.”

“I don’t know about that. We haven’t been in touch at all. It’s probably better if we leave things the way they are.” She’d come all this way, and now, she was ready to chicken out.

Carl squinted at her like he was trying to work her out. “Can I show you something?”

“Sure.”

“You mind taking a walk? It’s around the corner.”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be.”

“Wait there a sec.” He ran back to his guys and spoke to them, grabbing a towel off the bench and draping it around his shoulders before rejoining her.

“And how have you been?” he asked as they walked down the sidewalk.

“I’ve been good. Plenty of work.”

“Getting a lot of us bad guys off the street?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. And thank you for your contribution with this work you’re doing.”

He stopped in front of a small church. “Here we are.”

“You’ve brought me to church?”

“Yeah. They approached *me*, believe it or not. The pastor came right into my bar one night and told me what he was thinking of doing. Asked me what I thought and if I had any ideas.”

“That was brave.”

“He knew what he was doing. Even when I told him to get lost.”

“How’d you get from there to here?”

“After he left, I started thinking. Turned out, I did have some ideas. I waited a few days, but I kept thinking he couldn’t help these kids, and I could. I didn’t want him to do it wrong.”

“So you came to sort him out.”

“Yeah. I stood out here on the steps. Wouldn’t go inside. I said what I had to say and left. A couple of days later, he came into my bar again. He said he’s implementing what I shared with him and wanted to let me know when and where.”

“And you said you’d help?”

“No way. I said buy a drink or get out. He was making my customers uncomfortable.”

“But you couldn’t help yourself.”

“Nope. And I imagine he knew the whole time. So here I am.”

“How’s Jay fit into it all?”

“He came in to check up on me. I told him what I was doing. He got his hands dirty immediately. If you ask me, he was desperate to keep his mind occupied. It just so happened I had just the thing.”

Carl led her up the stairs and opened the door. Inside, kids filled the foyer area sitting quietly at tables and chairs, focused on the papers at their desks.

“What’s going on?” Isla whispered.

“Reading test. Winner takes all. That’s how we keep them focused.”

“What do they win?”

“Different things each time. Whatever gets them learning. I don’t know if it’s the right thing, but it works. These are kids that don’t go to school. The idea is to transition them into school, but we’re helping them from the inside out. Working with whatever parental situation they’re in, among other things. We’ve got a specialist who’s recently signed up to work with us.”

“Specialist in what?”

“Dyslexia and other learning disabilities. It’s amazing when you tell a kid there’s a reason they can’t read, and it’s not because they’re stupid. That’s usually what they’ve heard their whole lives.”

Across the room, a door flew open. “Time’s up!” Jay bellowed when he entered the room. “I bet you all failed.”

The room went into an uproar with shouts of, “No!”

“You know I’m only kidding. Or maybe I’m jealous. You guys are too smart.”

Jay spotted Isla, and his smile dropped for a second but then picked up again.

“You didn’t tell me Jay was here,” Isla mumbled.

“Would you not have come?” He looked at her with a curiosity that said, ‘I dare you to admit you’re afraid to see him.’

“I’m just surprised.”

“All right, all right,” Jay said to the kids. “Hand me your papers. I know you guys smashed it as usual. But I won’t pronounce the winner until Mrs. Aitkins grades you all. For now, it’s basketball in the park. Everyone get your butts outside.”

Chairs scraped across the floor, and kids bumped Isla and Carl as they rushed out the door. Several adults smiled apologetically and shook hands with Carl as they followed.

Jay waited until the room cleared before walking up to Carl and Isla. “Hi.”

“I found her loitering in the park,” Carl said. “I thought you might know what to do with her.”

“Loitering, huh? Sounds suspicious.”

“That’s what I thought. I’ve got to get back to the courts. I’ll see you down there.”

“Thanks, Carl,” Isla said.

“So.” Jay rested his hands on his hips. “This is unexpected.”

“Yeah. I know. I’m sorry to barge in on you. Carl didn’t tell me you were here.”

“Would you rather I wasn’t?”

“No. We just haven’t seen each other in a while. I didn’t mean to surprise you.”

“That’s okay. It’s a good surprise. But what are you doing here? Checking up on Carl?”

“Peter told me about his new project and that you were helping him.”

“Of course he did.”

“I can go if—”

“No. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m glad you’re here. When Carl first told me about his ideas, I thought of you and how much you would approve. Fewer criminals on the street. Should help you do your job.”

“It looks like you guys are doing fantastic work.”

“I’ve been amazed by how fast it’s grown. And Carl has been very open to conversations about God.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“You want to take a walk?”

“Sure. Or do you need to go to the courts? I don’t mean to keep you from your work.”

“They’ve got plenty of supervision. I was here helping with the test.”

Jay led her down a leafy sidewalk. It was a quiet street that left everything unsaid hovering before them.

“I take it you’ve been good?” Jay said.

“Work’s going well. I’m doing better. Learning to trust God with more stuff.”

“Good.”

Isla stopped walking. “Jay, I didn’t come here for small talk. I really came here to say sorry.”

“For what?”

“For the way I treated you.”

“You don’t have to apologize for anything. I expected too much. I made a mistake thinking we had something, and I put you in an uncomfortable position.”

“No. You were right. Something had developed between us, but I pushed you away because I didn’t know how to handle...anything. I wasn’t prepared for you and how you made me feel, and I screwed everything up. And I’m sorry because I think I hurt you. That was the last thing I wanted to do. It’s the last thing I ever want to do.”

He nodded. “Thank you for saying that, but I’m not sure what you want from me.”

“Nothing. I’m not here because I want anything. You’ve moved on, and that’s great—I mean, I want what’s best for you. I’m proud of you and who you are. I want you to know that.”

“You’re proud of me?”

“I am. I hope that doesn’t come across as condescending.”

“Not at all.”

“Right. Okay. Uh...I guess that’s it. Good luck with everything. I’ll find out from Peter how things are going for you. I won’t take up any more of your time. I know you have a lot going on.”

“Isla.”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you come here?”

“I told you. I wanted to apologize.”

“That’s it? You weren’t hoping for anything?”

“I—I don’t know what I expected.”

“I didn’t ask what you expected. I asked what you hoped for.”

The way he looked at her twisted her stomach into knots, but she couldn’t tell if he meant it to or not. Then he stepped closer.

“I hoped—” She looked at the ground. “I don’t know. I was afraid to hope.”

“I don’t want to play games with you. If you only came here to apologize and tell me you’re proud of me, that’s fine. Have a great life. But if you’ve come for another reason, I want you to be straight with me. You owe me that much.”

“You’re right. You deserve to know the truth.”

“Thank you.”

She could always run away after telling him what was really going on in her head. “The truth is that, when you weren’t at Peter’s when we got together for that dinner, I was more disappointed than I expected to be. I had been looking forward to seeing you, and you weren’t there, and I can’t stop thinking about you. The truth is that I’ve wanted so badly to see you, but I’ve been afraid that you don’t feel the same anymore. But if you have moved on, what can I do but be happy for you?”

“Happy for me?”

“Yes. If I’ve lost you, that’s my fault, and I’ll live with that.”

“Now that you’re being honest with me, I have a question for you.”

“Should I be worried?”

He grinned. “You remember the way you looked at Whitlock in that photo?”

“Yes.”

“You said it didn’t represent how you really felt. Was that true?”

“I lied.”

“Then I want you to know—” He took hold of her jacket and pulled her closer, looking into her eyes with a desperate longing that stole her breath. “Nothing about how I felt about you has changed,” he whispered.

“Why didn’t you come to Peter’s?”

“The same reason you were afraid to find me now. I wouldn’t have been able to face you if you’d moved on.”

“I haven’t. Not at all. I’ve missed you so much. I’m sorry for ever treating you like you weren’t good enough for me.”

“I’ll get over it.”

He dipped his head and kissed her, and this time, she didn’t worry about losing herself in it.

When they pulled apart, he took her face in his hands.

“I’m not usually one for public displays of affection,” he said. “But I think I earned that one.”

He slipped his arm around her and led her down the sidewalk. “Want to go watch a basketball game?”

She leaned into him. “Only if you take me out after.”

“Isla, I’m never going to let you go again.”

Epilogue

ISLA PULLED the car over to the curb but kept it running while she checked her emails. They were having a heatwave, and she planned to savor her last moments of coolness.

Glancing across the park, she could see a group already gathering. Several large oak trees would offer shade during the training. That was something, at least.

A list of emails populated the screen, and she groaned. That's what happened when you took a couple of days off work. She scanned for anything urgent and tapped on one that she'd respond to before heading for the park.

As she finished pecking out the message, a knock came at her window.

She jumped, then scowled at the window before buzzing it down. "You scared me."

Jay grinned. "Don't tell me I caught Isla Taylor, agent extraordinaire, off guard."

"I'm finishing up an email, then I'll be over."

He leaned down and rested his arms on the window.

She looked at them. "You're letting all the hot air in."

"That's a problem?"

"Is there something you wanted? Or are you here to bother me?"

"You're touchy this morning."

She sighed. “Sorry, it’s these emails. I thought we were done cleaning up the mess, but it just keeps going and going. All I want is to move on with life.”

“Good. And I’m not here to annoy you. I came over to get a kiss before I miss out.”

“Why will you miss out?”

“We can’t do it over there. I won’t hear the end of it for weeks. Last time you came, they saw us holding hands and I couldn’t get them to shut up about it. Imagine if they saw us kiss.”

“Okay, but make it quick. I’ve got to finish this email.”

“Sheesh.” He rolled his eyes, then ducked inside, lingering. “It’s nice and cool in here,” he said against her lips.

“Is that the real reason for the affection? So you can steal my air conditioning?”

“Nope, just a perk.”

She pushed him back, but kept her hand on his chest. It was coming up on a year since everything came out about the loss of her team, and being with Jay for most of that time had been a greater comfort than she could have ever imagined. It was so easy to spend time with him now that she was willing to open up.

She bit her lip. “I love you.”

“I know. I’ll see you over there.”

The air conditioning didn’t seem to matter so much anymore, and she quickly ended her email and joined the group in the park.

“You guys remember Isla?” Jay said to the teens, who were lounging in the shade. A few offered affirmative responses, then Jay said, “Today is all about learning some practical skills. She’s going to show us some easy self-defense moves

that will give you more confidence in going out into the world. Hopefully, you'll never have to use them, but it's good information to have."

"What do I need to know about self-defense?" one of the group said. "I already know how to punch anyone who gives me trouble."

A few guys around the teen laughed in agreement.

"What's your name?" Isla asked.

"Ryan."

"Well, Ryan, it takes more than muscles to protect yourself. If you don't want to learn, that's fine. Girls, what I'm here to show you today is how you can take down a guy like Ryan and teach him a lesson."

The girls looked impressed. Ryan and his friends were skeptical. "Why don't you come up here, Ryan, so I can demonstrate."

He stood, cocky, and strutted up to her, pushing his shoulders back so he was the full foot taller than her. He looked at Jay. "Are you going to be okay if I knock out your girlfriend?"

Jay crossed his arms and snickered. "Go ahead. Let's see what you've got."

"Don't hold back on my account," Isla said, stepping her feet apart to shoulder width.

"You sure?" Ryan bounced on his toes and shook out his arms.

"I'm sure. Go ahead. Hit me."

He took a swing, and she blocked it. The other kids hooted.

He bounced again and went for another swing. This time Isla dodged, but grabbed his arm on the follow-through and yanked him forward. He tripped and nearly fell.

When he faced her again, his face was red. He didn't like being shown up.

She lifted an eyebrow to egg him on.

He charged her and she bent, taking his weight on her shoulder and using his momentum to throw him down to the ground. She added enough extra force to knock a little of the wind out of him.

The group cheered, and Isla reached her hand down to help Ryan up. “Size does make a difference, but mostly it’s about skill. Who’s next?”

Ryan returned to his friends and received slaps on the back and jabs to his side for his effort.

“If I hear any of you guys giving him a hard time,” Isla said to the group, “I’ll take you out. You know I can.”

They laughed, and someone called out. “Jay should have a turn.”

Jay put his hands up. “No way. You’ve seen what she can do.”

“You chicken?” Isla said with a wink and the group erupted in shouts for him to stand up for himself.

When he approached Isla, they whooped.

“Jay here has the muscles and the skills,” Isla said. “All I have to rely on are my skills.”

“I still think she could take me.” Jay said to the crowd before pushing his tongue into his cheek as he sized up Isla.

“Only cause you wouldn’t want to hurt her,” someone yelled.

“That’s partly true, but she’s got some good moves. However...there is one move that I think could take her out instantly without threat of a grievous injury.”

“What move?” Isla cocked her head to the side. “It must be good.”

“It’s called the knee-bend.”

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s because it’s old school.”

“Okay then, show me.”

The kids closed in when Jay nodded his agreement. “You stand here, like this.” He turned her slightly, and she lifted her hands in defense. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Cause there’s no defense against this move.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She dropped her arms. “You’ve got a move that I won’t be able to guard against?”

“Yes.”

“This I’ve gotta see.”

He reached into his pocket as he dropped to the ground on his knee. “I get down like this, then ask you if you’ll marry me.” He opened a small black box to reveal a square solitaire diamond ring.

She stared at it and blinked. “Is this serious?”

“Of course it is.”

She looked at the kids who’d moved closer but remained completely silent except for a couple of squeaks from the girls.

“I never expected to meet anyone like you in my life,” Jay said. “I want to be with you forever. Marry me.”

A laugh slipped from her throat, but it choked on the tears that filled her eyes. “There’s no one else I want to be with. Of course I’ll marry you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

The kids clapped. Their celebratory shouts were like fireworks to celebrate as Jay put the ring on to Isla’s finger. She wrapped her arms around him, and he lifted her off the ground, swinging her around before setting her back down.

She put a hand on his cheek. “I’m sorry to do this to you.”

“What?” His brow collapsed in concern.

Slipping her hand around the back of his neck, she pulled him into a kiss and the group erupted again.

When she leaned back, she said, “You’re just going to have to suffer the consequences.”

He smiled. “These are consequences worth sacrificing for.” He yanked her close again and kissed her, waving away the cat-calls as they both savored the moment of a decision that would change the rest of their lives.

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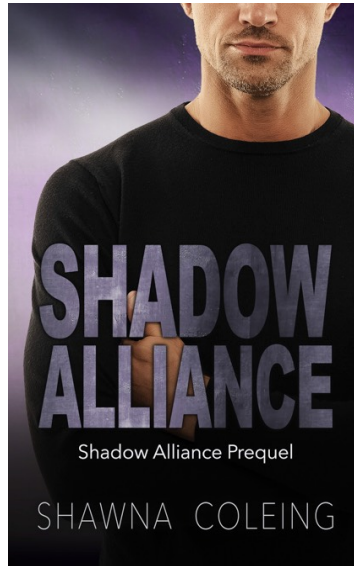
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