



Lethal

SECRETS

JENNA GUNN

Lethal Secrets

Jenna Gunn

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About Lethal Secrets

Mia

Women like me don't get fairytale endings.

We get abusive brothers.

Liars and cheating.

We get scars.

Damage so deep it will never be shaken.

Until a battle-hardened SEAL decides to prove otherwise.

Vows to avenge me.

Puts his life on the line.

And shows me what it's like to feel safe for the first time.

But big badass Eli Fortier is too good to be true.

Only now I know that running from Eli won't just end with me
in the grave my brother's have already dug...

Leaving him will cut my heart out of me once and for all.

Ironic because I didn't know I had one left...

Until Eli picked up my broken pieces.

Eli

I've always been a walking talking compass for trouble. And my aim was true when I walked into a bar and laid eyes on Mia Bailey.

She wasn't part of the job. She should have been off limits for so many reasons.

Only the moment she looked up at me with fear in her pretty green eyes she was my mission.

To protect.

To heal.

Mine.

Because two broken souls make one.

But danger gets far too close and I might lose my chance at forever with the the woman that taught me how to feel alive again.

Mia Bailey and Former SEAL Eli Fortier come together in an explosively hot suspense romance. Dive in today and hang on tight because it's a wild ride. Lethal Secrets is a standalone in the Agile Security & Rescue Series. This is the 9th alpha rescuer book in the collection. You do not have to read any other books to enjoy this story. HEA guaranteed!

Also By Jenna Gunn

The Jenna Gunn Romance Library

Jenna Gunn's books can be found under her name and the pen name Maris Night. Below is a partial list of her books.

Agile Security & Rescue Series

[Forgotten Soldier](#) - Cole & Sierra's Story

[Dr. Trouble](#) - Scotch & Simona's Story

[Off-Limits Protector](#)- Andre & Willow's Story

[Forbidden Knight](#)- Wolf & Kate's Story

[Clash Landing](#)- Mako & Erika's Story

[Lost & Found](#)- Mikail & Gina's Story

[Guarding Secrets](#)- Marshall & Danee's Story

[Dangerous Secrets](#)- Dozer & Candy's Story

Lethal Secrets - Eli & Mia's Story

Want a free book?

[Guarded by the SEAL](#)- is FREE when you join my newsletter and features the origin story for Agile Security & Rescue.

The Eden Mountain Firefighters Series

[Saving Sophia](#) - Liam and Sophia's story

[Saving Skye](#) - Larson and Skye's story-

[Saving Summer](#) - Carter and Summer's story

[Saving Savannah](#) - Caleb & Savannah's story

[Saving Valentine's Day](#)- A Novella- Mr. & Mrs. Strong's story

Jenna Gunn Standalone Books

[Rocked](#)- Gage, Julian & Winter's story

His Irish Captive Duet - Kieran & Carra's story

Archer Brother's Series

(Now Under Maris Night Pen Name)

[Boss Rules](#)- Bryce and Raven's Story

[Faux-Ever Rules](#)- Christian and Maddy's Story

[Broken Rules](#)- Brandon and Anya's Story

[Do-Over Rules](#)- Bishop and Mia's Story

[Friend Rules](#)- Tyson and Abby's Story

Jenna (As Maris Night) Standalone Books

[That One Kiss](#)- Brock & Avery's story

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Chapter One

Eli

An ungodly screeching sound comes out of my iPhone. “Holy shit that’s loud. Sorry,” I say to my new partner. But it’s impossible to swallow the lump in my throat or think beyond what that sound could mean.

Beckett picks up my phone and passes it across the console to me. “That sounds urgent.”

After hitting the turn signal, I swerve off the road into a turnout so I can look. “It is. It’s the notification from an app called Circle. Only three people in the world know how to contact me that way.”

Arctic cold hollows out my chest as I look down at the blue notification icon pulsing on my phone screen. *Fuck.*

Nyx was the one who used the app the most. The other two are SEALS that served with me—Beast and Hardknox. Both of the Team Guys know that this line of communication is for one thing—recovering Nyx. Dead or alive.

Fucking. Fuck. Please let this be good.

A familiar ache hits the back of my throat. My hands start to burn. My breath turns into useless chugs as my world collapses.

I knew that something would break one day. I just didn't know if it was going to be me or the news we'd been waiting for.

Thirty seconds pass as the app loads. Feels like I age thirty years in that span. Cold sweat pops up across my skin like I've walked in front of a sprinkler.

I've been waiting for that sound for seven months and three days. I've held onto hope beyond all reason.

The three of us have.

But I'm the one that will never give up. The one who bears the guilt.

A full-body shudder hits me as messages download.

Steeling my spine, I open the new message thread.

Beast: **"Got a hit on Arcto3."**

I exhale hard as my entire focus narrows. My thumb sets a new land speed record. **"Where? I'll get on the next plane."**

Beast: **"Los Angeles. Aren't you in California?"**

Holy shit.

"I'm in L.A. on a private security contract."

Beast: **"Well, fuck. That's amazing. The ID was on someone walking into a bar called Richter Scale, 415692 E. Ninth."**

My gut turns over.

It's not real. It can't be. There's no way. Not in Los Angeles.

If the facial recognition system picked up the image in any other country in the world, I'd think there was a chance.

Hardknox joins the thread. First, he sends the 'mind blown emoji'—classic Hardknox reply. Then he writes. **"I'm in Vegas, I can catch a flight if you need me."**

I 'thumbs up' Hardknox's remark.

Beast: **“Call me the minute you know.”**

“Copy that.”

My new coworker is still studying me from the passenger seat.

He doesn't know me. I don't know him. But based on the fact that we have both been hired by the highly reputable Agile Security & Rescue says enough for me to trust him.

However, that doesn't mean I need to air my fucking skeletons to the former Force Recon Marine.

He nods toward the phone which is back in the cupholder. “Gonna tell me why you look like you're about to skydive without a parachute?”

“I need to get a beer in a bar over on East Ninth. Want to go?”

He snorts and gives me a pointed look. “I've been living in bum-fuck Alaska for four years. What do you think?”

I shift the rented Navigator into drive and pull away from the curb fast enough to squawk the tires.

Fuck. Arcto3 got a hit on Nyx's face.

If Beast hadn't left the SEALs and gone to work as a contractor for the NSA, we would be flying blind. But now we've got access to better and more sophisticated intel. Couple that with the resources Agile has and we're in a good place to continue our search for Nyx.

Beckett leans back in the seat and pops an Altoid in his mouth. “Not gonna get in your business, but that text must have been some heavy shit.”

“Earth-shattering. But I'm going to be honest. The likelihood of this being real is slim.”

If only it could be true. The nightmare could end. Nyx would be safe. Or at peace.

Traffic's dense, which has me cursing. I cut across an intersection and join a flow of cars on a main arterial road. "Someone that me and my former team have been looking for has been spotted in the area."

He doesn't ask anything else. I like that about the man. He and I work just fine together. Which is good right now because my throat is too tight to talk about the thing that destroyed the SEAL that I used to be.

Traffic irritates the hell out of me. To stop myself from driving over the top of the cars in front of me, I ask Beckett, "What do you know about facial recognition?"

"It's getting a lot better."

"Yeah, have you heard of Arcto3?"

"Is that the one where private businesses and citizens can submit their video feeds?"

"Yes, that's the one. Which means the network is getting bigger every day. I don't have a full scope on the system, but my former teammate is working on an NSA contract that uses it."

He whistles. "Damn. Crazy world we live in now. I'll admit, that kind of tech gives me the willies."

"No shit. Especially if it's not accurate."

I jam the company's Lincoln Navigator into a tight parking spot, and we take off for the bar.

The Richter Scale is a pub in a crap part of town. The hanging sign has lost one of its chains and dangles haphazardly.

Or...maybe it was meant to look like it got busted loose in an earthquake.

As I take in the ratty exterior, a bit of relief hits me. I wasn't in the mood to wade through a dance club.

This will be easy. I'll spot someone that mildly resembles Nyx, and we can move on.

Then the team can go back to chewing our fucking arms off as we try to find her.

Beer-laced air assaults me as the two of us walk through the door. It's a narrow place with standard tables and red stained-glass lights over the bar. Unremarkable in all regards.

The total number of heads inside is less than thirty.

Beckett thinks like me. He angles his head toward a table that will allow us to see all the critical access points. My feet feel weirdly detached as I cross the scuffed wooden flooring and pull the seat at the table out.

“This target a man or a woman?” Beckett asks as he picks up a laminated menu off the table.

I'm about to answer when a petite brunette in black cut-off shorts, a tight black t-shirt, and bright red Keds sneakers shoots out from behind the bar.

Christ.

I nearly yell from the shock.

My body bolts upright to a standing position, sending my chair crashing to the floor.

“A woman, then,” he calls as I stride away.

She doesn't see me coming, but I'm on her in less than five seconds. “Nyx—”

Startled, the unsuspecting woman jumps back and bumps into a table. I reach for her but freeze with my hand extended.

God. I'm looking at a ghost. Only, I'm not.

This woman isn't Nyx, but the resemblance is un-fucking-canny. Not identical, but I can see why Arcto3 picked her up.

When I don't move, her tongue nervously darts across her bottom lip, and her gaze flicks around the bar. Thin veins along her temple flickering wildly in the light.

She's about to bolt on me. In a reedy voice, she says, “Excuse me, I didn't see you.”

My brain processes her accent. Standard American. Not at all like Nyx's British accent. But it's ridiculous that I'd want her to sound the same.

Disappointment slices me clean in half. It was foolish to get my hopes up. But I refuse to let Nyx die in my head. I'd trade my life right now to find her in a rundown bar in Los Angeles.

"Sorry." I straighten and drop my hand as the disappointment settles like lead into my gut. "I thought you were someone else."

"I've got to take an order." She ducks around me and heads toward Beckett.

I stay planted where I am, reeling from being so close but so fucking far from ending the nightmare.

With my chest caved in, I watch her as she takes his drink order, and passes me as she returns to the bar. This time she gives a wide berth.

I unglue my feet and follow her.

She glances over her shoulder and jerks her gaze away when she realizes I'm coming right to her.

"I'll add a bourbon and Coke to that order."

She won't look at me as she jabs violently at the computer screen with her fingertip. "I'll bring it over."

Feeling like an idiot, I say, "I'm sorry I startled you."

She jerks out a glass and clunks it down onto her tray. Her shiny brown hair sways with the motion as she does the same with a bottle of beer. Not once do her green eyes lift to me.

"Try not to sneak up on people," she clips as she spins on her Keds and strides toward a set of swinging doors.

The guy next to me chuckles. "She's *uptight*. Good luck, buddy. You'll have to work hard to get in that one's pants."

WTF?

The urge to backhand him off his barstool is real.

For a beat, I breathe down my anger. Getting in a bar fight isn't on the mission objective tonight.

Through my gritted teeth, I ask, "You know her?"

"She's been around here for a while. Probably got spikes on her chastity belt. Always in attack mode."

Right. Probably more like she doesn't want anything to do with a derogatory slob like him.

I don't bother illuminating fuckface on the fact that she's not in attack mode. She's on defense.

The last thing she needs is me following her around and for the asshole to be making remarks about her. I'm not the same caliber dickhead by far as that guy, but she might disagree.

Besides, I need to get in touch with Beast and Hardknox. I draw in a tight breath, pull out my phone, and head toward the table before I smash that asshole's face just for breathing in her direction.

Beckett's tapping his fingers on the menu when I pull up. "False alarm?"

"Shit, yes." I hook the overturned chair with my toe and right it. I take a seat again and as I'm drumming out a reply with the bad news to Beast and Hardknox, the woman appears with our drinks.

She stops a few feet away and draws in a deep breath. Her spine might be straight, but her posture lacks confidence. It looks like she's about to run a gauntlet.

Her eyebrows are scrunched, and there's heat tinting her cheeks when she blows a lock of hair off her forehead. "Sorry I reacted so pissy."

As she sets the drinks on the table, her gaze stays low.

Disappointing. I really want to see her incredible eyes again.

I say, "Not your fault. I came on hard. I just had hoped..."

That you were Nyx.

That the nightmare I caused would end.

Clenching my jaw, I wrap my hand around the highball glass and fight the urge to say anything that might get her to stay.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” she says quietly and turns away.

Guilt stings at me for scaring her. But the deeper emotion cutting off my air is resignation.

What I need won't be found in this bar.

I sag back into my seat.

Beckett takes a drag of beer as he watches her go. “She doesn't meet anyone's eyes. It's not just you.”

“I caught that.”

He goes back to people-watching. I ruminate on the immediate flash of fear in the woman's expression. “She was scared when I walked up on her.”

Beckett glances at my biceps. “Ever look in the mirror?”

I try not to.

He continues, “You're a big motherfucker. You also look like you chew steel beams as a pastime.”

I grunt.

He sighs and spins his bottle in his hands. “Not that I'm any better.”

Beckett's a handsome guy, but something black is eating him from the inside out.

Like sees like.

I say, “Come on, you look like a choirboy. For Satan.”

He laughs darkly and shakes his head. “Thanks. I think.”

We go back to our drinks, only to swing our attention toward the bar when shouting rises over the din of other patrons.

Even though I'm spoiling to crack some heads, a bar fight is the last thing I need right now.

Only, it's not the man that's loud-talking that grabs my attention. Whoever the Nyx lookalike is, she's frozen with her eyes locked on the Bowie knife that's hanging on the guy's belt.

Her face is now milk-pale in the glow from the stained-glass lights. There's a twist to her lips and her knuckles are bleached. The tray in her hand teeters. Two full beer bottles slide to the edge and tumble to the floor. The crash is loud enough to make everyone turn.

Beckett bolts to his feet at the same time I do. "You got her?"

"Yep."

Shit. Poor girl. Everyone's looking at her except the guy who's yelling. He's firing off at the same drunk that talked to me earlier.

I insert myself directly in front of her, pulling her against my back, to block her from the man. A delicate hand lands on my spine and tightens into a fist in my shirt.

That small motion drives a spike right into me. Exactly into the narrow sliver of soul that is left.

The last woman that held onto me is the one that haunts me.

Chapter Two

Mia

My flashbacks always start with this weird roar in my ears.

Not now. *Please*, not now.

I know what to do. I've handled this before. Just not in the bar with all eyes on me.

Focus.

Feel the shirt in your hand. What is the texture?

Feel the softness. The warmth.

Breathe. Breathe.

After a few forced inhales and controlled exhales, the worst of the flashback recedes. But the shaking will take a long time to go away. Only, I'm stuck in a terrible predicament.

I've got my face pressed against a black T-shirt, lodged between two large shoulder blades.

Oh god. Talk about mortifying.

How can I get out of this disaster?

Before I have time to act, the wall of warm, safe man pulls away and spins me into motion. With a firm hand around my upper arm, the man hurries me off to a darker corner toward the rear of the bar.

Normally, I'd freak about being alone with a man in such a compromising place, but right now, I'm already past that. I'm turning numb.

I've had enough flashbacks to recognize this too.

He blocks my entire field of view. Wall-to-wall muscle and testosterone. *Wherever they grew this one, they grow them big.*

This time he's got a different look in his gaze. Genuinely concerned—not the frustrated disappointment from earlier when he thought I was someone else.

I can't remember anyone looking at me like this.

With all of his focus on me, he strokes my arm, gliding his large hand up from my elbow. "Talk to me. What's happening right now?"

"I'm fine."

His brows slide together forming a question.

"Really, I'm fine."

"Are you getting treatment for post-traumatic stress?"

I open my mouth to tell him I'm fine, *again*, when he cups my cheek and in a low, measured tone says, "That was a flashback."

I deflate and sway in his hand. A sick unease invades my stomach.

"How did you know?"

"I was in the Navy, specifically a SEAL for ten years. When you see a lot of combat, you see a lot of flashbacks in the men you work with."

A SEAL. That explains the over-the-top masculine vibe.

On an exhale, I drop my gaze to the floor.

“I’m really okay, I just need to—”

“Do you know your triggers?”

His fingers flex against my face.

I’m not sure why I say it, but I do. “The knife. It’s nothing. I’m just frazzled.”

He’s so still, I’m not even sure that he’s breathing. Then his fingers start moving again. This time down onto my shoulder.

“What can I do for you?”

Those simple words make me jolt.

Has anyone ever asked me that question?

Nerves sizzle in my stomach as I peek around him to make sure we’re not being watched. Or maybe just to avoid looking at those scorching eyes of his.

When I look up at him, he’s so focused that it makes my bones feel weird.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

His shoulders widen with his inhale and the line of his mouth turns to a hard slash. “Because you’re a fucking human, and that’s how we should treat each other.”

Okay. Ookay.

So, that was not what I was expecting. The vehemence in his voice leaves me blinking for a long time.

It also leaves me a little breathless.

“That’s the nicest thing I’ve heard in a long time. Maybe forever.”

The man shifts and a wash of red light from the nearby exit sign touches his face again, showing off his strong features. Perfectly proportioned nose. Deep-set eyes. Angular cheekbones. And a jaw that screams masculine.

The SEAL is shockingly handsome in a dark, virile way.

Not now, girl! This is not the time to be noticing hotness. I need to get away from him.

My voice warbles embarrassingly. “I should go.”

His other hand rises, and he caps my other shoulder. Now he’s got both of his hands on me. Electricity is arcing between his palms.

His heat makes me shiver. But as much as those hands have me, it’s the look in his dark, dark brown eyes that keeps my feet pinned to the floor.

They’re so warm. The emotion in them is so strong. Like two uncharted gateways to a fairytale land where everything is safe.

His voice rumbles and causes my skin to gooseflesh. “Sweetheart, get the hell out of here. Duck out early. Tell them you’ve got a headache.”

If only. “I can’t afford to miss the tips.”

“That’s easy to fix. I’ll cover your loss.”

I outright gape but his offer warms my heart almost unbearably. “*No*. I couldn’t. You can’t do that.”

His left hand falls away and he’s got his wallet out the next second. He does some kind of one-handed trick to slide out a stack of bills and folds them in half.

Oh no. No. No! No.

I try to pull away, but the hand he’s still got on my shoulder slides to my neck and eases around the back, under my hair. “Easy, sweetheart.”

Never mind that his hand is scorching me to my bones, I’m still coherent enough to say, “I can’t take *that*.”

“It’s just a tip for that bourbon and Coke.”

“I... No. I can’t.”

He tugs me closer until we’re just inches apart. In a voice that’s obviously meant for me only, he says, “Look. You’re running on fumes. You’ve got all the classic signs of someone

who's seconds away from a major breakdown. Take the money. Take the rest of the night off. Regroup and decide if working in a bar with a bunch of drunks is the best thing for your health."

We stare at each other, with me craning my neck up, for an awkwardly long time. His attention penetrates so deeply that my soul wants to skitter away.

I lick my lips and try to exhale.

"I don't know what to say."

In a husky tone, he says, "Nothing. You don't have to say a thing. Just seeing your beautiful face was all I needed."

What the hell? I stare at him, rocked to the core.

He presses the money into my hand and his fingers linger in my palm for an extra-long beat. His gaze intensifies. This time there's a hardness to his face and pain etched in the lines between his brows.

When he turns to go, I look down at the money and my stomach bottoms out.

Holy smokes.

He didn't give me a stack of ones. I have a mound of hundred-dollar bills clenched in my shaking hand.

I'm not sure how long I'm frozen—staring at the cash with nerves in my belly—but when I make myself look up, he's back at his table. His gaze is still burning hot...and locked on me.

Chapter Three

Eli

Beckett leans back in his chair as I approach. “Brother, is she okay?”

“Not in the least.”

The bourbon and Coke tastes like gasoline, or maybe it’s the fire that’s already burning in my stomach.

Beckett slides his empty beer bottle to the side. “Did she tell you what’s up?”

It takes a monumental effort to drag my eyes off her, but I turn to face him. “Only that the knife was the trigger.”

“Not good,” he grinds out.

From across the table, Beckett stares at me. Analyzes me like I’m one of his old ATF cases. You can take the man out of the agency but can’t take the agency out of the man.

I know it’s coming, so I’m not surprised when he grills me. “What are you going to do about it?”

Good fucking question.

“I suggested she take the rest of the night off. When she does, I’m going to make sure she gets home okay.”

His scowl falters and a quick grin flashes. “Good man. I’ll catch an Uber.”

“You could take the rental.”

He stretches, “Nah. You never know what you might want the back seat for.”

I give him a flash of my irritation. “That’s not what she needs.”

“It was a joke, man.” He stands up and tosses some money on the table. “Watch your six. That guy that was talking to you at the bar has been watching you.”

After another swallow of my rot-gut drink, I lift my chin to acknowledge Beckett. “Copy. I saw his beady fucking eyes on me. Thanks for the heads up, though. Always appreciate confirmation.”

Beckett glances around, cataloging all the people in the bar. “You could take them all.”

“Figured.”

He stands but stops. His hand lands on my shoulder for a hard squeeze. “Sorry it wasn’t your friend.”

I lift the drink to my mouth and toss another vaporous swallow down. I let the burn go all the way until it hits the dead spot inside of me. “Me fucking too.”

He disappears through the front door, which is my signal to pick up my highball glass and move to the bar.

The crowd is thinning, so there are a dozen seats to choose from. I pick one that’s isolated but has a good view of all corners of the room.

Then I let myself look at her again. A sick indulgence.

She’s at the far end of the bar, near the kitchen, talking to another woman. Her back is to me, but the woman’s face is somber.

Good. I hope she's telling the manager she's leaving. It rattled me to see her swept up in a flashback. This place is probably hell on her with all the fucking bozos that come with a job like this.

The longer I watch—as I catalog all the small details about her—the more my chest tightens.

She's taller than Nyx. Her hair is a few shades darker. Cut differently. This woman's hair is all one length and ends in a blunt line. There's more strength in her body too. Like she trains with weights.

If Nyx had a chance to train with weights would things have turned out differently?

The scowl on my face tightens.

Give it a break, man.

This woman can probably feel me burning a hole in her back. Like she needs that when she's already running from demons.

I cut my stare and focus on the melting ice in my cup. It clunks as I swirl the dregs of my drink around, but the distraction does nothing to keep the agonizing thoughts in my head at bay.

Nyx deserved a life like this. A normal life. Not the shit hand she was dealt. She wanted out. That's all she wanted. All she worked for.

The fist inside my chest tightens so hard that I have to cough to get my lungs to work. Every day that fist gets harder to dislodge.

“You want another?”

I refocus my thousand-yard stare until I'm locked on the blonde bartender who's standing in front of me.

“A glass of water, and I need to pay my tab, please.”

She takes my empty and reaches for a clean glass. “Mia paid your bill already.”

Damnit. I should have known. “She didn’t need to do that. Where is she?”

After the irritation that Mia paid, I fixate on the fact that her name is *Mia*.

“Going home. Isn’t feeling well.” The woman’s dark red lips purse—holding some other remark back—as she slides the glass of water to me. But her eyes are soft and concerned.

After a quick glance to see if anyone is listening, she says, “I saw you talking to her. Thank you for that. I’m worried about her. Mia’s been having a hard time dealing with customers. They rattle her. Even the usual bar stuff makes her react. But if someone’s creepy, she gets super anxious.”

“Like the guys that were shouting earlier?”

She looks down the bar as she glides a towel over the glossy surface. “Yeah. They’re hard on Mia. I’m glad they’re gone.”

The two jerks in question left a few minutes ago, which changed the whole vibe of the place.

Alarm hits my gut. If Mia just left... they could have left at the same time. Or maybe they were waiting for her outside.

The bartender slides a pad and pen onto the bar in front of me. “You can leave a note for her if you want. It would be nice for something good to be here for her when she comes back. I don’t think that Mia has a lot of good things happening in her life.”

I’m off the stool a second later, with that unease growing. I don’t look back. I don’t tell the woman I’m going to try to catch Mia. I just stride out the door like a man on a mission.

Chapter Four

Eli

Twenty hours later, I wedge the Navigator into a parking spot near the Richter Scale. It's earlier than the time we arrived last night. The night feels young, like the worst is yet to come.

I step out and look around. Quiet blankets the street except for a car alarm in the far distance. An uneasy feeling tingles in my gut.

I shouldn't be here. I should drop it.

But fuck if I can stay away.

Mia and Nyx warred in my head *all* damned night. Toss in a few hours of pacing and tossing and cursing and call it torture.

I did my best to keep my act together...and failed. So, here I am. Desperate for another look at Mia.

For another moment of that pretty emerald gaze turned my direction.

What am I hoping will come of that? I don't know.

Maybe some kind of relief. Sick as it is, maybe I want to pretend Nyx is safe and alive, working in a crap bar. Even though I know that will never be the case.

I need to stop lying to myself. Mia is not Nyx. Nyx is probably dead. Period.

But something else about Mia called to me. The protector inside my soul can't fucking stand to see the woman scared. And that's what she was. Scared. Traumatized. Hanging by a thread. Carrying some lurking burden in her mind and heart.

I stalk toward the bar, the muscles in my shoulders tighten with each step. The fact that I'm also on the job in L.A. for Agile Security and Rescue right now is part of that tension.

The last thing I need to do is lose my focus on my new job.

Between Nyx and my first civilian gig after the SEALs, I have my hands full. But that's never stopped me before.

A red 'open' light on the front of the bar blinks at me as I approach.

A warning?

Probably.

I've never been good at heeding warnings, though, so I jerk open the door and step inside.

The familiar smell hits me as my eyes adjust to the darkness.

Tonight, the place is almost empty. One guy sits at the bar with his head hung low.

Unlike last night, the music is much lower in volume. A television flickers on the wall near the shelves of liquor. There's a sad air to the place that wasn't here last night.

I scan every damned corner of the place for the little brunette that added another slice to my sanity. But the search is fruitless, and I turn my attention to the bar, wondering if she's behind the swinging doors.

A few seconds later, those double half-doors swing open and the blonde bartender from last night strides out. She skids

to a stop when she sees me. The color drops from her face. A series of uncomfortable sounds come out of her slack mouth. “Oh. *Uh*. Um.”

Deer in headlights—her gaze skates from side to side as she clutches a white and blue striped bar towel.

“What can I get you?” she asks.

The hitch in her voice is so obvious I hear it from twenty feet away.

“I’m here to see Mia.”

Her hand falls to her side, visibly trembling, as she takes a slow step back. “She-she’s... Mia’s not here.”

The about-face in her behavior from last night fans the flames of unease in my stomach.

“Where is she?”

For a beat, she stares at me, biting at the corner of her mouth, and based on her expression, it looks like she might run.

When she reaches to the side without looking and picks up a tall pilsner glass, I prepare to duck. Expecting her to hurl it at my head. Instead, she places it below a tap and tugs the lever.

Maybe she’s going to throw a full beer at me for added weight.

Her eyes stay on me the whole time she fills the glass and then keep flicking to me as she delivers the beer to the guy that’s a few stools away from me.

As she passes me again, I growl out my question again. “*Where’s Mia?*”

This time, she hurries away clutching a bar towel to her chest. After wiping up some spilled beer, she talks with the customer in a stilted conversation. Her face is so brittle it could crack open any second.

What the fuck is going on?

The doorbell clangs and another guy, this one in his mid-sixties and sporting a mullet, walks across the wood floor and takes a seat. She skitters to his end of the bar and takes his order.

The whole time she keeps cutting her eyes to me like I might jump on her.

Now I'm not just worried, I'm getting pissed.

When she passes this time, I lean across the bar so she has to go out of her way to avoid me.

I go for maximum effect. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm beginning to think something serious is happening and you looking at me like I'm carrying a smoking gun is starting to piss me the fuck off."

She jolts back. That ghostly color is now sheet-white. Any second, the woman could go toes up and faint. That's straight-up fear in her eyes.

I hold up my hands and ease off. No fainting needed.

"Christ, I'm here to talk to Mia because I couldn't stop worrying about her last night. I need to see her."

In a ragged whisper, she says, "We haven't seen her tonight."

The distressed sound of her voice makes me go on high alert. "Is she supposed to be here?"

Her teeth bite deeper into her lip, and she nods rapidly. "But... I don't think she's coming in."

Another signal that makes my nape tighten. I don't like this one damned bit. My volume rises as I ask, "Why not?"

That mask of fear turns into a painful grimace. Her eyes skate around like she needs a lifeline. Since I can't afford for her to bolt, I unclench my hands, spread them on the bar, and lean closer. "Is there somewhere we can talk alone?"

She violently shakes her head back and forth.

Fuck. I roughly whisper, "You think I did something to Mia."

That step back she took turns into three. “Monte!” she yells toward the swinging doors without peeling her frightened gaze from me.

“I’m just here because I’m worried about Mia.”

The doors flap open. A man steps out. There’s a food-splattered apron covering his broad torso. In his hand is a meat cleaver. His acidic gaze prowls across the bar and lands on me. “Problem out here?”

The woman’s too frozen to speak, so I say, “I don’t know. You tell me. I asked for Mia and this woman acts like I’m a murderer.”

“The fuck? You got something to do with Mia being hurt?” he grunts.

Hurt?

Gut-punched, I demand, “What are you talking about?”

The two guys at the bar get up and leave. The door chime jingles loudly as they dart outside. The woman makes a nervous sound as her hand covers her mouth.

Guess the meat cleaver did it for them. Just as well, the fewer people in this conversation—and possible fight—the better.

“What’s going on?” I demand. Without taking my eyes off the six-foot-two tank, I say, “What the hell happened to Mia?”

He flexes his fingers on the handle of his weapon and his pierced upper lip pulls up in a snarl. “You the bastard that did something to her?”

The hell? “No! Why would I be asking if I did something to her?”

His nostrils flare, his eyes snap, and he takes a lurching step toward me. “Why should I believe you?”

As my fists come up into a fighting stance, I sneer back. “Why should I believe it wasn’t you?”

“Wait!” The woman leaps between us to intervene. “Monte, maybe he knows something.”

Fury rolls through me like lava. Clenching my hands tighter, I growl at the man, “I don’t know jack, and somebody better start talking.”

The woman swallows deeply as she edges closer to the chef. “Someone came in here late last night—after you left—and said they saw Mia. She was limping, was pretty beat up, and wouldn’t let them help her.”

Holy. Fuck.

No wonder this woman’s scared to death of me. I stormed out right after finding out Mia had left.

Through my constricted vocal cords, I bark, “Where is she *now?*”

Seething energy comes off the guy but his anger shifts to worry. He lowers the cleaver to his side. “We don’t know. Not answering her door. Not returning calls.”

“Give me the address.”

They share a glance, but both remain stoned-faced.

Shit, what’s it gonna take to get through to these two? “Did you call the cops?”

As the woman wraps her arms around herself, she says, “No, we thought Mia should decide about that.”

I’m not just seeing red, I’m feeling it in my bone marrow. It’s probably glowing out of my pores, leaking from my ears, and pooling around me on the floor. *Thought she should decide?* And now she might be missing?!

Dropping my voice low, I enunciate my words slowly. “Give me her goddamned address.”

The bell over the door clangs, and in tandem, their narrowed gazes shoot in that direction.

“Fucking dirty cops.” The man spins on his heel and stalks through the kitchen. He doesn’t look back.

The bartender holds her ground. Albeit not without effort.

She wipes her shaky hands on her shorts and forces a weak smile. “Officer Hammel. So nice to see you. The usual?”

I’m frozen in place. Stuck in my head.

Mia was hurt. I must have missed her when I went looking for her.

That carves a gaping cut into my gut, just like that cleaver would have done.

I failed to protect her. Just like before...

I need to know where Mia is and I’m not leaving until I have what I want.

Fighting the urge to smash a barstool on the ground, I force my rigid legs to carry me to a table when what I really want to do is storm into the kitchen and rip Monte limb from limb until he gives me Mia’s address.

Come to think of it. Maybe that’s what I’ll do. But the bartender smiles that fake smile in my direction and holds up a single finger.

Shit. I’m torn. I have no choice but to wait, just as the bartender requested. But I don’t have time. I have to find Mia, right fucking now.

Still, I sit my ass on that chair and stare at the cop’s back so hard his skin is probably getting tan below his uniform and body armor.

Dirty cops. What the hell did Monte mean? And how does that play into all of this?

Gritting my teeth, I watch as a fictional scene plays out behind the bar. I have to give the bartender credit. She managed to get her face somewhat back to normal, as she puts on an act and chats with the cop. Serves him a glass of pop. After a beat, she laughs and rubs her temple. Her words are loud enough for me to hear her. “Nah, I just have a headache tonight.”

Smooth.

The cop rumbles something, then laughs like a donkey. Pathetic. But whatever it is, the color returns to her cheeks. Her lashes flutter, and she smiles.

Fake flirting? I'm not so sure now.

That cop's not just dirty, but probably a cheater too. His gold wedding ring is impossible to miss under the lights above the bar. I hate a fucking cheat.

When a man gets married he makes a promise. That promise is in stone until he's legally done or dead. That's how I feel about the matter.

"I'll be back with your food." She heads for the kitchen.

Again, I have to hold my ass down by clinging to the seat of the chair so I don't follow her. Only because the last thing I want is a dirty cop and a bunch of red tape bullshit tangling up whatever's going on.

The clock above the bar ticks. I get more and more jacked as the second minute passes.

Come on.

I almost smack my own forehead. God, I'm such an idiot. She could have skipped out the back door.

Sixty more seconds. That's all she gets. The hand spins on the clock, and I count each tik and each tok, ready to shove up from my chair when she bolts through the swinging doors hard enough for them to slap against the wall.

This time, she beelines for the shot glasses. She makes small talk with the cop over her shoulder as she selects a bottle of tequila.

As she fills the shot glass, she lets her gaze swing my way and hold.

About damned time.

Straightening her spine, she puts a napkin on her tray, then the shot, and walks toward me like a woman on a mission.

Her voice is tight when she leans down toward me. "Your order, sir."

The tequila shimmers in the glass as she places the shot in front of me on a paper napkin.

Her right hand fishes in her apron and comes out with a spare napkin. She places that one next to my drink too. In the center of the white square is a messily written address.

Fuck. Yes. *Yes!*

She locks gazes with me. Her voice trembles when she asks, “Anything else you need?”

I tip up on my left hip and grab my wallet out of my back pocket. “Nope.”

As the woman watches, I shoot the liquor and hiss as the amber liquid hits the back of my throat. She stumbles back as I rise to tower over her. But she doesn’t run before I put the empty shot glass, one of my business cards, and a twenty on her tray. “Call me if you and your friend want a good time.”

Her worried eyes blink up at me. She pastes on a fake smile, but the worry shows through as she plays along for the cop’s ears. “We will think about it.”

Chapter Five

Mia

Well, this officially sucks.

I push up with my right arm until I'm mostly upright on my lumpy second-hand sofa. For a minute, I sway and hold my breath as my head swims and my stomach lurches.

I need to eat.

Ick. Just thinking about food makes me want to yack. But I need to get some food in me. It's dark outside and that means it's been at least twelve hours since I had half of an English muffin.

I know better. I need to force it and take some more aspirin. But the idea of moving more than a few inches makes me shudder.

So, scooting down four flights of steps feels impossible. But it's not safe here.

Rock, meet hard place. It's not fun here, be warned.

Hissing, I clench my teeth as I lift my left arm with my right hand. The nausea hits again, but somehow, I keep the

howl of pain locked in my chest. This time at least.

Whatever's wrong with my left arm is bad. *Really, really* bad. The pain is pretty much unbearable.

With incredible care, I scoot around so I can reach for the liquor bottle on the table. My hand is shaking as I pick it up—I'm not sure if it's the fact that I drank most of it already, lingering adrenaline, exhaustion, or pain response. My body is a mess. And this is all I have to help numb the pain somewhat.

As I force a few sips, I get lost in thought staring out the window. Blurred lights from the nearby highway flicker. Red and white streaks slicing across the darkness. Sadness bubbles up through my physical agony.

The people in those cars have the freedom to go wherever they want. Most of them anyway. But me?

That's not my life.

As I place the bottle back on the coffee table, I move too much and get sliced through by a bolt of pain. Owowow!

A hot poker stabbing in my shoulder would hurt less. Getting bitten by an alligator would hurt less. Being struck by lightning would hurt less. At least that's what my imagination has been busy telling me for the last twenty hours.

I can't even imagine how it would feel without the booze.

The only blessing about my shoulder hurting is that it overrides the deep ache in my ankle—which is now the size of a small blimp.

The sting of tears tightens my throat and pokes at the back of my eyes. *What am I going to do?*

I can't figure it all out right now. First, I just need to get the hell out of this apartment and away from the neighborhood. That's step one.

A sinking feeling in my gut says the life I created here is done.

Only, running in this condition is unimaginable.

I groan, “Damn fool.” I want to kick my own ass ten ways to Sunday. This is all my fault.

Now I’ve got to deal with the consequences.

Moving like molasses, I push up off the sofa and drop to the ground.

So, I sit in the dark and prayed. Every sound outside my door sends me into tremors—terrified that my past is finally going to be at my doorstep.

God, how is this happening? I thought I left that chapter of my life behind. But after last night... I’m not sure. If those men were tied to my brothers, I have to run.

Damnit. I can’t even call an Uber without a phone.

If I could kick something, I would. Mainly my own butt. What an idiotic move—throwing my phone at the attacker. My purse too. Now they’re somewhere in the alley. Or worse, with them.

A pang of guilt mixes with my ‘pissed-off-ness’ and queasiness. The cash the man gave me was in my purse too.

I shake my head and plant my good hand on the floor to steady myself. I really could have used that money right now. A thousand dollars isn’t enough to start over—hell, it’s barely enough to get a hotel for a week in Los Angeles—but I could have bought a ticket somewhere less expensive. Then figure out the next steps.

Now I can’t even access my bank account. No ID. No debit cards. I can’t borrow the money. I should have worked more. Stashed some more emergency money.

With the weight of my nightmare crashing down on me, I lean back against the sofa.

The thought of leaving has emotion clogging my throat and sinking into my lungs.

I don’t have much. Some books. My favorite mug from Hollywood. A tiny collection of houseplants.

Is it stupid I feel like a plant mama? The thought of abandoning these little lives I've groomed and nurtured makes my heart nearly slice in half.

I bought them because I thought...

This was my chance to change the course of history. A chance at hope. At starting new. Differently. At creating something good. An attempt to bring a ray of sunlight into my pitch-dark soul.

I straighten and swallow down the pain and the stinging reality. Don't think. Do not think.

Take action.

Those two words saved me before. Got me this far. Gave me redemption and hope.

But a wave of despair hits me as hunger twists like a knife inside my gut. Weakness has me sagging back again. The kitchen feels so far away...

I laugh darkly, mostly just to keep myself from crying.

Does it really end like this?

I could just sit here and wait for them to come find me.

Clearly, I need to eat, because that's just crazy. I've come this far, I'm not stopping.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I don't know what jolts harder, the door or my heart. I freeze, staring at the door as it pulses.

"Mia!" a male voice bellows.

The fist clenching my stomach tightens. I try not to breathe as I pray whoever it is leaves.

"Mia!"

Another round of three knocks violates the apartment.

Who the hell is that?

It's not Monte. I know the chef's accent. Besides, he was here earlier knocking, and I know he's working now.

I stall my breath. Holding my shaking body as still as I can, I shrink back against the wall, praying.

Since the day I moved in, I've had my bug-out plan. The fire escape. But I never counted on being seriously physically limited. Without being able to walk normally and use my left arm, that plan is dicey.

The staccato knocks start up again. Heaven help me, I have to try. I crab-scoot as quickly as I can to heave myself onto the couch, fighting the scream of pain in my throat, and reach for the window latch.

A deeper kind of pain shoots through my shoulder and causes me to see spots.

I almost yell out from the excruciating torture.

Hurry, Mia.

My fingers fumble with the window lock. It's stubborn. I lift my hips and try harder. *Damnit. Please.*

The doorknob rattles and my heart nearly jumps out of my throat. *No. No!*

Finally, the latch gives way, and the window slides up with surprising ease. I stick my feet out first, then shimmy my butt, then my shoulders.

Holy crap. I can't believe I got this far. I scoot as fast as I can toward the stairs, but it's hard. The metal grate tears at my bare legs, digs into my butt.

Every movement causes my pain to triple. Panting, I slide off the first step.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Please go away.

I scoot down another step.

The banging stops.

A cold shudder races up my spine.

Please. Please leave.

But the tingle at the nape of my neck doesn't quit. Statue-still, I listen, trying to hear over the rush of blood in my ears.

Silence.

After an agonizing minute, I lean over to look down through the fire escape, four stories below, toward the parking lot.

It's quiet.

Heavens. *What should I do?*

A vibration rattles the fire escape.

Then another and another.

A wave of nausea hits me so hard my mouth starts to water. This is it. Someone's taking the fire escape stairs.

I try to hide, scooting back, but there is no escape now.

I'm so dead.

Chapter Six

Eli

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. What the fuck is happening right now?

I croak out a single word, “Mia?”

A small, shadowy shape of a woman is huddled against the brick exterior wall of her building.

I stride across the grated decking of the fire escape, squat down, and plant myself right in front of her face.

I’m so stunned I don’t see her hand arcing upward. With a feral growl, she slaps me hard, then tries to claw my face. She shrieks, “*No!* Don’t touch—”

Her palm collides with my cheek. Strong enough to snap my head back. Then the claws get me, three dragging across my jaw.

Damn, she’s strong and fast.

“Shhh, Mia, it’s okay. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

With all her might, she swings at me again. I grab her hand this time and press it down to her side. “Enough.”

She screams in my face. “No! No! Stop, don’t cut me.”

Cut you?

Goddamnit, she thinks I have a knife.

Seeing her terrified again crushes my chest, leaving me winded and sick-feeling.

I lower my voice. “Oh, baby. *Shhhh*. I’ve got you. You waited on me last night at the bar. Do you remember me?”

But she doesn’t even register my words as she huddles against the wall, her whole body’s shaking.

It makes me furious that the soft angles of her face contort in pain. I hunker down and get in her line of sight. “It’s okay. I’ve got you. I won’t let anything happen to you—”

“Get away from me,” she cries.

Not gonna happen. If anything, I’m dragging her into my arms. “Mia. Listen to me. You’re safe. You’re at your apartment.”

She tugs against my hold and tries to kick me but there is something off with her foot.

What the...

Fuck, she’s hurt. Seriously hurt. Her ankle is the size of a cantaloupe.

That motherfucker, whoever did this to her... I’m going to hunt them down and make sure justice is served.

“Don’t move. I don’t want you to hurt yourself more.” I reach for her shoulders, “Listen to me, sweetheart—”

She shrieks in pain. The smell of alcohol washes toward me.

What? Holy hell. She’s drunk.

Fuck. Her left shoulder is disfigured. I lean closer in the darkness.

My teeth clench. She’s got a damned dislocated shoulder, had it since last night.

Mia's been suffering. That thought sickens me more. "Christ, how did this happen?"

She doesn't answer, just stares at me.

Damnit. I massage her hand, lacing my fingers between hers. "Can you hear me?"

I rub my thumb over her hand and speak to her in a low tone. "I'm right here."

After a few minutes, she whimpers and blinks her luminous eyes as she looks around.

"Mia, you're safe. You're in Los Angeles. We're sitting on the fire escape outside your apartment. I won't let anything happen to you."

After a long, agonizing silence, she swallows and ducks her head. "My arm hurts."

Yes, finally. My chest heaves in a breath as relief loosens the bands of muscles. "I bet it does. Can you look at me?"

For a beat, she stares down at her lap. I slowly reach up, careful not to startle her, and rub my palm over the disheveled strands of her long hair. "Does anything else hurt?"

She whispers roughly, "Everything," and shivers.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'll do what I can to stop that. When you're ready, I'm gonna move you inside."

Her gaze rises to mine and her eyes bloom wide. "Not inside. They could get me in there."

"Not while I'm here. Promise. And soon as I get you sorted, I'll take you out of here. But first, we need to go inside so I can look at your injuries. It's too dark out here."

Agony tightens her features. "I'm so scared."

"I know, beautiful, just trust me, okay? I won't let anyone get to you."

She nods, but her face tightens in pain. "I'm really banged up."

No joke. Banged up doesn't even cover it. She's wrecked. "I see that. I'll take care of you. Just let me help you."

With a shiver, she squeezes my hand hard, and I expect her to argue. But she breathes out and relents. "Alright."

It takes ten minutes before I feel okay moving her. Slowly, she comes back online. We sit in silence as she comes around. When I think she's clear and ready, I lift her, cradle her small body against my chest, and thank god for big windows. This one's large enough for me to pass through with her in my arms.

As I unfold inside her living room, I grumble, "Let's get you comfortable."

I set her on the sofa and gently place her injured leg on the cushion. She's still wearing her work shirt from last night. But she's only got panties on below.

That's another blow of a different kind. Seeing her bare legs freezes me up for a second, but then the pissed-off comes roaring back. She's been in agony since last night, probably with no one to help her.

I have to force myself to step back. To unclench my jaw and relax my fists.

She's silent as I stride away to find the bedroom.

When I flip on the light, I'm met with another sad sight. Faded walls, a mattress on the floor. Windows without covering. A few clothes stacked in the corner. A small closet that's completely bare.

As I look closer, though, I realize that the comforter on the bed is new, and the sheets have delicate flowers on them. The scent of clean linen fills the room.

There's a slender glass lamp on the floor next to the bed, and a stack of books. A single pink flower is standing proudly in a small vase beside the assortment of paperbacks.

A different kind of concern for Mia starts to simmer in my gut.

I file these facts about her for later—much later—as I snatch the comforter off the bed and head back to her. “Getting warm will help your muscles relax, which will ease some of your pain.”

She nods as I tuck her in.

It takes a monumental effort not to let my eyes go to that sweet little juncture between her legs. I mostly manage to ignore the thin lace panties. Because gawking at her right now would be beyond dickheaded.

I lift a mostly empty bottle of liquor off the table. “Were you drinking because of the pain?”

Her lashes lower and she won’t look at me. “I didn’t have anything to take. I don’t drink normally, but that’s all I had.”

“You need pain medicine, but that’s not an option until the alcohol gets out of you. Regardless, you need to go to the hospital.”

She goes into panic mode. “No! No hospitals! I can’t.”

A staring match ensues with her breathing roughly, and me grinding my molars. I demand, “Why?”

Her gaze falls as her mouth flatlines. Begrudgingly, she mutters, “I can’t risk being in the system?”

“You’re shitting me, right?”

That emerald gaze flicks to me. “Sorry, not kidding. Wish I was.”

I want to push this, but she winces as she tries to shift her arm. “I don’t know what’s wrong with my arm.”

When I squat down next to the sofa, her expression grows wary.

I lay it out there. “It’s dislocated.”

She jolts as if I’ve slapped her, and I feel bad for not taking the time to break the news more gently. But it doesn’t stop me from asking, “How did this happen?”

The faded color of her face changes as what's most likely shame tints her cheeks, and that grates on me. She murmurs, "After I left the bar...I got attacked in the alley."

My anger flares to a dangerous level. I unclench my jaw and growl, "Who?"

"I don't know. I wanted to get home as soon as possible, but a man jumped me, so I scratched his face and fought as hard as I could. When he let me go, a second man appeared. I ran like hell, but..." She shakes her head.

I'm getting angrier by the second. "What happened?"

Softly, she admits, "I don't really know. They cried at me to stop, but I couldn't. I wouldn't. I started to run, but as my foot got caught in a pothole, my arm was yanked back. Hard. I remember the pain. Feeling something popping, ripping, but the world just went black."

What the fuck? They may have—

"When I came to, I was fully dressed," her voice cuts through my spiraling, and a wave of relief floods through me, "so, I have no idea what happened, but I was alone and all I could think of was to get home, get safe. I hurt so bad, but I got out of there as fast as I could, which, as you can imagine, was not fast at all."

Every word hits me like another blow. A spike driven into me.

"I'm so sorry," I half-growl, half whisper because I can't form solid words after hearing that.

Having her look up at me with those liquid green eyes doesn't help the matter. I want to crack heads. I want to hear jail cells slam.

But she's scared of the system.

I drop my head and think through the options for dealing with her injuries.

As a SEAL, I'm trained in field medicine, but she needs X-rays.

Mia must pick up on what I'm thinking about because she says, "Please don't make me explain, but I can't go to the hospital. I can't talk about it, either."

Secrets. Goddamnit. Not what I need. I've got enough of my own.

On an exhale, I relent to not pushing her on the matter right now. She's banged all to fuck, in pain, and scared mindless.

"Fuck. Alright, I'll see what I can do."

She draws back against the sofa as I pull the blanket back away from her left shoulder. Her next words are almost shrill, "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to fix your shoulder."

As that sinks in, her lashes go wide. "You are? You can do that?"

With grim determination, I nod. "I've been a SEAL for a decade. I've fixed a few dislocations."

Her confused expression morphs into relief. Then determination.

She sucks in a breath and devastates me by saying, "I trust you."

Just like that.

Breath gone. Stolen. Those words ruin me.

Mia trusts me.

It doesn't take long for a cold spike of terror to plunge into my gut.

Don't trust me. It will only get you hurt.

I don't want her to look at me like that. But hearing those words rocks me back, making a longing unfurl inside that blindsides me.

I scrub my hand over my face.

Get your shit together, man. She needs you.

Chapter Seven

Eli

I can do this. That doesn't mean I want to.

Sounding gruffer than I should, I say, "Let's get this done. This is how it's going to go. I'm going to move your arm very gently as I pull downward. I'll massage the muscles of your shoulder, while you breathe and relax. Once the muscles get slack enough, I'll apply a little rotation and the head of your humerus will slip back into place."

She gulps a little air, then bobs her head in an exaggerated motion. "If you say so."

"It works. Trust me. I've done it. I've seen it done many times. The key is for you to relax. Let's get this over with."

"You don't have to beg me. I'm ready for the—," she hisses when I touch her arm. "Ouch, ouch. Just make it stop hurting."

"Take some slow deep breaths, close your eyes. Concentrate on relaxing as much as you can." Carefully, I apply traction to her arm, separating the bone from the pinched tissue.

When her lashes fan down over her cheeks, my anger stirs. She's bruised, scraped, and in pain because of some fuckface. He's gonna pay. Mark my words, he's gonna pay in spades.

I work my fingers into her trapezius, then along her slender collarbone, and over the cap of her shoulder as I apply traction to her arm. The whole time I do my damndest to ignore the way she feels, soft, feminine, very delicate.

My jacked-up head even goes so far as to picture my mouth sliding along that smooth skin, kissing away the pain.

Holy. Fuck.

Just do your damned job.

I sound like I've got a throat full of rocks when I say, "That's it. Breathe."

Her eyes flip open and she searches my gaze out with those mesmerizing emeralds. "You've got a nice voice."

"Me?"

She nods and the corners of her lips hitch up.

Gut meet sledgehammer.

She likes *my* voice.

Not what I need to hear right now when I'm trying not to think inappropriate things. But that remark just makes me want to lean into her ear and tell her how hot that makes me for her.

Clearly, I've lost my mind.

I grumble, "Thanks."

"It's starting to move," she says, "I feel something. I can't believe it doesn't hurt more right now."

"The traction relieves most of the pain."

More of a smile tugs at the corner of her pretty lips. "If this doesn't work, you're going to have to walk around forever holding my arm like that."

Her soft voice makes me breathless and it's hard to chuckle, but if I don't, I might say something really fucked up.

“I doubt you’d like me after a while.”

“I don’t know. Man that can massage like that. Has a voice like yours. A girl could get used to it.”

“Careful, sweetheart, you’ll make me think you like me,” I warn. Before my blood stirs any more, I need to get this done. I don’t need Mia liking me. My head is too fucked up for that. I have to keep my focus.

“I’m going to move your arm slowly.”

“Oww.” Her face twists in pain and a knife blade of guilt slices me.

I unclench my jaw before I snap my teeth off at the roots and say, “Okay. We’ll slow down.”

She watches me and it makes me wonder what she sees. A monster? Or a bad guy? A broken man?

After tightening her jaw, she urges me on. “Try again.”

When I pull her arm forward this time, she keeps her eyes locked on mine. My hands start to sweat. *Fuck*. I don’t want to hurt her. Reducing shoulder dislocations on other SEALs was a far cry from this. I didn’t give a shit if I made them yell.

“Getting there,” I say as encouragement to myself as much as her. And as smooth as butter, the bone slips right back into place. “That’s it.”

I inhale deeply. Thank. God.

In a breathy whisper, she says, “You did it.” Her smile goes full wattage and I nearly keel over on the spot.

Sunshine. Pure, radiant sunshine.

I’ll never forget the way that smile sucks the oxygen out of me.

Whoa. Command, we’ve got a problem.

This is *not* a good thing. As a matter of fact, I wish she was mad, or something. *Anything*. But, Christ, not smiling at me with trust written all over her face.

It takes a monumental effort to speak. The words come out rough. “Keep your arm like that. I’m going to see if I can improvise a sling. Do you have any old sheets?”

“No, just the ones on my bed.”

Scratch that. I’m not shredding up her pretty sheets. The woman doesn’t have much and I won’t destroy what she does have.

“Have a belt?”

“In my bedroom, on the floor—”

I’m off my knees and already walking. “Gotcha.”

When I return to her side, her expression has dimmed. She’s looking at her ankle. “Can you fix that too?”

Shit. “I wish. I can get some ice on it, but that’s really gonna need an x-ray. Maybe a cast.” I don’t tell her the worst-case scenario could require surgery.

Her gaze jolts toward me before she looks away and scans the room with urgency. When I fold my arms, she sags. In a resigned voice, she asks, “Um...what other options are there?”

“Why does the thought of going to a medical facility terrify you?”

She fists her hands, avoids my eyes, and generally says this conversation is a no-go.

I give her a pass, but I know this story is bigger—Mia’s running from something. The puzzle pieces are there. The flashback. The wary energy. The lack of belongings. The fear in her beautiful face. It adds up to one big arrow pointing to trouble.

This news does not make me happy.

Because the last thing I need to be doing is taking on this woman’s problem. But that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

Chapter Eight

Mia

Eli tosses my shorts on the chair and kneels next to me. But I can't even look at him. Because seeing my shorts gives me the shocking realization that I don't have any bottoms on.

And he saw my panties. Mortification has me sinking back and fighting the urge to cover my face with the comforter. A hole in the floor would do right now.

"What's that expression?" he asks.

"Um... just thinking about the fact my arm doesn't hurt now."

He sees right through that. His lips twitch, but he says, "That was the goal."

Without another word, he gets right to work on fashioning a sling. Which brings him waaaaay too close. Like right in my personal space.

Before I can stop myself, I inhale deeply, drawing his clean scent in. Cedar, cinnamon, ocean.

My, *oh*, my, he smells so good.

Great voice. Bedroom eyes. And now *this*.

I shake myself mentally and hold my breath. Now I wish I hadn't touched that bottle of liquor that was in the cabinet when I moved in. Because my morals are feeling kind of loose and my judgment kind of wavy.

Eli chuckles and stirs my hair with his breath. "Go ahead."

Eeep!

Okay, now I'm really embarrassed. He caught me sniffing him like he's a cinnamon roll on display at a bakery.

The torture continues as he reaches around me, rubbing his mountain-size bicep against my neck, as he murmurs. "I can see you've got questions. Go ahead and ask."

What's happening in my tummy?

Definitely can't ask that.

But what the heck, those can't be butterflies. I don't get gaga over men.

He brushes my tangled strands of hair aside. "Ask whatever you want."

"Uh..."

Nope. No brainwaves to form a question.

With gentle movements, he arranges the belt so it doesn't bite into the skin on my shoulder. Which puts him right next to my ear when he says, "Don't you want to know how I found you?"

I want...

I want him to whisper in my ear in the darkness.

"Yes," I stammer, and thank god he suggested the question because I wasn't able to think about anything but him leaning in and brushing his mouth against my neck.

I rush out, "That would be good for starters."

"The bar."

That snaps my brain online. Wait... did he stalk me after I left work? But something doesn't add up with that scene. Only, I'm a little too tipsy, too tired, and too close to him to make any sense of things.

Yet, a cold eerie dread replaces those butterflies in my stomach.

Not sure I want to know the answer, but praying he says yes at the same time, I whisper, "They gave you my address?"

After buckling the belt, Eli adjusts the now latched closed loop so my arm is supported. When he's done, he sits back. "Not until I had a face-to-face meeting with the meat cleaver."

Oooh. Not good. I grimace. "Monte?"

He chuckles and quips, "Nice guy."

I continue to feel obligated to grimace. "He's a little... rough."

Not on subject, but I can't hold back any longer from asking. "What's your name?"

"Eli Fortier, spelled like For-Tier, pronounced For-shay."

I surprise myself by showing him a small grin. "Thanks for the pro tip. You obviously know my name's Mia."

Something flickers behind his dark eyes that gives me pause. "Yeah, the blond you work with told me that last night. After you paid for my drink and bailed."

My grin leaves and is replaced by a petulant scowl. "That would be Marley. She talks too much."

He rests his oversized hands on his thighs and considers me for a few seconds. The overall mood around him is still pissed. The eight-hundred-pound menace in the room is the attack. Which I do not want to talk about.

Eli shifts, crosses his big arms again and says, "Someone came into the bar last night and told them you were banged up and refused help."

That rat.

“Lester Williams,” I mutter. *Damnit*. I should have known he would ignore my pleas to keep his mouth closed.

“Marley gave me your address when it was clear that I was as worried about you as they were.”

I look down at my lap as I try to process everything that’s happened.

“I should have called them about not coming in... but I kind of lost my phone...”

He grumbles loudly, “*Kind of?*”

“Technically, I threw it at someone. My purse too.”

Eli closes his eyes and shakes his head. After a minute of breathing down his anger, he growls, “What happened after that?”

“I ran like hell... Until I was grabbed and blacked out that is. I told you that part already.”

His eyes flare, then his dark brows lock down. “No shit, cupcake. Can you identify them?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. It was dark, it happened really fast.”

Eli stands up and stalks to the window. Whatever I said really pisses him off. The man’s jaw ticks, and he takes a few deep breaths.

Finally, he snarls, “You need x-rays.”

I lie, sort of. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Not happy. Definitely pissed. His head snaps to me. “Mia...,” he growls.

We breathe at each other until he surprises me by asking, “Have you eaten?”

Hello, whiplash.

My stomach decides to rumble as I say, “Not much.”

That propels him into my kitchen. The cabinet doors bang, the fridge is opened and closed. A moment later, the smell of warming toast drifts through the room.

For a second, my appetite flutters.

It's weirdly endearing for him to be in there making something for me. When he returns, he places an open-faced peanut butter sandwich on my lap.

The tickles return to my stomach.

He made that for *me*.

"I don't think I can eat." Not sure if it's the alcohol, the hangover from the pain, or if it's him looking at me hopefully, but something is amiss in my tummy.

Only, his expression says I'm not getting out of this. "Try anyway. You need some food with your booze. I'll finish what you don't."

He does have a point. I've got way too much alcohol in my system.

He folds his long legs until he's sitting on the low and very rickety coffee table. "Hope this thing holds me."

I was worried about that. "Guess we'll see. At least it was free, I got it off the curb. Same with the end table, and that chair in the kitchen."

With his index finger, he points at the sandwich, then pins me with a stern expression. "You're just deflecting. Eat."

Damnit.

I lift a piece of toast carefully since I'm not that stable, and I'm using my non-dominant hand. The smell of warm peanut butter makes my mouth water.

When I bite, he watches me with something close to fascination.

Heat crawls up from my neck to my cheeks. No one has ever watched me eat like that. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure no one has ever watched me like that period.

Barely able to take the heat, I manage a few more bites. Then my stomach gets too nervous.

"You can have the rest."

His ridiculously thick lashes narrow as the dark lines of his eyebrows snap together. “Babe, come on, a bird eats more than that.”

Babe?

With a huff, he grabs a piece of toast and lifts it toward my mouth. Thank god, he didn’t make an airplane sound. But that does make me want to grin.

And for some reason, I open obediently, and every tiny movement of my lips feels sensual.

Never in the history of humankind has eating peanut butter toast been sexual.

Until now.

Do I like this? More importantly, why does it feel like the room might combust? Heat doesn’t just infuse my face, it goes right to my nipples before it makes a rapid descent to my clit.

I’m not the only one affected. The veins are standing out in Eli’s neck. He drops the toast on the plate like he’s been burned. Then he shifts, scrubs his hand over his mouth, leans back, shakes his head tightly.

When I find my breath, I push the plate away and say, “I’ve had enough.”

Lightning fast, he grabs the piece of toast I was eating and bites it furiously. Then stalks off with the plate. Water runs in the kitchen sink. A plate clangs in the drying rack.

I’m frozen, staring at the doorway. *My god.* I can still feel his scorching inspection. Like it wasn’t his eyes on me, it was his big, rough hands.

When he comes back, he looks angry enough to chew nails. I officially get whiplashed again.

That’s a good thing. I need to keep my head. He needs to go. I’ll have to deal alone.

I say, “You don’t have to do anything else. I know you’re displeased. I don’t blame you, I’m sure you didn’t plan for

your evening to go this way. Now that my arm isn't hurting, I can manage."

His face hardens, his shoulders stiffen, and his hands curl into fists next to his two muscular thighs. He proclaims, "I'm not leaving."

Just like that.

This man says what he's thinking without sugar-coating, that's for damn sure.

I blink for a while. Two things make me pause. His determination and the lack of cruelty in his words. I'm not used to men like this.

"What if I don't want you to stay?"

His head tilts, he studies me for a beat, apparently decides something, then he says, "I'm not leaving, so you might as well stop trying to convince me."

"But—"

"If you think I'm the kind of man that would leave a woman in distress, you're wrong. So, stop wasting your energy, and tell me what you need."

Well, darn. If that didn't just rip the argument right out from under my feet, I don't know what will.

"I'm just—"

He interrupts me again when he softly says, "Not used to having anyone look out for you?"

I pinch my lips and let that sink in. It stirs a painful truth inside of me.

Not only have I never had a man look out for me like this, but every man in my life has treated me cruelly. Viciously to be more exact.

My words come out sounding sad to my own ears. "I'm not."

Eli's nostrils flare, his expression darkens. "That pisses me off all kinds of fucking bad."

“I’m really confused right now, I can’t understand why you’re helping me,” I admit.

“You’ve had a rough night.”

As if that explains all the weirdness.

“Alright. But I need to tell you something.” I pause as I fight an internal war. Then I pause some more as I choose my words carefully.

Silently, he takes a seat on the coffee table again. The wood groans but holds. And he waits.

Heavens.

He doesn’t deserve to be caught up in this. I’ll make a clean break when I can get away from here. But without a phone, access to my money, an ID, and a jacked-up foot, I’m going to need help.

“Um. This isn’t going to make sense, and I can’t explain everything, but we need to leave.”

His chest puffs as he drops his hands to his hips. That dark gaze gets even more intense. “Trouble coming after you?”

“Yeah,” I admit in a whisper.

Chapter Nine

Eli

Finally. I get confirmation.

That fact doesn't make me happy, but it confirms my suspicions that started last night and ended with me finding her on the fire escape.

Which still makes me angry as a pissed-off alligator.

But I have a feeling my anger hasn't been truly tested yet. Whatever this woman's got chasing her feels big.

Simmering, I demand, "What kind of trouble are we talking about here?"

The woman's color vanishes. She looks away and worries at the blanket with her fingers. "Don't ask, please."

Fuck. The woman is all secrets and dark shadows. That's the last thing I should want to be tangled up with, but it calls to something dark inside of me.

Before I can think, I reach for her hand and still the nervous motion. "Look at me."

I brace because I know what it's going to do to me. I'll lose another part of myself. That's something I'm not sure I can do. Hell, I'm not even sure there's anything left in me to lose.

Mia hesitates. Glances around the crap apartment. Looks at her lap, then heaves out a sigh. She fights, but finally levels green eyes awash in sadness at me.

I was so goddamn right. Seeing her despair unravels another layer in me. Something I didn't know was there. Or maybe I hoped wasn't still there.

I rasp out, "I'll take you out of here, but we're going to get your ankle checked out."

She flinches. Sucks in a breath. The intensity of fear that shafts through her expression makes my gut clench.

I vow, "I won't let anything happen to you."

She pulls away from my touch and her shaking hand comes to her face. After covering her mouth, she whispers, "You can't promise that."

Holy hell, that hurt. Her comment stabs deep, but after I swallow down that agony, it fires my determination. "Let's get you ready to roll."

Drawing the blanket up to her neck, Mia pulls back. "Eli, I can't—I told you..."

"Trust me on this."

Breath held, she watches me as I snag my phone out of my back pocket. As I stand, I tell her, "Time to call in a favor. Hang tight."

Matthew Ringold answers on the first ring. He shouts, "Yo, *Forsure!*"

I almost grin at the nickname, but I don't have time. "Hey, man. Look. I need your services."

For the next couple of minutes, I pace up and down the short hallway, wearing a few more threads out of the decrepit carpet, as the Navy Corpsman and I hash out some options.

What we come up with has me saying, “Risky, but let’s do it. See you there in an hour.”

When I hang up, I swing around to find Mia staring at me. Her expression has gone cold, almost resigned. Makes me wonder what else she’s endured in her short, traumatic life.

While she’s holding her façade, the worry in her voice is very clear when she asks, “What’s happening?”

“We’re going to see a friend of mine, a Navy Corpsman. No formal workups.” Before she can protest, I ask, “What do you need to take with you?”

A flash of relief hits her, then a wave of uncertainty. Before this gets any more complicated, I flip aside the floral comforter and scoop her up off the couch by snaking one of my arms under her bare legs and the other behind her back.

Shiiiiit, things just got a lot more complicated.

Her little gasp heats my blood.

The weight of her is becoming familiar, and I’d be a lying sack if I said I didn’t love the way she feels in my arms, tucked tight against me. Warm, soft, and perfectly proportioned to tuck under my chin.

I do feel mildly guilty. For a second. But Mia distracts me from my guilt and my pleasure when she screeches, “Damn it, Eli. Put me down!”

“Not gonna happen. Either you tell me what you need or we leave like this.”

After grumbling something about ‘giant alpha male,’ she mutters, “Pants. But you’re gonna have to help me. I don’t think I can do it by myself.”

Chapter Ten

Mia

I'm pretty sure Eli doesn't look shocked often. But he is. Then he looks torn, like he might not help me, might just stride out the door. After a beat, he huffs and eases me to the ground so I'm standing on my one good foot. He drops to his knee right in front of me, "Hold onto my shoulders."

Oh nooooo.

He's got my shorts in his hand, his face is just a foot away from me, and he's looking right at my lace panties.

He's frozen. So am I. But frozen hot.

I didn't know I could be completely motionless but have so many things going on inside of me. All of them involve heat and moisture.

Then he looks up, licks across his lip, and mutters, "I really didn't intend for this to happen."

I certainly didn't intend to have the reaction I'm having.

Breathy, I sputter, "J-just move. Do something, help me—"

His eyes drift closed, and he inhales, everything about him changes. His shoulders get broader, his neck tighter, the tension in his face borders on pain.

I have the barely controllable urge to dive my hand into his hair, fist those dark strands, and shove his face into my pussy.

Mother of madness. What has gotten into me?

If I weren't such a mess, I'd laugh. But there is nothing funny about how much I want to feel his mouth on me.

When his eyes open this time, he glares down at my feet. He grumbles, "Give me your injured leg, first."

He's silent, but his body language is screaming as he helps me get one leg and then the other in my shorts. Carefully managing my weight by hooking his arm around my hips, he gets me balanced so I can lift my good leg.

His heat surrounds me. The warmth of his breath over my skin. The comfort of his arm around my hips. Every time his fingers brush my skin, I almost whimper.

By the time he has my shorts over my hips and is buttoning them, I'm delirious.

He's grumpy. Glaring at my button, he snaps, "That it?"

"Seeing as I don't have a purse or a phone, yeah."

He scoops me up once more, strides to the door, and flings it open. Then he freezes. "How did you get up all these steps?"

"I crawled."

He jolts. "Woman..."

That one word is just a throaty growl. A very husky, rich-sounding growly noise that makes my blood heat and zoom through my veins.

"How'd you get in without your purse?"

I cringe. Eli is not going to like this answer at all. "I forgot to lock my door yesterday. Call it dumb luck."

That growl deepens and turns angry. "Seriously? Fuck. Mia."

I close my eyes because I can't take the scathing expression he's wearing.

"I know. I never do that, but it was dumb luck, and somehow worked out in my favor."

With me still in his arms, he reaches behind him, twists the lock on the knob, and curses some more. "One lock. You've got one lock, for fuck's sake."

"I put a chair under the knob. I know, I'm an idiot."

He shakes his head and looks down at me with a frown. The mix of things I see alarm me. I have no idea what he's thinking, but he quickly informs me.

"Didn't say you were an idiot. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't call yourself that. Serious as hell right now. You can't say things like that about yourself."

Ooof.

That sets me back. But unease quickly follows the warmth in my chest, which goes up in smoke when I wonder, who is Eli Fortier really, and *why* the hell am I trusting him?

An hour later, we're parked on the outskirts of Los Angeles outside a hospital that I've never seen before. My heart is trying to evacuate my chest. "You promised no hospitals."

"Didn't say that, sweetheart. I said I was getting you checked out. We're sneaking you in for an x-ray."

"Ohmygod! That's illegal!"

His hand plops onto my thigh, his gaze says this is happening. What have I done?

"I don't want anyone to get in trouble."

He blinks, shakes his head once, and says, "Honey, I've pretty much been getting into hot water since I came out of the womb."

Those sinfully dark brown eyes spark. And a part of me realizes that I like that dangerous glint far too much.

“In the Teams, they call me, Compass.”

“Because?” I ask in a whisper.

“I’m the one that always finds trouble.”

Boy, he has no idea. “I’ll remember that.”

“Baby girl, don’t look at me with that mischievous glint in your eye. I cause enough problems on my own.”

When he turns and opens the door, he’s laughing. When he carries me in the back door of the hospital, he’s wearing a cocky grin. When he looks down at me, he winks.

Devastating.

The man is too handsome.

When his friend waves us into an area marked ‘Radiology Department,’ the other guy shakes his head. “Compass strikes again.”

“Fuck off,” mutters Eli good-naturedly.

A pretty blonde woman in black scrubs appears and exchanges some flirty banter with the other man. Eli’s buddy says, “Arianna is going to get some images for us.”

Arianna glances over at him with a blush on her cheeks. “I hope you’re worth all the risk,” she mumbles to him.

“You know it, sweetheart,” he returns with a slow smile.

“Jesus,” Eli snarks. “Can you two wait until we get this done?”

Someone in another room calls out. “Hey, Arianna!”

Her eyes shoot wide as she looks at each of us. After giving Eli’s friend a scathing look, she mutters, “You three be quiet.”

As she hustles out of the room, she douses the lights and leaves the three of us in the dark.

The minutes tick by. Eli’s breathing is steady. Same for the other guy. Me? I’m freaking. FREAKING.

Sweat beads between my breasts. My neck is so tight it's gonna snap. Like the night hasn't been stressful enough already.

When Eli touches my back, I almost scream. He presses his nose to my cheek and his heat envelopes me. "Try not to hyperventilate."

"Right," I mutter as I chug air.

"Trust her. She'll figure it out. If not, we'll deal."

I angrily whisper, "You're a maniac."

He doesn't reply but his hand works a slow circle on my back. I let myself lean into him in the darkness. A trance takes me over. I'm so sedated by his touch that I barely hear the ruckus behind the half-wall that separates the work area from the x-ray room.

"This room is acting flukey," Arianna declares. "Take them to room four."

Then another voice joins, this time it's a twangy male voice. "We had a report of some people in civilian clothes, unescorted in the back hallway. But the security cameras didn't catch them. Have you seen anyone?"

Oh. My. Lord!

Security!

Eli's hand slides over my mouth. I must have been breathing like a racehorse. How can he be so freaking calm? I'm about to explode.

"Earlier, I saw some people," Arianna replies, "But that's been a while. They went toward the cafeteria."

Smooth.

Eli's friend chuckles in the darkness. He whispers, "See why I like her?"

The twangy security guy says, "If you see someone, call dispatch."

Arianna chirps, "Will do, gotta get to this patient."

The voices disappear. A few minutes later, she sweeps into the room and hisses, “I’m gonna kill you, Matthew.”

He pushes off the wall. “How ya gonna do it?”

Arianna flips on a small light on the X-ray machine. As the dim light shines on my ankle, she says, “You’ll have to wait and find out. Now let’s get this done before I get busted and lose my job.”

“Let me have a look first,” Matthew says. He feels around my ankle and foot. Even in the dim light, the sight is frightening. I had been avoiding really looking, but now that I do, it makes my stomach feel weak.

It’s already turning purple. There’s a massive amount of swelling. That with the pain level, I’m sure it’s screwed up.

A few minutes later, all of us are looking at some digital images of my ankle on a screen. Black and white shapes, that make no sense to me, but the three of them seem to know what they’re looking for. A conversation ensues that’s full of medical terms that I’ve never heard.

Finally, all three look over at me.

Matthew says, “Probably just a bad sprain, no fractures visible at this time, but something can still show later, once the swelling is gone.”

I get a squeeze on my good shoulder from Eli.

Relief makes me exhale slowly. “Whew. A sprain. I was so worried it was broken. But this is good. I should be back to normal in a day or two.”

Eli and his buddy crane their necks to look at me at the exact same time. With the same expression.

Uh. Oh.

Matthew breaks the bad news. “Ma’am, sprains can take weeks or months to heal.”

I’m not one to cry easily. But a dam breaks.

It’s ugly. A river of water shoots out of my eyes.

“We’ll leave you two,” Matthew says and retreats with Arianna into the work area behind the control panel.

Eli wraps his arms around me and holds me to his warm chest. He tucks my head below his chin and lets me cry for a minute. I can’t say I ever recall crying in someone’s arms before. It’s so nice that I don’t ever want him to let go.

For a beat, I wonder if I’m so emotional because of the alcohol. I never felt needy. Until tonight.

He rubs my back, I worry, and he murmurs, “I know it’s upsetting.”

My reply comes out between sobs. “My life is ruined.” I gulp for air. “I won’t be able to work, I can’t pay my bills.” I bury my forehead against the muscles of his chest. “I’ll lose my apartment.”

He sets me back from him. For a beat, he just looks at me with something twisting his brows together.

Slowly, he reaches for me. With the pad of his thumb, he catches a tear, lifts it to his mouth, and sucks it off.

As if that’s not shocking enough, he knocks the wind out of me by roughly whispering, “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Chapter Eleven

Eli

This just got real.

Mia blinks at me. Hell, I blink at her.

Something just happened and I'm not going to take the time to label it.

All I know is that the woman wrecks me. 'Tore up from the floor up,' as some of the guys used to say in the Teams.

This is not supposed to be happening. For so many reasons, but damn if I can stop myself. I lean in and brush my lips over hers.

I let myself linger, tasting the salt of her tears with the sweetness of her mouth.

As her small fingers twist into my shirt, my gut pretzels. I pull back and stare down at her for a beat.

I swear there's hope in that confused expression too.

Right there with you, sweetheart. Feeling gruff, I say, "Let's get you out of here."

She leans against me as I scoop her up.

I call out, “Matthew, let’s roll.”

My buddy appears and glances between our faces but doesn’t say anything else.

Like thieves, we hug the shadows, avoid the camera, and keep a fast clip as we work our way out of the back of the hospital.

My first relieved breath happens when we’re in the SUV and far away from the hospital.

“How you doing?”

Mia’s voice is tired. “Truthfully, I’m in shock.”

I signal and change lanes, taking another look at her. She’s exhausted.

“Did you sleep last night?”

After rubbing her eyes, she says, “I don’t know. I was sort of in and out. The pain was really bad.”

“I have to say, it pisses the fuck out of me that you were up there in your apartment alone and injured like that.”

“It was late, I think everyone was in bed, except the weird guy that never leaves his place and plays video games all night long. But I don’t think he could help me if he wanted to. I think the heaviest thing he’s lifted in a decade is a pizza box.”

“He could have called a fucking ambulance for you.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose and looks over at me. “Like I said—”

I grumble as I fight the urge to crush something. “Still doesn’t make me happy.”

For a long time, she stares at me. “I haven’t ever known what it is like for someone to care about what happens to me.”

I snap my head in her direction. “Come again?”

She starts to shut down right before my eyes. Her lips pinch, her eyes fall. Whispers, “Never mind.”

It takes effort not to drive too fast because I want to act like a maniac right now. I'm not sure what makes me angrier —no one helping her last night, or her implication that she never had anyone in her corner.

I marinate on that until I'm quadruple mad. When I can't take it any longer, I slice my eyes toward her. "What about your parents?"

She blinks and her head tilts. Confusion enlarging her pretty emerald eyes.

"Didn't your parents care about what happened to you?"

Pain lances across her beautiful face.

Oh fuck. "Mia."

"No. My mother didn't care. She only cared about what my brothers did."

What the hell? What a royal bitch if the woman only cared about her male offspring.

My throat is tight when I ask, "Father?"

"Dead since I was three."

Fucking hell.

I go back to glaring at the road. Traffic thins and I give the SUV a healthy dose of gasoline as thoughts about Mia's childhood sting me like fire ants.

No mother to love her. No father.

Shitty situation for a beautiful, sweet girl.

I didn't have a golden life, far from it, but I knew my pop had my back. Even if he was broke all to hell, he wanted something good for me.

And my grandmother... she was the sunshine and the reason I am the man I am today.

The silence is brutal, and I don't break it because she doesn't need my anger right now.

Mia needs someone to look out for her. That's what I'm gonna do.

No matter how complicated my reasons are.

Chapter Twelve

Mia

A weird numb resignation weighs my bones down. The last thing I want to do is think about my parents. That pain is too heavy for tonight. And especially not my brothers.

The enormity of everything flattens me to the seat, making breathing a demanding labor. I'm so tired.

Drained. Emotionally, physically, and it doesn't stop there. My soul feels empty.

Eli drives through the city streets. Lights flicker by as I stare out the window.

Months to heal.

What am I going to do?

I have bills due. My checking account is pathetic. I won't be able to work at the bar. Pay my rent. Everything I've worked so hard for is circling the drain. A fact I won't be forgetting any time soon. My whole body is throbbing.

The buzz is wearing off and reality seems to become a lot more glaring.

God. I close my eyes, hoping that when I open them again, this will all have been a nightmare.

Except him.

I want to feel the warmth of those strong arms holding me tight.

But Eli can't fix this. I can't even begin to understand his motivations. I just wish I didn't love how safe he makes me feel.

Eli Fortier looks at me like I'm a fragile thing to be protected.

I can't afford that. Or anything, for that matter.

Definitely not some reckless attachment.

I turn my head and stare at his brutal profile. That affects me too. Eli's not a weak, simpering man. He's one hundred percent badass. A SEAL. An elite warrior. One that's taken on my case.

I break the silence with a question that's been simmering on my tongue. "Why are you doing this?"

He's curt, more so than before. "What?"

Too tired to play games, I say, "Don't play dumb."

He doesn't look at me. Which is good. I can't take those eyes on me much more tonight.

With my adrenaline running low, I feel too raw. Too weak to keep up any defenses. "Why are you taking care of me?"

"Because I want to."

Very informative. *Not.*

"Seriously, Eli-whatever-you-are, why are you taking me on as a personal charity case?"

"Not charity."

Ugh. More male non-speak.

"Well, thank you. I don't know how I can repay you." My voice fades and my stomach goes cold inside. "The money you

gave me was in my bag.”

That makes Eli’s jaw tighten. Which sends a whole wave of regret sloshing into the pit of my belly.

Without looking at me, he whips out his phone. After a beat, he starts talking. “Need you to go look in the alley behind the Richter Scale for a purse and a cell phone.”

The person on the other end replies, he listens, then Eli says, “After that, meet me at the Shell station on Callabera. I’m about an hour out.”

He disconnects and tosses his phone in the cupholder between us. “That was the guy that was with me in the bar. Beckett’s his name. I’m going to hand you off to him.”

I didn’t see that coming. And since it’s out of left field, I also couldn’t predict how it would sting. Way down deep in a place that I try to keep covered up.

Before I can put a cork in my mouth, I ask, “*Why?*”

“I’m going hunting.”

I blink at him, but my brain is not computing. Hunting? I don’t understand. “For my purse?”

The no-nonsense expression is gone. Now he looks... completely and utterly murderous.

That makes me shiver. Those shivers turn to a shudder when he says, “No, sweetheart, hunting for whoever hurt you.”

“I...no. You...you shouldn’t do that.”

He ignores me and drives. The air inside the SUV gets so stifling I turn into a sponge. Sweat comes out of me everywhere. Even the bottoms of my feet.

In a squeaky voice, I try to reason. “That’s not a good idea. It’s a really bad idea. You should just leave this alone. Let it drop. I’ll deal.”

Ever get a full nonverbal ‘no’ from someone? I’m not talking about a shake of the head, either. He said all that with body language. The straightening of his spine, the hardening

of his jaw, and the narrowing of his eyes, all happening at the speed of light.

He demands, “So, you’re saying, let them get away with it?”

No one wants revenge more than me. But I don’t want Eli ensnared with something that could be far bigger than he realizes. “I didn’t say that. But I don’t want you to go off all half-cocked.”

I did not just use the word cock.

I didn’t.

Please say I didn’t.

His head pivots my way. Some of the bitter anger leaves his face, and a cocky, new, and very male expression replaces it. “Sweetheart, I don’t do anything *half-cocked*.”

Holy... Those potent eyes slide down from my eyes to my lips and his nostrils flare. Just like before when he looked at me like that, I turn into a breathy fool.

My jaw unhinges, my mouth drops open. A breathy sound escapes me. Eli does it *fully cocked*, he pretty much telegraphs that thought right into my head.

I can’t even take that vision. I just can’t, it’s too much.

My tummy heats and something flutters in my chest. I don’t want Eli hunting anyone on my behalf because that is a deadly endeavor, but heavens me, that protective look, that heated glance makes me weak and wanton.

He goes back to driving. I go back glistening... in different places.

The turn signal clicks, then the vehicle sways, snapping me back to the moment as Eli turns into a parking lot next to an apartment building. He backs into a stall with the kind of proficiency that I could never have. Course, I’d have to drive to have any proficiency, but he’s totally in control of the oversized vehicle.

When the motion stops, he puts the thing in park and turns to me. Back to business. At least that's what the now serious expression he's wearing says. "What do I need to know?"

"A lot." More than I can share if I were to paint the whole giant ugly picture. So, I keep it simple. Related only to what happened in the alley. "I think the men from the alley are dangerous."

He looks unimpressed. "Honey, that's not a news flash."

"No. *Really* dangerous. They were talking about selling drugs."

He turns off the ignition with an easy flick of his wrist as if we're talking about ordering takeout or something totally benign.

He casually says, "Not surprised, given the neighborhood."

Panic makes me wheeze. I start talking too fast. "I mean, like *lots* of drugs. They're bad men, Eli. You could be..."

Eli pivots in his seat so he can face me as he drapes one wrist over the steering wheel. The cotton of his T-shirt stretches tight over his arm, and I have to drag my gaze away.

He asks, "Do you know what SEALs do?"

I recoil back, disturbed by his expression. "I mean, sort of. You rescue people. Chase people."

"And kill people. What kind of people do you think we hunt?"

Thinking too hard about that makes me queasy. I shrug and regret it. My shoulder is back in place, but it is not normal. "*Ouch*. I don't know."

"Bad people, we hunt evil people, drug dealers, gun runners, terrorists, human traffickers, murderers, rapists, the scum of the Earth. And like I told you yesterday, I spent a full ten years doing just that."

That sick feeling inside me gets worse. Eli's spent a decade doing terrible things to protect people. I love that and hate that equally.

His right hand moves toward me and settles on my bare thigh. I stare at the splayed digits as he gives my leg a gentle squeeze. The warmth from his palm scorches my skin.

“Babe, you need to let your shoulder rest. You’ve got it squeezed up by your ear.”

Huh?

All I can feel is his hand.

“Your shoulder, sweetheart. Try not to scrunch it up too much when you cringe.”

My eyes finally let go of the sight of his hand.

Shoulder. Right. It is cranked up next to my ear.

“I’m just processing,” I reply.

His fingers squeeze my thigh, not too hard, just enough to tell me what it would be like for Eli to really touch me.

A burning heat starts at the base of my spine. God. What do I do about this problem?

Weirdly, I say, “My whole body needs to rest.”

But what it really needs is to feel the weight of Eli pressing down on me.

Okay. That’s some straight-up crazy thinking right there.

I never, ever, *ever* think about men like that.

Eli’s eyes darken, his lids dip, he moistens his lips. “I’m gonna ignore that expression you’re wearing because I need to keep my head in the game. Beckett’s meeting us after Matthew hands off an ankle brace.”

My brain short circuits, and I can’t recall half of what’s transpired this evening. Only the parts where Eli was touching me remain. A stream of oh-my-god sensations that make my toes tingle and something inside of me clench.

I know he said the name before. I wrack my head, but my brain is offline, so I mutter, “Who is this Beckett?”

“The guy that was with me at the bar, you served beer to him.”

Before I can ask more about this Beckett guy, a car whips into the stall beside us. It's not the guy from the bar, it's Eli's medic friend, Matthew.

Eli slides out of his door without a word. They shake hands before they share one of those male back slaps. Must be a military thing.

"Got you a brace," Matthew says as he looks toward me through the windshield glass. Then he holds up something else. "A sling too."

"Don't like the belt?" Eli grumbles.

"Didn't say that. But your friend might prefer not to get a burn from a belt, at least not that way," he finishes with a smirk.

Um. Belt-burn with Eli?

Stop. Just stop! Clearly, I'm dehydrated, my blood alcohol level must be ridiculous. I must have low blood sugar too because this is crazy.

Eli takes the brace and sling and gives his friend a shut-the-fuck-up look. But he follows with a genuine, "Thanks man, I owe you."

Matthew asks, "What now?"

"Now, I'm going to deposit this lovely creature in a safe place while I take care of the fuckers that did this to her."

The grin on the medic's face tucks in deeper, becoming two dimples. "Good man. Let me know if you need anything."

"Copy that," Eli replies.

Matthew motions toward the sidewalk, an indication for Eli to follow him.

Eli tosses the braces on the driver seat, says, "Won't be long," and strides off after his friend. Whatever needs to be said, wasn't meant for my ears, so it seems.

I can't make out the conversation, but the way Eli glances toward me makes my stomach flip-flop, then clench. Then that clench turns into a full pretzel when he shakes his head. He

starts to shift between his feet and looks down at the ground. One of his big hands rises to the back of his neck for a rub.

Eli's unsettled. In a different way. It's not the first time I've seen that soul-deep emotion wash over him. It's troubling. I don't know how it relates to me, but there's some connection.

Whatever Eli is carrying is heavy. Bone deep. And is somehow tangled up with me.

Or maybe he's just starting to regret helping me.

Maybe it's his sixth sense.

He is a SEAL after all. And the man should be worried. I'm far more dangerous than he can imagine.

The two men talk some more. When he finally raises his head, he looks across the space, searches me out, and locks onto me.

It's like he's touching me. My skin tingles and the muscles in my chest tighten painfully.

Every time he looks at me, whether heated, pained, unsure, angry, or locked away, they all rattle my foundation.

Whatever they talked about is definitely something to do with me. Or he wouldn't be staring at me now with his looking like he's fighting some kind of internal war.

He's torn. Suffering.

I see you.

I recognize the signs.

I feel it too.

What the hell am I doing trusting a stranger, when I have no reason to ever trust anyone again?

Chapter Thirteen

Eli

By the time I fit Mia with the shoulder sling and get her ankle properly braced, she's exhausted. Finally, as I drive, she dozes off in the passenger seat.

She's so deep in the abyss that she doesn't wake up when I stop. With any luck, she won't wake up until Beckett gets her back to the apartment.

I park at the gas station and wait for Beckett to arrive. He's less than ten minutes out—confirmed by text.

Nine minutes to be exact, of me staring at her while she sleeps.

Nine minutes with my heart thudding inside my ribs and my hands fisted tight.

Nine agonizing minutes with dark memories clawing at my brain.

Nine long minutes of wondering why the universe delivered a nearly identical look-alike of the woman I failed, right into my arms.

I don't know what I want—to drag her into my arms and bury my face in her hair or scream in agony.

A sedan rolls in with an Uber sign. Beckett scans the lot as he hops out. A reminder that we still haven't picked up another ride in the weeks we've been in Los Angeles. No need until now.

He wastes no time heading my direction. Long strides bring him to meet me at the rear corner of the company truck. There's a small leather purse clenched in one of his hands.

One could say his expression is suspicious. Or maybe concerned. Hell, probably both. Since Beckett's not one to mince words, I'm sure he'll tell me.

He passes me the bag. “This was all I could find. No sign of a phone. No wallet in there.”

“Thanks, brother.”

After I glance at the purse, I find him crossing his arms and looking me dead in the eyes. He gets down to business. “Now, what the fuck is going on?”

After scrubbing my hand over my jaw, I admit, “A shit ton. Mia—that's the waitress's name, by the way—when she left work, she got jumped. I went back there tonight, then to her apartment, and found her.”

I inhale through my nose, fighting the rage churning in my gut. “She got fucked up. Dislocated shoulder, sprained ankle, a bunch of cuts and scrapes.”

Beckett stiffens and the energy around him crackles as his mouth goes grim. “Man. That's tragic.”

I hook a thumb over my shoulder. “She's resting better. She was able to doze off in the passenger seat. Hoping she stays that way for a while, till you get her back to the apartment.”

“Damn. Did you take her to the hospital?”

With a disbelieving grunt and a shake of my head, I mutter, “That's where things get really crazy. She begged me not to go to the hospital or call the cops.”

He whistles low and looks past me toward the vehicle where Mia's asleep.

I say, "Yep. I thought the same thing. She was scared shitless. So..."

I clear my throat because I still can't believe the absurdity of the evening. "So, I fixed her shoulder, then I took her to see a Corpsman I knew from the Navy. We got her x-rayed—off the records—because once again, she didn't want any official reports. It's been a long night. Anyway, she's got a bad sprain, and she's in a shoulder sling."

"Jesus. Helluva night. What now?"

The question of the day, apparently. One I keep asking myself.

"She needs some sleep, and somewhere safe to do it."

He crosses his arms, locks his jaw, and mutters, "Fucked up, bro."

"I want you to take her to the apartment. Get her settled. I'm going to find the man or men that did this."

He gives me a sharp look. I've seen Beckett scowling over his own demons, but this is different. "Is your head straight?"

"No."

He continues to pin me with a stare. "That's what I thought. How about you come back to the apartment and get some sleep. You look like a heap of cow dung. We'll dig into it after you've regrouped."

I rub at the back of my neck. "No can do. I can't go back there with you right now."

Beckett, being the thorough fucker he is, says, "I'm compelled to ask why."

I throw my head back, look up at the starless L.A. sky and growl. When I right myself and look at him, I ask, "What do you think?"

"Because you're fucked up about how much she looks like your friend."

I find my hand on my sternum, where an ache is burning a hole in the bone.

“I’m not sure,” I admit. Because I’m so jacked, up is down and down is up, and I’m on an emotional rollercoaster that feels like a one-way ride to hell.

But what I can’t figure out right now is if I won’t go back to the apartment because they look so much alike or because I don’t deserve to feel anything other than pain?

Nyx is missing because of me.

Plain. Fucking. Simple.

“Man, it’s a mindfuck. Because the way she looks at me with trust in her eyes... Slays me.”

Chapter Fourteen

Mia

The growl of the engine wakes me. It takes a few seconds for my brain to come online, but when I do, I nearly leap out of the seat.

The man in the driver's seat grumbles, "Sorry, I tried to be quiet. I'm Beckett, Remember me from the bar?"

I blink away the grit in my eyes as I try to slow my racing heart. "Now that I'm not having a cardiac arrest, I do."

He gives me an apologetic smile as he slips the vehicle into drive and pulls out of the stall. "Eli wants me to take you to our apartment."

"Where is he?"

The smile he was wearing disappears. "He's taking care of some things." He throws me a glance that's meant to silence me. "You can talk to Eli about that when he gets back."

In a whisper, I admit, "I don't understand what's happening with him."

Beckett exits the highway and speeds down a road that's crowded with high-end apartments and condos. "He's the man with the answers."

"You don't know?"

His face turns to stone. "Not when it comes to you, ma'am."

My feathers ruffle and I let it show. "Silent Beckett, and the mysterious Eli. The man grumbled, growled, licked one of my tears off his freaking thumb, and disappeared."

Next to me Beckett scans the mirrors as he merges into traffic. When he's in the stream of flowing cars, he chuckles.

That surprises me so much I whip around to face him.

Beckett starts to grin again as he drives. "Eli's a piece of work."

God, do I know.

"Will he be okay?" I blurt.

Beckett cuts his eyes to me. They're sly. They're also deadly and unnerving. "He's fine, it's the other men who need someone's concern. Eli's a killing machine."

Gulp. I press my lips flat and stare ahead.

A killing machine that looks at me like I'm something precious. Not a thing to destroy.

Coming from the background I have, I should shrink away from that. But I don't. And I'm not sure how I feel about that.

After a good while filled with crackling-anxiety silence, Beckett asks, "How are you holding up? Heard it was a rough night."

I fidget with my sling as my heart rate goes down, then up again. "You could call it that. Now I'm in pain. Exhausted. And nervous and worried about everything." My honesty surprises me.

His hands flex on the steering wheel. "I'll keep you safe."

Over the next few minutes, Beckett's as talkative as a tree stump. A gigantic, muscular one with a scowl that probably scares Pitbulls.

"You don't have to take me to your place. You could take me to a hotel or something."

He snorts. "That's not gonna fly. Before you argue, I might as well tell you that you're not winning any arguments, so you can save your breath."

He takes a turn far too fast, jams on the gas, and bolts out in front of two cars. His hawk-like eyes scan the road. But he doesn't say a freaking word as I grab onto anything that's attached. The Navigator sways and settles into thundering speed.

"Speed limit, anyone? Both of you," I gripe. "I just hope you're a trained professional."

He chuckles at that and keeps the pedal down as he tears through the night. We finally arrive at a big, sleek apartment building. True to form, Beckett parks as quickly as he drives, flinging the giant SUV into a narrow parking spot.

My breath wooshes out of me. Lord, I've never ridden with someone so crazy.

Okay, I take that back. I have ridden with crazy people—including my asshole brothers—but this is good crazy. That was bad crazy.

My head is still spinning when Beckett strides around the front of the truck, opens my door and picks me up. Silently, he carries me into a modern building, then into a very posh gold and burgundy elevator.

It's a fast ride to the seventh floor. Beckett doesn't waste any time carrying me down a hallway—also decorated in tones of rich gold and burgundy—and stops at the entrance of an apartment.

The door's gigantic and looks like it could be thick as a vault door.

Without breaking a sweat, or putting me down, he enters a security code, uses his thumb-print, then uses a key on the door.

Triple locks.

What I'd give to have that kind of security system. This place is swank. One of these guys has money. "Whose place is —" The door swings open, and the sight before me takes my words right out of my mouth.

Wow. I've obviously been living in the slums too long. I don't even know what that fireplace thing in the wall is. "What is this place?"

"An apartment."

"No... Duh, Captain Obvious. But is this Eli's place?"

"He's got the answers."

I tilt my head up and pin him with a look. "You're a broken record, Beckett."

He deadpans, "I know how to keep my mouth shut."

The lack of answers is starting to make me more than a little crazy. This is getting weirder by the moment.

He carries me down a wide hallway, turns into a bedroom, and eases me onto the bed. The duvet is pale blue silk. Drapes in dove gray hang from ceiling to floor against walls that are closer to storm clouds. Everything is sleek and minimalist in a beautiful way.

It's the kind of place where someone could rest with uncluttered dreams.

Beckett watches me for a beat, then he walks out.

More weirdness.

But a minute later, he returns quietly with a glass of water and a bottle of Motrin. This time, he says, "Get some rest. I'll be on watch."

And that's how my night ends. High in a tower, guarded by a man I don't know, while I think about another man I don't

know.

My life is definitely off the tracks.

Maybe for once, something good has happened.

Chapter Fifteen

Eli

For being so late at night there sure is a lot of fucking traffic. It takes forever to make it back to the Richter Scale. Or maybe it's just the fact that my patience is *gone*.

Or that I'm a wreck.

Nyx. Fucking Nyx. Now Mia.

A double dose of...

There aren't even words for the enormity of the shit that's raining down around me right now.

A bitter fire hits the pit of my gut.

The burn is not so different from alcohol. But the buzz of this sucks balls and doesn't go away. It eases only to return with twice the ferocity. It claws and fucking eats at me.

Every damned day, the holes in me get bigger. And that won't stop until our team knows Nyx is safe... or we know she's dead.

My knuckles ache and my eyes burn like I'm holding onto a rope in a windstorm, but all I'm doing is sitting in an Uber at a red traffic light in L.A. at one in the morning. Surrounded by ghosts of my past failure and threats of more to come.

The light turns green, the Uber driver hits the gas, as I scan over the mostly-empty sidewalks.

Searching.

For Nyx—*always*.

For those bastards that hurt Mia too.

I ask the driver to slow down when two men step out of an overhang. Wrong age. Wrong height.

As I continue to stare into the shadows, an eerie tingle hits the back of my neck. This one has me swiveling my head to the right.

A red cigarette glows in the corner of a building's façade. The smoker recedes. The face is too hidden for me to determine if it's my mark.

"This is me, thank you."

Time to hit the pavement on foot.

The driver looks unsure but stops and I get out.

Catching a glimpse of Mia's building, I take in the neglected exterior. The trash laying around the stairs. The crappy single lock on the entrance door. Things I saw earlier but didn't take time to study.

Unease about the place layers on top of the tingle on my nape.

The building is a short walk from her work. Someone could easily follow her or see her coming or going from her shift.

The block is full of other neglected buildings. Some apartments. Some boarded up businesses, Add the abandoned, hollowed out building and a couple vacant lots and you have the makings for a walk fraught with potential danger.

Briskly, I walk around the block, cataloging the scene, until I'm in front of the Richter Scale.

Pisses me off to think Mia's been trekking through this neighborhood at night after her shift. We're gonna be having a talk about that.

It's quiet except for a car alarm in the far distance. The 'open' light at the bar is still on.

The place is pretty much deserted now. A guy sits at the bar with his head hung low. There's music, much lower in volume playing from speakers on the wall. A television flickers behind the bar now.

The blonde bartender from earlier skids to a stop when she sees me. The color drops from her face. "Oh."

Her eyes slowly round as they skate from side to side. There's a hitch in her voice when she asks, "Did you find Mia?"

"I did. She was badly hurt."

The woman's face goes blank, then she sways on her feet. "Is she going to be okay?"

I nod stiffly through my simmering anger. "Yes, but it's gonna take time. Do you know what happened in the alley?"

She's trembling as she takes a slow step back. "What alley? What happened? I mean, the guy told us he saw Mia, and she was injured, but I don't know anything else."

Monte steps from the back room. "Whatcha find out?"

"That Mia's night was torture. Beyond that, I need to know what you know."

Monte's jaw works, he glances at the bartender. "I'll talk to him," he says, and he motions for me to follow him through the double doors.

The thump of his boots echoes as he stalks down a hallway, slings open a door, and steps into an alley—the alley where Mia was hurt.

After a few paces, he jerks a flask out of his back pocket and takes a deep swig. He holds it toward me, but I shake my head.

I want my faculties wired tight tonight.

He drinks again and hisses through the burn of something strong. He caps the flask and fists it in his hand. “She’s got trouble in her past.”

“I figured. She’s having flashbacks.”

He looks at the ground, before he gives me a worried glance. “Look, what I’m about to tell you is really supposed to be confidential. Or maybe not. Hell, I don’t know what it is, so I’ll let you sort this shit. The boss was out the day Mia started working, so he asked me to make a copy of her license and put it into the file cabinet in the office. You know with that official employment shit...”

I’m nodding, wanting him to get to the point.

“Anyway, her license was kind of weird. This isn’t my first time around the block, so I’m going to venture a guess that it was fake. And not a good fake, if you get my drift.”

“No shit,” I mutter as I consider the reasons Mia might have a fake identity. “You think she’s on the run?”

“Girl’s got ghosts in her eyes, you tell me.”

I scrub my hand over my face as I picture her suffering at the hands of some fuckface. “Maybe an abusive ex.”

He grunts and folds his arms as he takes on a thoughtful expression which clashes with the face piercings and the violent neck tat. “Come to think of it, she’s never mentioned dating.”

I add, “Course, she could be scared and doesn’t want to let anyone into her circle.”

His turn to scrub his face, but he also rubs his palm over his shaved head. “Yeah, she never really let Marley or me close. But I like her,” he states as he gives me a pointed look.

I like Mia too but that's not something I'm going to tell him because I can't even understand it.

He glances around, scaling the dark alley top to bottom with his narrowed eyes. "Something else..."

Whatever it is, is bad, because he's not thoughtful now, his face is red with anger. He pauses so long, I want to yell, SPIT IT OUT.

"Rumor is that a guy I know showed up this morning at the convenience store down the street with scratches all over his face."

Jesus. "So, we was either attacked by a really large cat with blunt nails or a woman wasn't too happy with him?"

He grunts and twists the lid off his flask again. "Right. But you gotta know, this fucker is bad news, and if he jumped Mia, he's not going to be happy she got away. And if he's interested in her for some reason, then there might be a bigger problem. This guy's got more trouble than California's got cars."

"Who is he?"

He proceeds to give me a name, and the place where I can find this man. But his eyes gleam as he issues a warning. "Fuck this up and you could end up dead. Then that fucker will go after Mia and make her pay for you getting in his business."

Chapter Sixteen

Mia

I wake up for the second time in twenty-four hours in a strange place—the first time in the vehicle with a man I don't know behind the wheel, and now in a quiet bedroom with a soft bed.

This is much more comfy.

The blankets are thick and warm. The curtains are drawn tight. It's a safe cocoon that makes me want to never leave.

Besides, my body hurts too much to go far.

How can I feel so banged up? I mean, I know I'm all banged up, but god. It feels like I fell off a cliff and hit every rock on the way down.

Maybe I should sleep some more. I close my lids and snuggle deeper into the bed. But my eyes won't stay shut as thoughts start to bubble up like my head is full of boiling water.

What time is it?

One of the downfalls of not wearing a watch—when you lose your phone, you have no clue about the time.

Ignoring the urge to know, I force myself to lie still. It doesn't matter what time it is. I need to think before I do anything crazy like hop up or hop on one foot and run away.

What am I going to do?

My first obsession: the contact numbers lost in my phone.

I also need to cancel my debit card and get my money out of the bank. Lord, what do I do about my ID?

Then I worry over why Eli is doing this. Why am I suddenly being protected and avenged by a man I don't know?

I fling off the blankets and sit up in the bed. Too quickly, apparently. A wave of dizziness hits.

Too bad, no time for that. I speed shuffle to the bathroom. My bladder is about to *pop*. I can't remember the last time I went to the bathroom. Thank god, I didn't have to ask Eli to do that too.

I fidget with my shorts with my good hand as I squeeze my legs together. *Please don't pee yourself. Please!*

Finally, I get my behind free and fall onto the toilet. I groan as the pressure eases. *Whew*. That would have been seriously embarrassing. I don't have any other clothes.

As I sit on the cool ceramic, breathing in relief, I look down at my boot. But it's not the boot that makes me do a double take.

Is that real marble on the floor?

What is this place?

Now that I'm not having a pee-mergency, I take a look around.

Whoa. The bathroom is amazing. A vague memory of a very fancy living room flitters across my mind.

Oh, right. This place is next level. And this room might be my favorite. There's a monster-sized shower, a big tub, marble everywhere. Green plants. Soft-looking towels in a neat stack. It's as pretty as a high-end hotel bathroom.

That tub is calling my name.

But I need answers first. Because I can't exactly relax and enjoy a bubble bath with my life in the landfill. I drag myself up and off the toilet, shimmy my shorts up and skip the button.

My Richter Scale shirt covers it anyway.

I've got more important things to worry about. Like the fact that my life has officially hit crisis mode. I'm broke—again—I may have gotten myself into serious trouble in that alley—*holy shit!*—I look awful.

I have to bite my tongue to keep from shrieking at what I see in the mirror. Well, shizzle sticks.

Girl, you're a trainwreck.

Those aren't bags under my eyes, they're two lavender marshmallows. *Where did all that swelling come from?*

That doesn't even count my hair. I try to wrangle the static-filled strands with my good hand, because I'm not ready to experiment with moving my left arm yet.

Huffing and puffing, I twist my hair around, this way and that, trying to make something out of the rat's nest. I fish a rubber band out of my shorts pocket—the spare one I always carry—and promptly drop it.

It mocks me from the floor. When I bend to snag it, I almost faceplant.

GOD! “Can I get a break here?”

Dizziness hits me again and I have to lean against the counter. When I look at myself again, my eyes have changed. This time they have a sheen of tears. “No!”

I will not cry. I *never* cry.

But I did cry. A lot! Like when Eli held my hand and told me I was safe, I cried like a baby.

Damnit. Damnit. Damnit.

I shuffle to the door. When I open it, Beckett's standing on the other side. My heart leaps into my throat. “That's not

creepy.”

He shrugs. “I heard you up. Some cursing and muttering too.”

I take a brief second to consider how handsome these two are. Eli’s dark and dangerous. And way more my speed than Beckett who looks like he’s a cross between Captain America and Thor.

Eli’s more like a fallen angel with scars, slashing dark eyes, and secrets that hang around six-feet underground. Like he was born to a heavy metal song and cut his teeth on saw-blades.

Why am I thinking this? Like it matters how much I like Eli, or the fact that he’s much more my type than his friend.

I try to ignore the little voice in my head and ask, “Eavesdrop much?”

He smirks. “All the time. Did it for a living, actually.”

Okay. That’s weird. I shake off the adrenaline spike and ask, “Could I possibly get some more ice for my face? I look like a racoon that got in a fistfight.”

“I’m not going to agree with that. But yeah, I’ll get you some ice.”

“Thanks, can I also get a hair appointment while I’m at it? One-handed ponytails are a bitch.”

He turns and walks away, but he’s laughing. He shouts over his shoulder. “I can’t help with the ponytail, but I’ll see if I can get Jean Pierre to put you on the books.”

I joke around when I need to escape reality. It’s a coping mechanism I learned a long time ago. “Right. I’d like a trim and blowout.”

“Sure thing. Coming right up.”

I carefully make my way down the hall following him.

“Why don’t you sit in the recliner? I’ll bring you some lunch.”

My eyes round, “Lunch?”

“Well, late afternoon snack, more like it. It’s three.”

I stop and try to do the math. “Wait, you’re telling me that I slept until three in the afternoon?”

He appears in the doorway of the kitchen with a tray. “You are correct.”

I must have been really out of it.

He motions to the recliner. “Sit. Your foot needs to be elevated.”

I grumble with a grin, “Bossy as your buddy, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Where’s Eli?”

“Still out.”

I lower myself into a badass leather recliner, and as I do, I realize it’s one of those super nice massaging recliners. Gotta say, I like this place more by the minute.

Beckett sits the tray down on an end table, and raises the foot of the recliner.

“When will he be here?”

He places the tray over my lap and soundly avoids my eyes. “I’m sure he’ll check in soon.”

“That’s not a real answer.”

He smirks. “You know me.”

I growl my displeasure. “Unfortunately, I’m seeing that your lips are as sealed as a bank vault.”

He walks off. Leaving me staring down a tray of food. A turkey sandwich with just mustard. A bright green Granny Smith apple. A folded cloth napkin, and a glass of water with lime. Rounded out by a zip bag with ice cubes and just the right amount of water.

What the hell?

“How do you take your coffee?” he shouts from the kitchen.

I’m too dumbstruck to answer.

After a beat, he yells, “Coffee?”

“Black.”

I still haven’t moved when he comes back carrying a mug with a steam trail in its wake. “Need anything else?”

“Why did you make coffee for me?”

“Because you’ll have a killer headache if you’re used to drinking it and you skip.”

Damn. He’s right.

He places the coffee on the table next to me, straightens, and says, “I’ll be in the office. Shout if you need anything.”

I watch him go. “Righto,” I mutter.

Because nothing about this is weird.

Especially not the fact that he knew what I like to eat.

Chapter Seventeen

Eli

My eyes are blurry and my head is buzzing as I walk down the corridor toward room twenty-seven.

Stagnation drives me crazy. But sometimes you know you have to hit pause. Recognize when you're not being productive and your exhaustion makes you dull. The cheap hotel a few blocks away from my hunting ground serves the purpose.

The door lock blinks red when I swipe the plastic keycard. "Fucker."

I swipe again. The lock blinks red again. I slice my gaze toward the long ass corridor and the stairs I just climbed. If I have to go back to the damned office, I'm not going to be happy.

When I turn my attention back to the door, I sigh tiredly.

I could just kick it.

The idea makes me feel mildly better. At least there would be a measurable effect from my action.

Unlike me hunting all day and coming up with thin air.

With a muttered prayer laced with profanity, I swipe the card again. This time—thank fuck—the light blinks green and the handle turns.

Shit. Finally, something goes right.

There was confirmation about the cop I saw at the bar being dirty from a conversation I overheard at the gas station. That could explain Mia's outright fear of the system.

But beyond that, it feels like I'm grasping at sand. The guy with the scratched face is nowhere to be found and no one is talking.

I fall onto the bed still in my clothes and finally drop into a restless sleep.

"Eli?"

I lift my head as I drop the tightly folded map on the table and turn toward Nyx.

"Ready for your big night?" she asks with a cautious smile.

"I'd rather be going to prom."

She leans on the tall table, resting her elbow, dropping her chin in her hand. With her other hand, she traces the route that the Team will take tonight for our mission. "What's it like to go to prom?"

I chuckle as I tuck away my waterproof notepad in my cargo pocket. "Stupid. You spend a lot of money, get dressed up, then go stare at the same people you see in the cafeteria."

She scrunches her nose. "Really?"

"Pretty much."

Her eyes go dreamy, and I can tell another question is coming. "But the dresses. Aren't they pretty? That's what I heard."

I sling my camouflage pack onto the table and check the shoulder strap. "Do I look like I know?"

She grins. "Come on. I'm sure you noticed."

"That was a loooong time ago."

For a while, she lingers in silence, sliding her fingers over the map. She's not here to talk about prom, obviously. After a while, the silence grows heavy and she whispers, "I'm worried about your mission tonight."

"Don't. You know it doesn't do any good."

When I glance at her, she's got her hand out, palm side up, extended toward me. Voice a raspy whisper, she says, "Take this."

"What's that?"

Thrusting her hand at me again, she smiles. This time there's a mix of sadness and nostalgia in her gaze. "My lucky rock."

"Nyx, didn't know you were superstitious."

She blushes. "Maybe I just like rocks. A specific one. Seriously, I'd feel better if you carry it tonight."

For a minute, we look at each other. Nyx is one of the smartest women I've ever met. She knows tonight's mission is gonna be hell. But that's something no one really wants to call into their reality, so we don't say it.

"Appreciate it." I lift the rock from her palm. It's smooth, midnight blue, and warm from her hand. "I'll bring it back."

Something else darkens her gaze and the shiver she tries to hide sends tension through my body. "Look out for Alex tonight, will you?"

It's the first time she's ever uttered Alex's name to me, but the Team had noticed her fondness.

"I got your boy covered."

With that, she ducks her head and walks to the door. When she reaches for the knob, she turns back to look at me, only it isn't Nyx that says, "You always succeed," it's Mia.

I rip out of my dream with a guttural yell. Fuck, that felt real. My hands come up and I cover my face with my palms. The sweat surprises me when it shouldn't.

I'm soaking wet. The room is baking hot, suffocating, not a whisper of air moving, except the sawing movement of my breath.

I can feel it in my pocket—that lucky rock. The one Nyx should have had with her the next day when she went out with a team.

But I forgot to return it.

My throat squeezes, my muscles shudder, and I drag myself from the bed before the dam holding my shit together breaks.

Fuck. I need two things. A shower and to get out of here.

I stalk to the bathroom, throwing my clothes on the counter of the vanity as I go, and swipe the cold water handle.

The spray is about twenty degrees shy of the kind of the cold that I like, but it will have to do.

As soon as I'm done and feeling half-decent, I jerk on my clothes. Time is of the essence here.

My phone chimes with a text. As I read the words, a vicious smile takes over my face.

Finally, a fucking lead.

After checking out, I head to a rental place for wheels before heading to my real destination today.

There is only one thought in my mind.

The hunt is on again.

Chapter Eighteen

Mia

Apparently, I'm worn out, or my body really needs to rest. I fall asleep in the recliner, only to wake when a shadow crosses me.

I gasp and blink about a hundred times until I realize where I am.

"Just me," Beckett says.

Clutching my chest, I grouse, "You need to give a girl some warning."

Beckett tilts his head and frowns at me. "I did. You didn't hear me calling your name?"

I point to my face with my good hand. "Do I look like I'm having a heart attack?"

"You do have a point."

My eyes fall first to a bouquet of flowers on the coffee table. It's tasteful and lush with a circus of mixed blooms tucked into a square vase.

Beckett clears his throat, “When you come out of your trance, I’ve got something for you.”

His hands are wrapped around a giant box. Not just a box, but a box with a red velvet bow. Confusion takes the place of my shock.

“Why are you holding a box that looks like a present?”

He holds it toward me. “I’m just the messenger.”

I wiggle around in the recliner and try to sit up. “For me?”

“Last time I checked, my name wasn’t Mia.”

My chest feels funny. I’m not sure if in alarm or excitement. “It’s not a bomb, is it?”

He snorts. “No. And I swiped it. So, you’re safe.”

Carefully, he puts the gigantic box on my lap. As I stare at the thing, he walks out and back in with another box. Also tied with a velvety red bow.

I’m not sure if I’m more confused by the packages or the fact that he checked them. “You really tested it to see if it’s a bomb?”

“I really did.”

I go back to staring wide-eyed at the second box. “Two presents.”

“I’ll be around if you need help.”

“Wait, can you take the lids off?”

He lets me pull the ribbon so the bow unties from each, then he lifts the lids off. When he leaves this time, I’m alone, staring down with a frown.

The sudden weight of tears on my lashes surprises me. I can’t remember the last time I got a gift.

There was a cupcake once. At work on my birthday. Marley did it. Or maybe Monte, I’m not sure.

But this is a real present with tissue paper and a bow.

The last time had to be when I was a kid, before my mom drank herself into a coma. Those memories are covered up now. Piled under heaps of ugliness.

These are beautiful. And for me.

Talking to myself, I mutter, “Crazytown.”

It’s a habit I’ve had since I was a kid. That’s what sad, lonely kids do, apparently. So, I continue to talk myself through this monumental moment.

The first layer is tissue paper with sparkles woven into its soft texture. “So pretty.” Below that is a treasure trove of beautiful clothing.

One by one, I lift out the carefully folded pieces. A soft cardigan sweater in dove gray. Next a luxurious silky black button up shirt—both which would be easy to put on with an injured shoulder. The last piece to the outfit is a dark gray maxi skirt.

“Uh... wow.” My hand cresses the delicate smokey-topaz lace bra and panty set.

Holy. Smokes.

Beneath that is another layer of sparkling tissue paper. This outfit begins with a blood red cashmere cardigan sweater. I wheeze in a breath. “So pretty.”

My fingers slide over a cream sleeveless button-up blouse. “Nice, whoever did this has good taste.” A fact that’s confirmed by the bottom piece—a hip-hugging, knee length skirt in dark chocolate.

“More?” I breathe. Nestled in the tissue paper in the bottom is satin lingerie. This time in the palest pink.

Okay. This is weird. But that doesn’t stop me.

The second box has a new pair of sneakers. Vans in my size, made of chocolate brown leather with pink accents. And... a pair of black ankle boots with laces. Sturdy and supportive. The kind someone might want after having a sprain.

Okay. I'm flabbergasted. My unsteady breathing is loud in my own ears. Who sends a gift like this?

I lift the ridiculously soft red sweater and press it to my face. It makes me want to purr.

What does this mean?

Presents from Eli.

I almost throw the thing away like it's cursed. Gifts like these come with demands attached.

I drop my hand to my lap and twist the sweater with clammy fingers. My insides are cool and hot in alternating turns.

Eli wants something.

I have nothing to give. Nothing left in this hollow shell. But my stupid hand brings that sweater to my cheek again and I close my eyes.

For a beat, I let myself enjoy the luxurious fluffy texture.

I haven't owned anything red in years.

My life is dark. I always choose blend-in-black.

But for some reason it feels fitting to wear the color of blood. A nod to Eli's search for answers because he doesn't look like the kind of man for a sit-down-and-chat kind of retribution.

Chapter Nineteen

Eli

There's blood in the air. Simmering along with the smell of fear that only happens when someone is facing death. It's a raw, powerful scent that you never forget. One that you recognize instantly with some deep primitive part of your brain.

Bodies jostle as the crowd pushes forward toward the makeshift octagon. Their screams rise to the high rafters. The entire horde pushes forward as the fight intensifies.

Hundreds of people are chanting, "Slayer! Slayer! *Slayer!*"

But it's not the man called Slayer that I'm here to see. It's the opponent that's got the crowd really in a froth. The Human Machete. Also known as Tony Marchetti—the supposed cousin of one of the men I'm looking for.

That text was just what I needed.

Guess I'm going to owe Monte big time for coming to the hotel to talk to me, I just hope that his goal is not for me to put in a good word for him with Mia.

Because that's a giant HELL no. He can keep his 'like' to himself.

With a grumble, I push all thoughts about Monte's possible interest in Mia aside and focus on my target.

The big, tattooed fighter. Marked with ink from waist to ears, bulging with muscle, and bleeding like a river from an eye-cut. He's also panting as he circles his opponent. Waiting for the chance to deliver his signature death-blow. A fact I only know because of Monte's intel.

My focus is solely on The Machete. The way he moves. The fact that he favors his left side. His right ankle is literally his Achilles.

I also note that after this fight he's going to be dehydrated and sore.

These details will help me later when I show him what it's really like to fear your death. Just me and him alone in the abandoned warehouse next door.

I'll bleed him for answers if that's what it takes. But as tough as he looks in the ring, he might be the kind that caves when you apply real pressure.

I've seen a hundred hard men fall.

My hand slides into my pocket, past Nyx's good luck rock, and skims over the garrote that's neatly wound into a small coil.

Nothing makes a person sing quicker. We'll see how tough the underground MMA fighter is when he's alone in the dark with my line around his neck.

A violent round of punches between the two men sounds like meat being slapped on pavement. A sudden gasp rips through the crowd.

Slayer leers as Machete teeters. As the bloodied, disoriented man sways, the other advances. More punches. A knee thrown to the abdomen. Then an uppercut sends Tony Marchetti sailing backward.

Blood splatters when he hits the concrete and the sound of bones slamming on unforgiving flooring echoes across the frozen faces of the crowd.

Then the room erupts in deafening cheers.

I stand staring, silent and waiting with a clenched stomach.

The MC calls the match and jerks the arm of the Slayer into the air. "Our winner!"

But I'm not looking at the man as he struts around the ring, pounding his chest. Machete isn't moving.

I turn and walk out with the crowd, blending in, but I only go as far as my truck.

My hands clench on the wheel as the minutes grow into an hour. *Fuck*. I know what's coming, but I need to see it with my eyes before I admit that my lead is a bust.

At 2 a.m. a black van rolls into the parking lot, and two men wearing white paper jumpsuits scurry out. A minute later, they drag a body bag to the van.

Another dead end.

Chapter Twenty

Eli

Eighteen Hours Later

My neck is nothing but a stack of knots. My stomach is about to eat itself. I need food. A shower, preferably cold this time, and... to see Mia.

Fuck me. Did I really just admit that to myself?

It takes a sizable amount of control not to speed. But the last thing I want is to waste time on getting stopped by a cop. I need to get to the apartment.

This corner of L.A. is working class, and most people tuck in by this hour. The streets are quiet, even though it's only 9 p.m.

Open window blinds give glimpses of people zoning out in front of flickering television screens and the occasional illuminated face of someone mindlessly binging TikTok.

A reflective dog collar flickers in my headlight beams. The owner and the terrier scurry across the street. They're the only

ones out. This is a far cry from the place where I've been turning stones for the last couple of nights.

It feels good to be away from it all. Even just for a few hours to reset. I signal and turn into the parking lot of the apartment building that Beckett and I are using as a temporary base. One of the many crash-pad safe houses that Agile owns.

If you can call it a crash pad. My definition and Agile's are two very different things.

I punch the ignition button, turn off the rental SUV, and lean back in the seat. I need a minute before I go upstairs.

I've also got to deal with the fact that I've basically gone rogue on my first mission for the company.

Not my style. As I scrub a hand over my face, I listen to the line ring through to Agile Security & Rescue's command central. My neck is tight, my shoulders are tired, and I need a shower. The stench of seedy places clings to me like bad perfume.

The line clicks open, and I say, "Fortier checking in."

"Greetings, Eli. We wondered when we would hear from your southern ass."

I grin at the other former SEAL's remark.

"Evening, Mako. I need to speak to the boss."

"No can do."

I raise my brows as I slide out of my truck and start walking a lap around the parking lot. "That's not the answer I was looking for. This is urgent."

Mako grunts, "A lot of other people claim the same thing. But here I am, playing secretary, if you can imagine that. The fact is, he's celebrating his anniversary tonight. He and Danee have plans. No calls in or out."

Not that I expect to interrupt the man and his wife, but I think it's only fair that I reveal the cards I've been holding close to my chest. "There's a situation with the mission."

He hums. "I'm probably not the guy to tell that to."

“What are the odds of me getting some intel on an individual that’s *not* related to the Rush case.”

Mako laughs, then quickly sobers. “Maybe you should tell me about that mission.”

“FUBAR, man. *FUBAR*. But this has nothing to do with the Rush objective and everything to do with me being in a bar and meeting the right wrong person at the right wrong moment.”

“That sounds absolutely mental, but about right for you. Your compass always points toward trouble.”

My reputation precedes me. “Tell me about it. This one’s a doozy.”

He asks, “What do you need?”

“Can you run a full background, maybe dig around on the dark side of things?” Mako’s work for Agile involves a lot of covert work on the dark web.

He grumbles and a door closes. “Hang on a minute. I’ve got to respond to an urgent text that just came in.”

The line goes silent. This goes on for minutes. Long damned text message. Long enough for me to pace a lap around the apartment building parking lot. Frustration and impatience make my steps long and my neck grow tighter.

I hate dead ends.

That’s all I’ve gotten in my hunt. Which is why Mako is just the person I need on my side tonight. He’s not only a genius when it comes to anything web and tech, he’s also a former SEAL and badass operator.

I make another lap, like I haven’t walked enough miles already today, but I’m not able to sit still.

His voice reappears. “I’m back. Working on some things for another case right now, but I’ll try to fit you in as soon as I catch a breath. Marshall’s going to have to expand my department.”

“I thought you were solo for inhouse tech intel?”

“Exactly. Which is why he’s got to add some more people. We need a department. Not a one-man ass-kicking show.”

A grin loosens my clenched jaw. “Good thing you’re a tough son of a bitch. Anyway, I’d appreciate it if you can give this some airtime. But I will not be joining you on your laptop crusade. I’m better on the battlefield.”

“Whatcha got, Etienne?”

I snarl and stop in my tracks. “Seriously, you’d go there?”

“I think it’s amusing that such a big, scary fucking SEAL has such a frou-frou French name.”

“Bite my Louisianian ass.”

“Not hardly, I like women. Specifically, one named Erika.”

“Don’t know how she puts up with you.”

“It’s complicated,” he replies with a deep laugh.

“I bet it is. Now, can we get down to business?”

He huffs and says, “I was enjoying the distraction. I was also enjoying stringing you along when you’re obviously torqued over something.”

That fucker. “Glad you’re enjoying yourself. You probably didn’t have to answer a text, you were probably making some caramel macchiato shit. So, sit your ass down and listen.”

He laughs but gets down to work. I give him the name and address for Mia that I got from the bar.

Mako taps the info into his computer and asks, “Did you already do an initial background?”

“What kind of slacker do you think I am? But it came up empty.”

He whistles and clicks his computer keys more. “Isn’t that interesting? Who is this mysterious Mia?”

The golden question. I stare off at the streetlight for a few seconds. I’ve got a war inside of me. And it’s not the kind I fought in the Teams.

I let out a breath. “I don’t know.”

It is why I care that rocks me more.

Mia Bailey, Monte gave me her last name, looks so much like Nyx that it turns me inside out.

Another phone starts ringing in the background. “Gotta take this,” Mako clips.

“Right on, brother. You know where to find me.”

He pauses for a beat like he wants to say something else. I get it, this is not company protocol—to be working on something that’s outside the case you’re assigned. But it is what it is.

Finally, he says, “I’ll have Marshall call STAT, but it won’t be tonight. Danee would have my ass.”

“Copy that.”

When he hangs up, I shove my phone in my pocket and hang my head.

Nyx is never far from my mind.

Now she’s practically a living breathing thing again. That’s almost more than I can take. But hell if I can stop myself from wanting to be close to someone that reminds me of a time before life went all to hell.

I turn and look up at the sleek ten-story apartment building. The light is on in the kitchen and the second bedroom of our seventh floor apartment.

She’s up there—whoever she is. My gut tightens as I peer across the dark parking lot at the half-lowered blinds of unit 713. A possessive monster stirs inside of me.

I let Nyx down. I won’t let another woman suffer because of the same mistake.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mia

I'm not a television person. Give me a book any day. But considering the apartment is as sterile as a hotel room, I'm kind of screwed in that department. Can't even read on my phone.

I've already taken a bath in the swank tub and changed clothes. So, I'm left to stare out the windows at a twinkling Los Angeles skyline. I do this while munching my way around the apple Beckett brought me. Which, by the way, is perfectly crisp without a single bruise.

When I tire of that, I inspect my orthopedic boot, willing my ankle to be healed. It's not long before I'm back in my head, feeling gloomy over my dilemma.

I used to pray. But I gave up on that. The omnipotent one has never once responded with anything that resembles help. That's all on me.

Army of one.

Sourness slides down my throat and coats my stomach. I let the memories of the way my brothers bullied and abused

me lay like coals in my gut. I need that fire. I'll need it even more when the feds move to take them down and I have to sit on the stand.

An itchiness builds in my joints until I'm propelled into action. I've been here for days now. Time to take a look around the mysteriously clean, decked-out apartment. Quietly.

I can picture Beckett going all SWAT—running down the hallway in a tactical stance with his gun drawn on me. That vision gives me a case of the shudders.

My first stop is the kitchen. Spacious and very clean. It's a magazine photographer's dream. All sleek gray, cream, and black lines with stainless appliances. Leather bar stools one side of the island. A table for eight sits in the corner—the sleek surface of golden wood gleams under an elaborate light that's made to look like deer antlers.

Every appliance is oversized to match the space. I haven't been in a kitchen this big since I left my oldest brother's mansion.

A revolting thought. My stomach clenches as the image of Ruben hits my brain. The devil incarnate. I still can't believe I escaped his house of horrors.

I stop that line of thought. I can't go back to that night. It's too painful. So, I count the pretty things I see in front of me.

Five lights. Twenty sleek cabinet doors. Six bar stools. I count all the details right down to the number of drawers—fourteen. Fourteen freaking kitchen drawers. Wow.

The counting grounds me.

Once my mind is firmly back in the kitchen and not in that hellhole, I zoom out and take in the whole space. It is a pretty space in a cold and very sterile sense of the word. Like a blank canvas. This kitchen could burst to life with the right cook's love.

Would men like Eli and Beckett cook?

Curiosity gets me, so I open the pantry door for a peek. Meticulous also. Rows of ingredients—real ingredients like

someone would use to cook.

I could have a field day in this pantry. But I don't let myself get attached.

This is just a temporary stopping point.

I shuffle along a little more. This time, I look in the cabinet where the plates live. Black. *Everything*. Sleek and very masculine.

I wrap up my walk by checking out the fridge. I hobble to the monster. It's extremely large, very expensive looking, and has a spaceship-worthy control module on the front. Probably worth more than my annual income.

The sad reality is the furnishings in this apartment are worth more than I'll make in ten years at the rate I've been going. I might have been born with a corrupt silver spoon in my mouth, but now I make my living the hard way. Unfortunately, it's barely enough to put a roof over my head.

But it's not the sheer size and over-the-top design of the fridge that's the surprise. That's inside.

I almost tumble head-first into the darn thing from my shock. "What the hell?"

Every single thing I like to eat. *Everything*.

It's been completely stocked with my favorite things. The juice I love—the one I can't really afford—down to the exact kind of baby greens that I buy. And the little mochi balls that ruin my control.

It's almost creepy.

No, not almost. It is creepy. And weirdly endearing.

Surely, it's a coincidence. Maybe they happen to like the same things.

Then I open one of the drawers and totally freeze. The whole drawer is full of my two favorite foods. Fresh goat cheese and Dave's English muffins. Packs and packs. The exact ingredients that I buy for making little mini pizzas.

I'm not sure whether to be pumped or freaking out.

“See something you like in there?”

Ohmygod! I jump and hit my head on the shelf. “Owww!”

A large hand slides into the fridge, covers the crown of my head with a warm palm, and guides me out.

“You’re back,” I wheeze out as my heart tumbles to my toes.

In a sexy rumble, he says, “I am.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eli

It takes every bit of my control not to grab Mia up in a fierce hug. I didn't realize how badly I needed to see her.

Alive. Whole. Up and moving about.

I shove my hands into my pockets and rock back on my heels as I offer, "I was trying to save you from a concussion."

She scrunches up her nose. "Taking care of me is turning into a full-time job for you."

True fact. A crazy one.

My hands slide out of my pockets, itching to reach for her. This time, I cross my arms. After looking her over from toe to head and back, I say, "I'm not sure if I should be ticked that you're up. How are you?"

That gets me a narrowed-eye look and a snarky reply. "Recovering from the scare you just gave me."

When I shift and reach for the fridge door to close it, she jumps. Edgy, wary—on high alert. Her body language screams that she's afraid of me.

That hits me hard. I knew this from the other night at the bar, she's got a traumatic past, yet I fucking charged in here and scared her again.

I can tell she is forcing herself to be still when I reach out and touch her face.

Careful with the volume of my voice, I say, "I'm sorry. It was thoughtless. I won't do it again."

She nods and shifts her arms, trying to cross them, but the sling is in the way. I loosen my self-control and let my hand slide around the back of her neck. Reveling in the feel of her soft skin, I whisper, "Hey, take it easy. You're safe here. It's okay."

Mia raises her gaze to mine. I let go a little more—a dangerous thing—and allow myself to study her. Soaking in her unbelievable natural beauty.

However, I'm acutely aware that her body is vibrating.

"Are you afraid of me?"

Making a show of standing taller, she keeps her eyes locked on mine, "Yes. I am. Call me stupid if you—"

That's not gonna fly. "You're not stupid. Whatever fuck made you believe that you're stupid deserves to be schooled."

Mia shakes her head and reaches for the counter behind her. She leans back against it as she says, "I was stupid to go in that alley."

I rest my other hand on the bar beside her, closing the distance between us even more, like I'm being pulled by a magnet.

The sweet fragrance of apple teases me. I almost duck down to taste it on her lips. Almost. But she's not ready. I say, "I told you before that you are not to talk about yourself like that. Besides, you were tired after a late shift. Probably left that way to avoid me too."

Those pretty greens snap open. "How did you know?"

“I knew I rattled you, and your coworker said you don’t usually go out the back door.”

Her body locks rigid, as if she’s waiting for me to tear into her for her choice.

The muscle in my jaw starts to tick. “I won’t hurt you. Ever. You’re safe here. Including your feelings.”

The pulse in her neck flickers under my fingers. She lets out a small disbelieving laugh. “You can’t promise that.”

“I’m serious, Mia. I’m not going to hurt you. I can tell you’ve had it rough, and all I want to do is take away that fear in your eyes.”

She ducks her head. After staring at our feet, she turns to look toward the tall bank of windows. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I did.”

For so many reasons. Motivations that I can’t even begin to understand.

I slowly reach up and cradle her chin with my fingers. With gentle pressure, I coax her to face me again.

This time, I let myself lean in close. “I want to kiss you so damned bad. I need you to say no if you want me to back off.”

I lean down more, nuzzle my nose in her hair. She softens against me.

“I’ll go slow,” I murmur, “I’m not going to hurt you, Mia.”

A shuddered breath dances over my neck, driving even more heat into my veins.

Then she shocks me by tilting her head back and searching out my mouth with hers.

Yes. Yes, fucking yes.

Damnit.

She tastes like I remembered. Perfect.

The world collapses to just that space—the place where her butter-soft lips tremble against mine. I taste them gently,

using every ounce of restraint, when all I want is to inhale her.

This is about her more than it is about me.

Lie to yourself some more, big guy.

A groan crawls up from my chest, tightens my throat, and spills into her mouth.

She inhales sharply. Soon after, she curls her fingers into the muscles of my forearm. Electric current races up my arm from her touch, across my body, and lands with whip crack intensity in my chest.

Holy fuck.

I pull back, stunned. “You good?” I ask in a husky whisper.

I’m braced for her to say back-the-fuck-off, but she whispers in the voice of an angel, “Kiss me again, Eli.”

I smile against her cheek. Then press my lips there, feeling the peach-soft texture. “That’s what I’m doing.”

A tiny feminine growl is followed by, “You know what I want. Give it to me.”

No, I don’t know what *she* wants. But I know what I want.

“Careful, babe,” I warn. “My control is thin at best right now.”

Her fingers tighten on my arm as she chuckles. “Then snap it.”

No.

That’s a hell-fucking no. I’d do something we’d both regret.

But I do take another taste of my newest addiction.

Carefully at first—delving into the sweet, wet warmth of her sexy mouth.

She opens more and melts into me as I cup her head in my palm and let my other hand snake around to her lower back.

I lean in. Letting her feel the full size of me as I press my body against hers, locking her against the bar.

I linger in the soft heat, the eager slide of her tongue against mine. I also force the kiss to stay slow.

It's sweet fucking torture.

All I want to do is ravage, plunder, feast. Fill up this hollow place inside of me with her.

Fucking hell.

If I don't stop now, something really is gonna snap.

I pull back and squeeze my eyes closed.

Feels like there is a tiny glimmer of light in that pitch black prison cell inside of me.

"Eli," she whispers, snapping me back.

I roll my lids open and lock on those pretty green eyes. "Yeah, beautiful?"

Her blush deepens and her fingers drop from my arm to rise to her lips.

"You steal my breath."

Know the feeling.

I'm not sure I'll ever breathe again. It takes a beat for me to shake off whatever weird shit is going on inside my chest. I force a grin. She holds perfectly still as I brush a few sleek strands of hair back from her cheek, then I let my fingers slide down her shoulder, along her arm.

A warm feeling seeps deeper inside my body as I ask, "You like the clothes?"

Her eyes round. "How could I not?"

I let that seep in too. It feels fucking good to my mangled insides. "That makes me happy," I admit.

Her expression softens more as she studies my face. "You sent the flowers too?"

"It wasn't the flower fairy."

She almost smiles but forces her face to a blank expression. I know it's because she's afraid to let down her

guard too much with me. Instead, she gets plucky. “Smartass.”

That spunk is another facet to the woman that intrigues me—something else for me to like about her. She’s got grit. But she’s tender. Yet, she’s not afraid to give me lip.

Indeed, I like Mia.

Far too much for logic.

An appreciative rumble vibrates through me. “You look really good in red.”

The prettiest blush deepens her color. It stalls my brain. I want to see that a thousand times over. Want to hear that sexy little inhale. Watch the way she worries at her lip. I want it all.

Just like I expected, she nips at her lip, then licks it. The pink tinting her fair skin spreads. “Did you shop for the gifts yourself?”

“I did. It was a pleasure.”

She opens her mouth, but she only makes a rough sound. After taking a moment to gather herself, she says, “The clothes are... exceptional. All of them. I haven’t ever owned something so...so beautiful.”

My reply is instant. “Neither have I.”

She blinks at me and the corners of her eyes finally crinkle with a grin. “I can’t picture you in cashmere. More likely chainmail.”

“I wasn’t talking about the sweater.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mia

I need to run from Eli. Very far away. But his words hook me somewhere soft and won't let go.

I whisper, "I'm not sure how to respond to that."

He chuckles for a scant second.

The sound is so perfect it makes me crave to hear it again.

Not only is he built like Hercules, and he's got a sexy as hell grin, but the man also chuckles in a way that drives a spike in your good intentions.

He lets me hear it again and says, "There's no need to respond, babe. Your eyes said it all."

Oh, this is interesting. "What did they say?"

Those dark brown irises burn, and I know something's coming that's gonna make me regret asking.

"That you've never been *owned* by a man like me."

Uh...

He just said that. Holy mother of come-ons. Eli knows how to take a girl down.

Gone.

My breath.

My sanity.

My grip on reality.

All in one fell swoop.

I make a choking sound and startle myself. The satisfaction on his face turns more raw, hungrier. He draws in a breath, a steady slow one, that sucks every bit of the oxygen out of the room.

“Easy, girl,” he murmurs.

“Tell that to my cardiovascular system. I’m one heartbeat away from an arrest.”

His eyes fall to my lips again. “I’ll save you a million times for another kiss like that.”

As his nostrils flare I wonder vaguely if I might be one of those people you read about on the tabloid websites that spontaneously combust. One minute there and the next...a scorch mark on the \$100,000 tile job in Eli’s kitchen.

A laugh bubbles in my chest.

That dark, mesmerizing gaze jumps from my lips to my eyes again. This time they carry relief. His rumble has an appreciative tone too. “It’s fucking good to hear that.”

“Well, it feels good to laugh. I can’t remember when I did it last.”

He moves closer—either that, or the room just shrank.

But he does not close the gap enough because he’s not touching me. *Tragic.*

There’s a bone-deep craving for his hand. Only, it doesn’t stop at my bones, it goes right down to the soft, creamy place between my legs. I need him to *touch* me again.

Those sexy lips curl up at the edges. Just enough to be devilish.

I'm officially a nut case. I must have gotten a concussion. I'm lusting after a complete stranger that looks like he could break me with his pinky finger. When the last thing I ever do is lust after men.

Men suck. Men hurt. Men break.

"What are you thinking?" he asks.

"Bad things," I admit.

A shudder rolls through me, snapping my spine into a straight column.

He slips a hand around my back and pulls me to his chest.

That's when I know I'm toast. Because as much as I want to resist him, something almost uncontrollable is happening inside of me. Like some force of nature has taken over the reins. All the tiny little cells in my body become acutely aware that Eli is not just monumentally hot, his whole presence screams 'I-fuck-like-a-god.'

My throat gets so dry that if I don't clear it, I'm not going to be able to breathe. I've got tumbleweed stuck in there. Sideways.

As I try to moisten my lips, it hits me. He's affected too. His body is now rigid. His breathing has changed and nearly matches the pace of mine.

I have to squeeze my arm to my side to keep from reaching for him. I want to touch that perfect jaw—feel the scruff of his days-old growth on my skin. I want to hold him to me as I lean back and find the sensitive skin of his neck with my mouth.

But instead, I push him away. As far as he'll let me. Which is not far. Only his hold isn't threatening, it's comforting.

His long lashes slowly lower, closing his now nearly obsidian eyes.

I can't even blink. He's breathtaking with that thin veneer of control on a devil-may-care face.

When he snaps his lids open, I jolt. The pupils burst open and the center of his eyes are a color so dark, I have no name for it.

He rasps, “Fuck, you *are* beautiful.”

Heat tickles its way to my core, to my fingertips, and lands in my nipples. Heaven help me. He doesn’t even have to touch me and he’s got me so primed.

“Yo, Fortier. Didn’t know you were home.”

Spell shattered.

Beckett halts in the doorway and bounces his gaze between us. It would be hard to miss the way his brow furrows.

Eli steps back. Cool air slices between us replacing the pulsing heat.

Without taking his eyes off mine, he says, “Needed to see Mia for myself.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Eli

Fucking, Beckett. That has to be the worst timing in the history of humankind. I want to throat-punch him for the interruption. Not just the interruption, but for the way his gaze hardens when he sees me touching Mia.

“Find anything on the Rush case?” I ask to throw him back into his own garbage.

He stalks across the room, reaches in the fridge, and snatches out a beer. “Dead fucking ends. Pardon my language, Mia.” He glances at her and tips his chin.

“Same,” I grumble and tip my head toward the hallway. “A word with you?”

Beckett hurls the cap from his bottle in the trash. “Sure.”

I follow him down the hallway into the expansive double office. The city skyline gleams in the distance beyond a wall of windows. His laptop is on one desk. Mine is on the other. I close the door but barely stop myself from kicking it shut with my heel. “What the fuck was that look for?”

He takes a drink, looks at his bottle, then slices his eyes in my direction. “You know what.”

Working with Beckett isn't like working with my Team guys. I could read those guys. They could read me. We always knew what's in the other guy's head. It came from years of training and missions together.

I say, “No. I think you need to be clear. You and I don't know each other at all, so you need to be straight up with me because I'll sure as fuck tell you what's on my mind.”

He slams his beer on the desk, drops into the desk chair, and leans back. After a moment of staring at me, he lifts his chin. “You're as intense as a wild boar. Is she ready for that?”

I grunt and cross my arms. “Now that is the kind of communication I can deal with.”

Beckett and I will someday make a great team. But we've got shit to work out first.

“What?” He kicks the second office chair in my direction.

“You telling me what the fuck has you looking like you're ready to hold an intervention.”

I drop into the chair and prop my boot on the desk. If you didn't know how military guys talk to each other, you might think we're brewing a fistfight, but this is how shit gets cleared.

“Wondering if I need to.”

I give him a glare and shake my head. “Man.”

“You sure she's ready for you being all fucking horny on her? She just got—”

I interrupt whatever crap he is about to say. “I know what she got. I was the one that found her hiding on her fire escape with a dislocated shoulder and a jacked-up ankle. So yeah. I fucking know.”

His dark blue eyes are steady on me. “What happened to you before?”

I lift my brows. “Before finding her or before as in high school?”

He flips me off. “No, in the sandbox. What made you like you are right now?”

My body was tense before, now it’s vibrating with anger. “The same shit that happened to you.”

“Nah. Doubt it. I’ve heard about your last mission.”

The air is somehow sucked out of the room.

I bark, “Is now the time to bring that shit up?”

“You tell me. Is it fucking with your head about this woman?”

No. Yes. Maybe.

I lean up and clasp my head in my hands. For a long time, I just breathe. The air is like a thousand knives piercing my lungs. Clawing at what’s left inside my rib cage.

When the words come, I can’t stop the purge of shit that comes out of me. My throat stings, my voice is shredded. “I might have fucked things up with my team in Afghanistan, but I can do this. This is cut and dry. Something tangible I can put my hands around when everything in Afghanistan was just sand slipping between my fingers.”

Shoving out of the chair, I pace the room, only to come right back and drop into the chair again. There’s a fire burning in my belly that threatens to incinerate the whole damned room.

Beckett’s frowning. “You need to work through your shit, man.”

Don’t I fucking know.

He asks, “Are you seeing a counselor?”

“No.”

“You should.”

I huff at him. “Okay, Dr. Phil.”

He sits up in his chair and drops a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Brother. You’re in pain. Talk to me. Talk to someone. But don’t let this burn you down and ruin any chance you have at living.”

I stare at the floor through my fingers.

“I feel like it’s foolish to ask anyone to rely on me again.”

He sighs quietly. “I get it. But you’re wrong. You’re a fucking SEAL. You’ve led your team on hundreds of missions over ten years. Fucked-up things happen in that goddamned place. No matter how much you plan or how much you know.”

“But...” The word rattles out of me.

I can’t even force the rest out.

He grips my shoulder as he asks, “But, what?”

“I don’t know if I can trust my gut anymore.”

Beckett grunts, then asks, “Is that what happened that day?”

I clench my eyes. Mia needs me to be the best I can be and this is not the way to get there.

I grunt and mutter, “Don’t go there now. I can’t today.”

He gives me one more firm squeeze on the shoulder and sits back.

“Your intuition has been right far more than it’s been wrong. Now, get on the phone with your Team guys. Get an appointment with someone that works on this kind of thing. And know that I’m here for you. Whatever you need. Even standing guard outside your girl’s room.”

As I shake my head, I say, “She’s not my girl.”

He chuckles and kicks me in the shin. “Lie to yourself some more.”

I make a loud groan. “What now?”

“Take your time.”

“That’s never worked for me.”

He lifts his beer and casually takes a sip. “Feel ya, man. I’m learning that too.”

“What’s up with you and the Rush case?”

The casual easy-going expression he was just wearing is gone.

“You know how you didn’t want to talk about your demons today? Well, I’m not in the mood either.”

“Fair enough.”

He takes a drink and looks at me thoughtfully. “What did you find out there?”

As I scrub my hand through my hair, I reply, “I know who one of the guys is, but he’s gone ghost, so I’m betting on the fact that the attackers are guys that come and go around that neighborhood. Someone’s going to know exactly where they are. I just need to shake them out.”

He nods, glances out the window and asks, “What are you going to do with her?”

“Keep her here until I find them.”

Leaning forward, he drops his elbows on his knees. Pressing his fingertips together, Beckett gets quiet. After a minute, he asks, “Have you talked to the boss?”

“I’ve got a call in to him, but today’s his anniversary.”

“And the background check on her?”

“Mako’s doing a deep-dive.”

“Did you tell her?”

My frown turns to a scowl. “I’m going to talk to her about that.”

“Before you fuck her or after?”

A growl builds inside my chest. “Too far, brother.”

He stands up, walks to the window, and scans the skyline. “Figure out a plan, Fortier. You know that missions without a

plan are doomed for death, destruction or mayhem. Sometimes all three.”

Don't I know.

Swallowing a bitter taste, I say, “Sometimes it happens anyway.”

He turns to face me with his eyes narrowed. The ghosts behind his expression tell me that I've hit a target. “We all know that.”

Nothing else needs to be said.

I lurch out of the chair. When I've got my hand on the knob, I turn back to him. “Appreciate you looking out for her. I know the original mission got fucked. I hope to have this wrapped in a couple days. But when your personal shit gets mixed up with work, I'll have your back.”

It's coming. I feel it.

Beckett's interest in the Rush case has that kind of electricity to it too.

He closes his eyes, and his bulky shoulders rise and fall on a heavy breath. The sound is loaded with unspoken frustration. With a shake of his head, he grumbles, “I'm gonna hold you to that.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eli

I stop by the head so I can stare at my face in the mirror. I need to have a come-to-fucking-Jesus with myself. To reset. To take a fucking breath and get my logical brain in motion again.

The tap water is ice-cold when I splash it on my skin. But it lacks the shock I'm sporting for.

That would require a dunk in the North Atlantic.

As I hang my head, watching the water drip off, I come to terms with the fact that Becket's right. I'm intense. Always have been and always will be.

The real problem? The energy that Mia injects in my veins is like a fucking steroid.

What the hell *am* I doing?

I lift my face and stare at the veins that are bulging in my neck. I look like a loose cannon.

What *is* the plan?

Am I going to take her?

Probably. Even though I'm not that guy. I don't pick up chicks for sport.

But *this*, without a doubt, is going to end in my bed. Fucking each other's brains out.

I don't know when. But I need it from her like I need water and air. She's saying yes with the way she touches me. Those heated looks.

A very dangerous combination.

Whatever Mia has stirred up in me is coursing through my veins like an army that's rattling their sabers.

I'm just greedy enough to take what I want, too. Because I've seen what she's not saying.

She wants this. I could have had her right there on the kitchen counter.

How fucked up is it that we both want to cover up our shit with sex?

After slamming the faucet off, I dry my face and stride back to the kitchen. Mia's still leaning against the counter, and I'm a total ass for not taking her to the sofa before I went to talk to Beckett.

Her face is a few shades paler than when I left. She jolts when she sees me.

I'm gruff with her. "You're in pain. I can tell. You're an easy read. Do yourself a favor and don't play poker or take up a career in the spy industry."

Her lips form a tight line. "Thanks for the advice there, Mr. SEAL."

Mia doesn't like that I can see her. It takes work, but her expression shutters, a defense mechanism I recognize well.

But as hard as she might try, right now she's an open book, and I'm an eager student.

She fascinates me. Endlessly.

Her scent does dangerous things to my cock. Her presence does even more dangerous things to my brain.

Too bad having her here also drives a knife straight through my gut.

But I will not acknowledge that her looking like Nyx is affecting me.

“I’m going to pick you up. Keep your injured arm across your chest.”

Slowly, her arm rises and folds over her chest, making the soft red V-neck sweater mold against her tits.

I freeze but my dick throbs. *Fuck. Wow.*

Under that sweater is the lingerie I picked for her. This fact I know because I made damn sure she didn’t get any other clothes from her place.

Ignoring the heat pulsing toward my groin, I reach behind her back with one arm, and behind her knees with the other. She’s light and warm in my arms when I lift her.

But she’s rigid. Her voice shoots up an octave. “What are you doing?”

Taking you to bed.

I wish.

“Putting you on a stool.”

“I can kinda walk.”

“You look like you’re one step away from a very painful faceplant. I think you’ve gotten banged up enough for the week.”

She grumbles something under her breath, but sighs when I ease her onto the leather barstool.

A war erupts inside of me.

Let her go. Don’t let her go? Crush my face into her hair. Or shove my head in the freezer.

I drop my arms, shove my hands in my pockets, and lean my hip against the island.

She fiddles with her shoulder brace and nibbles the corner of her lip.

Fucking delicious. That sweet, pensive look does something raw to me.

Keeping my smile to myself, I say, “I wasn’t sure if you’d be down with the cream and red.”

She gives herself a little shake. More confusion shows in her pretty eyes. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you were wearing all black. Besides, that night all the clothes in sight were black too.”

A beat goes by, then her nose scrunches. “You noticed.”

I nod. She doesn’t need to know I went back there later and learned all about her. Her preferences in clothes, in food, in books.

She asks, “Did you grocery-shop too?”

I shrug at her adorable misbelief. “I guess you noticed.”

“Noticed?” Her brows shoot up as her voice goes loud. “How could I not? You bought all the foods I like.”

“I wanted you to be comfortable.”

That seems to baffle her. “Eli.” Her surprised expression turns to a frown. “What in the world is going on here?”

Question of the week.

“I wish I knew,” I answer honestly in a rough tone.

The silence that falls in the kitchen is crackling. I push off and go to the cabinet and grab a mug. “You look like you could use some tea.”

“Are you from Mars?”

“I’m from Louisiana. Figured you’d have guessed that by my accent.”

She’s silent as I heat the water in the microwave. While I’m waiting, I pop open the new box of chamomile tea. The same brand she had at her place. The sound of the tearing wrapper echoes around the expansive, modern kitchen.

“When did you have time to shop?”

“Technically, I gave the list to Beckett. He ordered grocery delivery.”

“Oh,” she says quietly.

When I walk back toward her, she’s watching me with a guarded expression. “I can’t pay you for this... any of this. The food, the...whatever you’re doing out there looking for those men.”

“Didn’t ask you to.” I hang the tea bag in the mug, and slide it to her, along with a spoon. “Honey?”

Mia shakes her head as two little vertical lines form on her brow.

“I don’t even know how I’m going to pay my bills with a bum ankle and a sore shoulder. I just finished cosmetology school. I’m supposed to take my test in two days. My bank account is pretty much bust.”

“I know. I saw your statement.”

She snaps her head back. A long moment of her staring at me ensues. “I feel violated.”

Fuck. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I intended. It was lying on your table.”

In a hard voice, she asks, “What *did* you intend?”

“After handing you to Beckett, I went back there, checked out your place.”

Her body tightens lightning fast. “Why?”

“Reconnaissance. Wanted to see if anyone had been there.” I wasn’t planning on having this conversation with her right now. She’s tired, on pills, and been through a lot. But it is what it is.

I say, “You could have been followed that night.”

Every molecule of color vanishes from her face. “No. I wasn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. I’m very careful.”

I don’t remind her she walked in a sketchy alley in a derelict part of town at midnight. She’s paid enough for that already. And who am I to judge? I’ve gotten myself into more deadly situations that any human should have survived.

But her reaction has me thinking. As I cross my arms, I ask, “Careful about what?”

Mia’s shoulders round and she folds in on herself. I have a feeling if her shoulder wasn’t sore, she’d be hugging her middle right now.

She replies, “Everything.”

“Good. Because in case you haven’t noticed, your apartment is not exactly in a swanky part of town.”

Hurt flashes in her eyes, before she drops an angry stare to the mug of tea. “Well, it’s not this place.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mia

Anger starts to replace the sting and my hackles rise so far they could reach the ceiling. I bite out, “Your point?”

“You shouldn’t go back there.”

With a head shake, I let out a bitter laugh. “Right. And I should just rent the apartment next door to this one. I’m sure it’s a real steal.”

Eli’s gaze narrows, his mouth compresses. “Why *are* you living there?”

I violently clang the spoon around inside my mug. “Because I have to, isn’t that obvious?”

“You could get a roommate and live somewhere decent.”

I grit my teeth and flick my eyes to his face. “I don’t want to live with anyone. I spent my life—”

My words drop. I swallow, straighten my spine, and say, “I’d rather be sleeping under the freeway than live at the mercy of someone else.”

Wow. Okay. I said that out loud.

The muscles in his crossed arms flex. After a very tense silence, he asks, “What about a boyfriend?”

Didn’t I just say I wasn’t going to live with anyone else? Dropping my spoon on the granite countertop, I ask in a flat voice, “Did you find any signs of a boyfriend in my apartment?”

As soon as I ask, I regret it. This conversation has gone from confusing to stinging, to alarming and infuriating.

Eli has NO reason to know everything about me. No one does.

“Nope,” he clips. His head tilts, and he asks another humdinger. “Why are you single?”

I scoff and stare at him with my mouth compressed. But I really just want to climb into my mug and disappear. “Is this really important?”

He stalks around the counter and twists my stool so I’m facing him.

It’s a good thing the stool is tall or I’d break my neck looking up high enough to his face—this guy’s built like a mountain.

“To me, it is.” His words are more growl than syllables.

His hand slowly rises and the back of his knuckle brush like a whisper-soft kiss over the bruise on my cheek. “I’m going to find those fuckers and make them wish they’d never gotten out of bed.”

My insides turn from angry-hot to just plain hot. Everything we talked about moments ago rushes back.

Me: “I haven’t ever owned something so...so beautiful.”

Him: “Neither have I.”

Me: “I can’t picture you in cashmere. More like chainmail.”

Him: “I wasn’t talking about the sweater.”

Me: "I'm not sure how to respond to that."

Him: "There's no need to respond, babe. Your eyes said it all."

Me: "What did they say?"

Him: "That you've never been owned by a man like me."

Oh my god. Eli wants something...big.

We breathe at each other for a few beats. His jaw tightens, then something else replaces the anger in his eyes. Determination.

I'm not sure what he looks more determined about. Owning me. Or avenging me. That reality hits me hard in a place where I never feel anything—the gaping hole in my chest.

I almost tip off the stool, but I can't stop the whoosh of air that falls out of my open lips.

I want.

Him.

His body.

To be avenged.

For a man to look at me the way he does. Like I'm precious. Worthy.

Slowly, he devours me with his gaze, and the possessive, protective vibe he's putting off tells me why I'm useless against the fight.

The need to feel safe is primal. Hardwired into us. And right now, my poor brain thinks this man is the ticket to that nirvana.

That heated, calloused finger of his continues to stroke my cheek in slow, soft circles, falling down the side of my throat, then lower until his hand is wrapped around the base of my neck. His thumb rests on my thundering pulse, and it takes me back to the moment he first touched me. In the bar, when he tried to shield me from the man with the knife.

A shiver runs through me.

Yep. I am alive. Very, much alive.

I'm so hungry for what this man promises that I'm nearly delirious.

Christ, I've lost my mind.

I've done some stupid things, but this is the *crème-de-la-crème*. I can't afford to lose my head over whatever weird chemistry this is between us. Only I can't drag myself away.

Mack trucks—a whole fleet of them—couldn't drag me away.

With his gaze on his hand as he touches me, he murmurs, "I couldn't stop thinking about you while I was hunting."

I blurt out the wrong thing. "I was worried about you."

Something flickers across his face. The tick returns to his square jaw. The softness of the moment shifts to something more raw.

He draws a sharp breath. "You don't need to worry about me. I'm hard to kill."

That hits me in the chest. Again, sending a shockwave through the space that I swore was empty.

I whisper, "Don't say that, something bad could happen."

Immediately, I wish I'd made a joke instead. I suck at being vulnerable. I said I'd never be open again. No one will ever get to that part of me again.

But Eli shifts gears and takes the pressure off by grinning, all full of male bravado. "Something bad did happen, to the other guy."

That's when I realize there's a fresh bandage on his arm, peeking out from beneath the tight cotton of his black T-shirt. I didn't see it before because his sleeve was tugged down enough to cover it.

But now it's like a glaring billboard. One that's complete with blood oozing into the big white rectangle.

I blink. And blink some more. My toes start to tingle. Something whooshes inside of me. Then the room starts to spin.

But two big, strong arms catch me as I fall.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eli

I'm leaning over Mia, kneeling with one knee on the bed, when her eyes blink open.

“Don't like the sight of—”

She shakes her head rapidly in tiny little side-to-side movements.

“Don't say it.” Squinting, she turns away. “Is it covered up now?”

The bandage. “I'll put on long sleeves.”

A relieved breath hisses out of her. Then she lifts her head. “Where am I?”

“My bed.”

“Oh, god,” she laughs softly and moans.

I'm already in the closet and have a folded long-sleeve black T-shirt in my hand. When I glance over my shoulder, she looks stricken. I spin on my heel and stride to the bed as my heart starts pounding. “Are you feeling okay?”

Her eyes dance as a grin tips her pretty mouth up. “I’ve never fainted my way into a man’s bed.”

“There’s a first time for everything. It’s a first for me too, but I’ll admit, I felt very heroic carrying you in here.”

“You’re already heroic, Eli. You sealed that in granite the other night.”

Well, hell.

She murmurs, “Didn’t know girls like me get knights in shining armor.”

“Shit. I’m no knight. But I’m not letting a woman suffer at the hands of monsters. Ever.”

I jerk off my T-shirt and start to pull on the long sleeve shirt when she whips her head in the other direction.

“Blood!” she gasps.

After I pull on the shirt, I say, “The coast is clear.”

Her eyes slide back to her hands. “When I see someone’s blood, I just get weird.”

“You’re not alone. A lot of people are like that. You’re also still working through what happened. You need to rest. Your body’s been through serious trauma.”

She looks at my now covered arm and asks, “How did you get hurt?”

“If I tell you it was a knife fight are you going to faint again?”

She meeps. “Maybe.”

“Okay. I won’t tell you, then. What can I get you?”

“Warm blankets. A good book. A new life.”

“Check. Check. I’m doing what I can.”

The look in her eyes is so vulnerable that I freeze up and have to scrub my hand over my jaw to shake myself out of the weird haze in my head. “Let me help you under the blankets.”

Her teeth go to her lip. Then she says, “You could take me to my room.”

“Nope. I like you right where you are.”

She lifts her legs, I tug the blankets up and over her, arranging her so she’s tucked in but her boot isn’t bound by the blanket.

I walk out of the room before I climb on that damned bed with her. My control is thread-fucking-bare.

From the hallway, I shout back toward my room. “What kind of book?”

She shouts her reply. “I thought you searched my apartment.”

I chuckle. “Do you want a vibrator too while I’m out?”

She shrieks and a pillow flies out the door.

I lean against the wall, far enough away that I can’t see her. “I mean, romance gets women hot, right?”

“Eli,” she warns in a growl. Then silence.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” I call back.

She growls.

I burst into laughter. Another pillow flies out of the door, followed by a series of yips. “Ow! Ow! God, why did I do that?”

I scoop up the pillows and return to the door. Her hair’s tousled, her face is bright with color, and I’m speechless.

She watches as I walk to the bed. My bed. At least the bed I’ve been using while we’ve been in L.A. for work.

In a soft tone, she asks, “How long will you be out?”

I shove my hands into my back pockets to keep from touching her again. “Not long. Try to relax.”

“Are you going to sleep tonight?”

Probably not. But she doesn’t need to know. I lean down until I’m right in her line of sight. “Don’t do anything to put

yourself in danger while I'm gone.”

“Like I can really do much in this state?” she challenges.

“I have a feeling trouble finds you. Just like it does me.”

I tuck a strand of silky chocolate-brown hair behind her ear.

Her pupils dilate as she watches me.

I lean forward. Inhaling her intoxicating scent, I can admit that I have zero control. “I can't stop myself from kissing you right now.”

Her mouth softens and the corners twitch. “Thank god.”

When I brush my mouth across hers, she shudders.

I plant a hand beside her on the bed and lean over until our foreheads are touching. “Your eyes are my ruin.”

Brush my lips along her brow, I whisper, “Your lips are going to be my demise.”

She shivers against me.

“But I swear, that sweet scent of yours is going to be my ultimate undoing.”

She makes a throaty sound and lifts her fingers to my face. “I want you to kiss me again, Eli.”

“Fuck, babe.” I inhale her and crush my mouth against perfect rose-pink lips.

Oh. Hell. Yes. Her mouth is soft, hot, and so damned perfect that my arousal nearly cracks my body open.

A tiny purr builds in her throat as she opens for me, and I groan my matched need into her mouth.

Our breaths heat. Coming faster and faster. Her tongue glides along mine and I get high off her honey-sweet flavor.

God, I cannot get enough.

Unable to resist, I climb on the bed, straddle her, and cup her face in my hands. She arches into me. Together, we take the kiss from hot to a dangerous place—the edge of no return.

Mia arches again, pressing her chest against mine and purrs, “Yes,” into my mouth.

I knew she’d be responsive. I drop one hand and skim along her ribs, letting my thumb graze the lower swell of her breast. A whimper replaces her purr. When I glide my thumb over her nipple, her legs press together.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Feel that heat. We’re going to burn this building down.”

Her head falls back, “I know. I’m dying.”

I’m one single breath away from taking us to that place. But I lean back. She’s so damned beautiful lying beneath me.

“Not tonight.”

Her head flies off the bed. “Eli, you can’t do that to me and say not tonight!”

“You’re not ready, sweetheart.”

Her pretty lips pull back in a snarl. I laugh at her cute expression and lean down to press my lips to hers again. “It’s too soon. You’re still healing.”

“I’m going to hurt you, Eli. Do you hear me? Next time I throw a pillow, I’m going to do some serious damage.”

I lean next to her ear, letting my mouth graze her neck. “It will be worth the wait, I promise.”

Her small hand fists my hair. “If you make me wait six weeks, I might hire someone to tie you up for me.”

I grin against her cheek. “Oh, that should be interesting. But gotta tell you, baby, the thought of you getting on top and riding me until you get your fill is almost more than I can take.”

Her eyes flash. “You mean, me talking about climbing up on you and sliding that monster cock of yours in my tight, wet pussy, and grinding my g-spot until I explode... You mean, talking like that?”

I nip her ear. “Bad girl, very bad girl.”

Her voice turns to a mutter. “You have no idea.”

When I pull back, she blinks up at me. With a grin, she says, “I really like reverse cowgirl. And did I mention that I like spankings?”

“Woman!” I kiss her before she can say anything else.

When we tear apart, she hotly whispers, “Is it working?”

“Nope.”

When I hop off the bed, she tosses her head to the side so she’s facing away from me. “Oh my god. I’m going to die waiting.”

I chuckle as I tag my jacket off the chair. “I’ll help you into something comfortable for sleeping when I get back. If you’re a good girl, maybe I’ll take the edge off, seeing how you can’t masturbate properly right now.”

A pillow flies by me as I go out the door, followed by another growled, “Ouch!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mia

Holy smokes. I might die. Really. For real. I'm so aroused that it's making my brain short circuit and my heart palpitate. My panties are a knot of burning, wet Lycra. My legs are shaking like I've been running. And my freaking shoulder hurts too bad to take care of things.

That damned devil. I'm going to...

I'm going to torture him.

If I had a phone, I'd sext the hell out of him. I'd write the longest, dirtiest texts I could think of. His phone would blow up. The battery would give up the ghost. I'd short out the wireless network.

But as my jets cool, another MAJOR problem takes over. This one is enough to send me into a two-hour long panic attack. Eli's going to see me unclothed. Or partially unclothed. There's no way to avoid it.

It would be stupid to tell him I want the lights off when he helps me get changed. He'd know something was wrong. Eli's too smart and too observant.

All of my aroused mood slides out of me and lands on the floor with a very inelegant splat. I lay on my back and stare at the ceiling. I want to have sex with Eli. In the dark.

Hot, wild, animalistic, cathartic sex. That's how it would be between us. I can just feel it vibrating in the air.

And that kiss. *Katy, bar the door.*

Eli worked me up so fast you'd think I had a switch. Zero to desperate in two point five seconds flat.

I want to see his glorious body naked. Lick him. Bite him. Explore his corded muscles. God, *I do.*

But I don't let *anyone* see my body.

I drag a pillow over my face and scream into it, "FUDGESICLES!"

This sucks.

I can't believe I'm even thinking about sex right now anyway. But, girl.... How can I not?

Eli's going to do me in. Seriously. I'm going to go up in flames or burn out from anxiety. Maybe both.

There's a rap on the door. "Need anything?"

I jerk the pillow away and lift my head so I can peer at Beckett. "Who is Eli?"

He leans his shoulder against the door frame. A pensive look crosses his face. "He's a former SEAL."

That wasn't what I wanted. "He mentioned that. Have you known him long?"

"A couple weeks."

I chew on that for a second. "But you're living together..."

"That's for Eli to discuss."

Okay. Beckett is not going to let go of one single fact. So, I change tactics. "Is he a good man?"

"He wouldn't be taking care of you if he wasn't."

Oh, how wrong he is. “That’s not always true,” I mutter as I fight to keep my body relaxed.

He shifts, “You mean, someone took care of you and manipulated you?”

Where did that come from? I lift my head again so I can see him. He knows he’s hit his target. My voice is wispy. “Something like that.”

“You and Eli have a lot to talk about.”

With a long sigh, I let my eyes drift closed. In any other circumstance, we *would* have a lot to talk about. But these are not normal circumstances. They never will be.

I’ll never be normal. I was born with a curse. I’ll carry it to my grave.

I ask one more burning question. “Who did he think I was?”

He glances at the floor. “Eli really needs to tell you.”

“Beckett, you’re really annoying.”

He grows even more serious. “In my line of work, loose lips don’t just sink ships, they cause people to die.”

After that bomb, he turns and walks away.

But his words hit me square between the eyes. The air rushes out of me as I turn ice-cold. That’s exactly the reminder I needed. I need to get away from Eli before something bad happens.

“Beckett!” I shout.

A few seconds later, he appears at the door. “At your service.”

“Call Eli, please. Tell him I need something from my apartment.”

He pulls out his cell phone and makes the connection. “Mia wants to ask you to bring something from her apartment.”

After tapping the speaker phone icon, he holds the phone in my direction.

“Hey.” Why does my voice sound all smokey?

Eli asks, “What do you need, babe?”

Babe. Gah. I get instantly hot again.

“More clothes...”

“Right. I should have thought of that.”

“And there’s a small cookbook in the kitchen. It’s near the coffee-pot. Can you bring that, please?”

He gets all growly. “You’re not even thinking about cooking. No fucking way.”

Crap. Why didn’t I think of that? I scramble for something, anything that would make sense. After a beat, I decide to go for honest. “I’ve got some phone numbers tucked in the front. Since my phone will have to be replaced, I’m going to need to reprogram them. I also need to check in with a friend and don’t have the number memorized.”

He murmurs, “Well, in that case.”

“Don’t worry, caveman, I’m not going to go all Betty Crocker on you. Although I do make some mean homemade biscuits.”

Eli chuckles and the sound is so delicious my toes curl. “Do you wear just an apron?”

My eyes burst wide and Beckett chuckles.

I draw out the word, “Maybe.”

Eli is quiet for a beat. Then he clears his throat. “Okay... so, what else do you want? I’m getting books, clothes, and the cookbook. Did you want that other thing I mentioned?”

My face gets hot so fast that it makes me cringe. That devil. I’m so making him pay for that remark. “You know, maybe that’s a good idea. Check my nightstand. It’s right next to the magnum condoms.”

God, I wish I could see his face.

He grunts, “Mia!”

I shoo Beckett away. “All done. Thanks.”

Beckett’s roaring in laughter when he walks out of the room. He says to Eli, “Dude, she fucking pulled your string like a pro.”

Great. I am a pro. At digging myself into messes that I can’t get out of.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Eli

I'm grinning when I climb the last flight of fire escape stairs to the tiny, crap apartment. I lift the window and climb inside again.

Only this time, when I step inside, I come face-to-face with the barrel of a gun.

Well, fuck.

A tall, lumberjack-looking bastard in a brown and black plaid shirt growls, "Who are you?"

I narrow my eyes and yell, "Who the fuck are you?"

He motions toward me with the muzzle of his gun. "I'm the one with the gun."

I roundhouse kick his arm, knocking the pistol out of his grip. "You were."

He shakes his arm and squares up with me. He's got a longer reach than me, so I make sure to stay out of range.

First, he swings a left at me. Then tries to kick me.

He's had some training. But I'd bet my last dollar that I've had more.

That's all we did in the Teams. When we weren't on missions, we were training.

I move toward the right, aiming to hem him into the wall, but he throws a punch and skims my shoulder. I dance back.

He growls, which makes me laugh. "Oh, scary," I mock.

I love this shit. Love to fucking throw down.

Veins pop out on his temples like angry snakes. "What are you laughing about?"

"About how good it's going to feel to shove that pistol up your nose."

That got him. His nostrils flare, his face burns an even darker shade of red. "I'm gonna school you, shrimp."

Haha. Shrimp. "That's a good one."

I'm nobody's fucking shrimp. Not since I hit puberty, then hit the gym to prove how fucking mean and big I could get after a lifetime of being bullied.

Lumberjack punches. I lunge. I take a jab and connect with his ribs. A breath wooshes out of him.

"Son of a bitch," he hisses.

I throw another punch. He ducks and makes an aggressive lunge at me. This time, his fist connects with my nose.

Blood splatters across the floor.

"You're gonna pay to have that cleaned up."

He snarls, drops low, and circles again. This is getting old. Time to...get the show. On. The road.

I land a hard kick on this thigh. He wails. "*Fuck. Fuck you!*"

We dance around the small ass living room for a few seconds, before he leaps. I turn his force and use it against him. The coffee table splinters as I take him to the ground.

“You’re buying a new table too,” I grit out as we roll around.

Fucker’s gonna find out that my grappling game is wired.

For a minute, we’re all grunts, growls, and hands grabbing each other. He’s got another thing coming if he thinks he’s going to get the best of me.

I spin him over, lock him in a sleeper hold and proceed to choke him out.

The door smacks the wall with a thunderous clap that is unmistakable even over all the noise we’re making.

“Police! Everyone, Freeze!”

Well, fuck. I didn’t have that in mind.

I slowly release the man and raise my hands.

Groaning, the lumberjack rolls away.

“Both of you, on your knees, hands on the back of your heads. *Now!*”

A female officer steps into the room, looks around, then picks up the pistol in a gloved hand. “Got a weapon.”

Then a sixty-ish woman in a blue robe appears in the doorway. Her glasses are crooked. Her hair is a rat’s nest on top of her head, and her finger’s pointing right at me. In a nasally voice, she says, “That’s the one, the guy with the dark hair. He was going up the fire escape.”

Goddamnit.

I let out a sigh. I should have known that a building like this would be full of eyes. I say, “It’s not what you think. My girlfriend had her purse stolen in a mugging. She doesn’t have a key. She’s injured, so I’m picking up some things for her.”

This makes the first cop’s face turn livid red. He’s ready to crack some heads. “Enough! Who had the gun?”

With a tip of my head toward the other man, I confirm it wasn’t me. “That guy.”

We're both in handcuffs a moment later. I'm dragged to my feet and pushed toward the couch. "Sit your ass down. Don't move."

He grumbles something about clusterfucks and goes to the other guy who is now seated on a small ass wooden chair. "Do you have a permit for that weapon?"

Through gritted teeth, the man mutters, "I do. I'm totally legal."

The female cop asks him, "What were you doing in the apartment?"

"Checking in on my girlfriend. I haven't heard from her in a few days. I've got a key to the door on my ring."

The cop looks between the two of us. "Well, gentlemen. Seems you boys have something to be fighting about after all."

Chapter Thirty

Eli

My head snaps around and I glare at the bastard. “If you’re her fucking boyfriend, where were you when she was attacked in an alley?”

He seethes back at me, but there’s a crack in his façade. A tic under his eye. He didn’t know Mia was attacked.

That unleashes a whole string of questions that I keep to myself.

Why would she keep that from a boyfriend, if he’s really a boyfriend?

I asked about this, she said no, even if she never uttered the word.

But she also never mentioned anyone. Didn’t try to get in touch in any way. Until she asked for the contacts in her cookbook. If someone was important to her enough, she would remember their number. *Wouldn’t she?*

After twenty minutes, the lead cop comes back into the room from the small kitchen. He’s been on his phone, but his

voice was too low to hear his conversation.

He's still red-faced. "You obviously have a key, not that having a key means shit. But since I can't reach Ms. Bailey. I've either got to book you both or take both of your words for truth. Since the department is about ten cops short today, I can't have them overloaded by a couple of guys who got into a fight over who is actually the woman's boyfriend."

After shaking his head, he looks at his partner who's now standing across the room with her hands on her duty belt. He says, "Right now neither of them has committed a crime, so we have to let them go."

A grin tries to break out on my face, but I force it flat. No need for premature celebration.

The woman walks around the living room. She toes a piece of the broken table with her cop shoes, and huffs. "She's gonna be pissed. I say we make them clean up, then kick them both out."

"Fine by me," grumbles the other guy. "Just keep that weapon until they leave in separate directions."

You don't know what awkward is until you spend a half hour picking up stacks of romance books, scrubbing blood, gathering up splintered wood from a broken coffee table, with two cops standing over you like school teachers watching you take a test.

The female cop slides up to me as I rinse out the mop that I used to get my blood off the floor. "Get what she needs—clothes or whatever—before we go."

Damn. I didn't expect that. I wasn't looking forward to breaking the news to Mia that I hadn't gotten the things she asked for. "Thanks. Appreciate that. A lot. I'm sure that will make her happy."

Voice low, she says, "I heard you've been working the streets to find out who attacked her."

"I have."

She frowns as she looks at the floor. “She won’t report it, huh?”

“Nope. What does that tell you?”

“She’s scared. She might know who they are and feel safer keeping her mouth shut. Or she’s been through enough to just choose silence.”

I tip my chin as I squeeze the water out of the mop, wishing it is the red-headed bastard’s neck. “I’m inclined to agree. But I’ll make sure whoever it was pays for what they’ve done.”

She lowers her voice even though the vacuum is now running in the other room. “We all need more heroes like you.”

Then she turns on her heel and walks back toward the other room.

“Hey,” I call.

She stops and looks at me through her practiced cop expression. I crook a finger, calling her back. After a quick glance to make sure no one’s watching, she comes closer.

“Do you believe the other guy is really her boyfriend?”

She gives a tight shake of her head. “Just because he’s got a key doesn’t mean anything. Something feels off. But his record is clean. The gun is registered to his name.”

“Which is?”

She studies my face for a beat as some kind of dark emotion takes over her eyes. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

Our gazes hold for a long time. Then I go back to work and rinse the sink.

But she doesn’t move.

This stinks like spoiled crawfish. And they stink to high heaven. Something eating at me, and I briefly wonder if she feels the same way.

I'm already working on another plan. I'll come back later and take prints off the vacuum. Agile will be able to run them and figure out who the asshole is.

That's not something I'm gonna share with the man and woman in blue.

The vacuum dies, the other cop shouts, "You guys done in there?"

"Just about," the woman replies.

I expect her to say something, but she finally steps away with a creased brow and pinched lips.

Ten minutes later, we're escorted outside. The female cop follows me to the Navigator. "Fortier, I know you're planning on coming back here. I would too." She pinches the bridge of her nose. "Shit, I can't believe I'm doing this. I found a spare key to the apartment when I was... looking around."

She slides it into my hand, careful that no one sees. After clearing her throat, she says, "If you stop by the 18th precinct tonight and ask for Ramirez, I'll make sure he's got a copy of today's report. The boyfriend's background included. The name Michael Williams might be mentioned somewhere, by the way. But you didn't hear that from me."

With that, she walks away.

Shit, what does she know that warranted that major break in protocol?

Chapter Thirty-One

Mia

It's been just a little over three hours by the time Eli returns. The front door opens. Footfalls echo through the apartment. Then grow closer.

A little thrill races through me. Like I've run my hand over the fire, and now I get to see what the flame really feels like.

But my heart skids to a stop. "What happened to your face?"

Eli is livid. He walks through the bedroom door, opens the closet, gathers some clothing and strides into the bathroom without a word.

The angles of his jaw are savage. The air around him is as flammable as gasoline vapor.

I'm frozen, sitting in the bed as the water turns on. It's not long before he comes back with his wet, disheveled hair. His face is unreadable. He's wearing a clean, tight-fitting black T-shirt and blue jeans.

The sheet knots around my fingers cutting off the circulation. “What happened?”

“Your boyfriend pointed a gun in my face. Which, as you can imagine, turned into a fight. Which ended with the cops coming.”

I gasp. What the hell is he talking about? He can't be calling one of my attackers my boyfriend. Surely, he wouldn't. My mouth refuses to work other than a series of disbelieving gasps.

He stalks out of the room before I can ask anything else.

“Eli!”

Nothing.

I slide out of the bed and limp to the door. When I step into the hallway, he's nowhere to be seen. The whole apartment is eerily quiet. Why didn't Beckett come when I yelled?

I find Eli in the kitchen. He's got a beer in one hand and the other is fisted in his hair. The kitchen has a static charge. A lightning storm waiting to unleash.

My hands curl into fists at my sides. “Talk to me. Please.”

He drinks and just looks at me.

The tension gets so thick that I want to scream.

Finally, he bites out, “I don't like surprises, Mia. And there's been nothing but surprises since I walked into Richter Scale.”

He turns and walks to the other end of the kitchen, putting a mile of granite between us. Can't blame him. I'd do the same if I were him.

He's right. Only Eli's not the only one that's been shocked to hell and back.

“I'm sorry. I don't know what's happening. I feel terrible that you've gone out of your way to help me and gotten hurt.”

His face looks like hell. Dark bruising is blooming below his left eye. It's hard to tell from this distance, but it almost

looks like his nose is broken.

Guilt weighs my shoulders down. I don't even know what's happening, but I feel responsible for him. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened while you're gone. It wrecks me to think you got hurt because of me. But I don't have a boyfriend. I told you that before. I don't date. I haven't in years."

He turns up the beer, takes a deep drink, then slowly places the bottle on the counter. When he's done, he licks across his lip. He's holding back. Measuring his words. "Well, you do now. The name Michael Williams ring a bell?"

I shake my head violently. "Never heard the name."

Eli spreads his fingers wide on the counter and leans on his hands. "Well, he knows you. The cop tried to give you a call to confirm... but of course, your phone is in the wind."

The enormity of what's happening right now makes my head hurt.

"Why would someone say they're my boyfriend?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

I drop my face into my hands and press my fingers into my twisted eyebrows. "You said they wanted to call me but couldn't because my phone is gone. But you could have had them call Beckett."

No reply.

When I raise my head, Eli's expression has taken on a cunning darkness. For the first time, I see another side to this man. This dangerous side has never been aimed at me before. I hope it stays that way.

He says, "The cops don't know that."

My mind spirals as I rub my aching temples.

Think. Think. You've got to figure this out.

"Do you think this is all connected?"

He's quick to say, "I do."

“Wait, you said this guy says he’s my boyfriend...did you hunt this guy down and confront him?”

“Nope,” he clips. “This was by chance. Or maybe not. He seemed as surprised as me.”

With Eli looking at me like he’s reading my mind, I finally work up the nerve to ask, “Where did you fight this...,” I stutter, “B-boyfriend?”

His scowl deepens, and his hands turn to gigantic fists on the bar. “He was inside your apartment. I got in through the fire escape and got a gun in the face.”

What!?! My toes start to tingle. My world begins to collapse. A breath-stealing reality rolls over me. I’m left emotionally wrecked in the wake. My apartment is compromised. The life I’ve created is officially over.

My stomach fists. My vision wavers. Everything is falling apart around me. I sound ancient when I ask. “How did he get in?”

“He had a key.”

I’m breathless and something inside me feels like sand that’s slipping through an hourglass. My time is up. I knew it was too good to be true.

Eli steps around the counter and walks right into my personal space.

“The bigger question, Mia, is, what are you hiding from me that almost got me shot in the face?”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Eli

The space between us vibrates with dangerous energy. Mia's hands cover her mouth. Her fingers are shaking. When she lets them fall to her side, she lets out a rough breath. "I'm not hiding a boyfriend."

The words hang in the air like cloying smoke.

I'm knotted with angst inside. My gut is locked up tight. My chest hurts and my temples are throbbing. What a fucking clusterfuck.

Gruff, I say, "I want to believe you."

She flinches and sways. "But of course, you don't."

"I don't know what I believe right now."

A stoney expression falls over her face and she shutters her emotions tightly behind the façade. "Based on your expression, I don't think anything I say or do will change your opinion. So, I'll go."

"Go?" I snap as I stalk around the kitchen island until we're face to face.

“Take me home. I’ll manage.”

My teeth grind together. I count to ten, half a number at a time.

But I still sound like a maniac. “If you think I’m letting you go home after all of this, then you don’t see what I am.”

Her eyes narrow on me for a long beat. “What are you?”

The room vibrates with our clashing energy.

I brace my hands on either side of her, caging her in. “I will never let a woman be in danger if I have the power to do something about it. Ever. Period. No fucking way.”

Her façade falters for a fraction of a second. Behind it is the rawest pain a human can have.

When she speaks, it’s a somber whisper. “Stop, Eli. You don’t have to protect me. I’ve managed my whole life. Somehow, I’ve survived.”

“Who are you?” I demand.

She blinks and looks away. “Just a woman that’s been to hell and back. That’s all. All I want is peace.”

“You’re walking into trouble if you go back to your place.”

Her shoulders sag as she leans back. “Then I’ll go somewhere else.”

“On the seven hundred and fifty dollars in your bank account? You’ll be out of money in less than a week.”

She raises her eyes to mine, and this time, the hurt isn’t hidden. “Ouch. That stung.”

“It’s the fucking truth, *Mia!*”

“Don’t I know,” she whispers, and turns her back to me. “Don’t I know.”

Her hands rise to her face. She groans.

“I’ve been doing everything I can to get ahead. This was my chance. I am so close to getting my state permit for hair stylist. But everything changed. But you wouldn’t get that, Mr. Rich Guy. Not everyone has a luxury apartment, a new truck,

and a trust fund or whatever you've got, because as far as I know, retiring from the SEALs doesn't pay like this."

Goddamn. I'm a fucking bastard.

I dip my head and bury my nose in her hair. She stiffens but doesn't push me back. "I'm sorry. I was totally out of line."

For a long time, we just breathe.

Who is this monster inside of me? No one deserves to be treated like that.

When her fingers tangle in my T-shirt, I finally let go of a hard exhale.

"I'm sorry. It's clear you're going through hell right now. I didn't mean to make it worse. I was so fucking angry about that asshole that I took it out on you."

Her body tightens. "I know it upset you and rightly so."

I whisper, "Babe, I won't stop. You don't know the reasons, but you need to understand—I will not stop until you're safe."

Mia leans into me, presses her face against my chest. I cradle her against me, feeling her trembling, a sensation that slices my blackened soul.

I fucking hurt her too.

I brace her against me, wrapping my hand around her head.

"You don't have to like me. You don't have to let me touch you. But I'm going to make you safe. Whether that's me putting you in a safe house, or keeping you by my side, it doesn't affect the outcome. I'm finding out who attacked you and bringing them to justice. I'm finding out why a man was in your home and says he's your boyfriend, when you say that you don't have one. I've got the power to do all of that. You just have to accept that this is happening."

Her soft sobs destroy the last of my heart.

"I'm sorry," I murmur. "So fucking sorry."

“Eli...” she whispers as I lower my chin to the top of her head.

“Let me take care of you.”

In a tearful voice, she says, “I want to, Eli. But the best thing for both of us is for me to leave and for you to... go back to your life.”

“Not a fucking chance.” I tighten my arms around her. “I’m not backing down.”

After a long time, she softens into me. “You make me feel safe,” she whispers.

My throat closes. Heat stings my eyes. Those words...

I don’t deserve them. But I’m holding onto them with iron fists.

I rasp, “Let’s get you off your feet.”

Beckett’s standing in the door of the office watching as I stride down the hallway with her in my arms. He holds up the truck keys indicating he’s leaving. I tip my chin and close us inside my dark room.

I take us down onto the bed, folding Mia into me, wrapping her up spoon style.

I can’t speak. Hell, I wouldn’t even know what to say if I could until her shaking gets worse.

“Are you cold? You’re trembling.”

“I’m in pain.”

God, why didn’t I think of that? “Where are your pills?”

She grabs my wrist. “Eli, it’s not that. My heart hurts.”

Fuck. I am part of the reason.

“Baby,” I say roughly and pull her tighter against me. “Rest. I’ve got you. You’re safe. I told you that I had you. I meant that.”

“But you don’t trust me. I understand. It just hurts. Everything hurts, the pain is so deep inside my heart, I can’t believe it’s even still beating.”

I stroke my hand down her side, feeling her warm body in the darkness. She fits perfectly in my hold.

“When you’re ready, you’ll tell me everything.”

She sighs softly into the darkness—relaxes more into me.

My control breaks and I lean over her. She meets me. The kiss is so achingly soft at first that I wonder if I’ll survive.

“Please...more, I need more,” Mia whispers against my lips.

I roll her beneath me, careful of her ankle and shoulder as I cradle her face in my hands. The energy around us is bristling with desperation. I’m not sure who needs this more.

The kiss gets deep and wet. So hot that it borders on rough.

“More...” she growls against me as she arches her body up, rubbing against mine.

I’m firing on all ten cylinders now. My engine is revved and ready to deliver. “Tell me what you want, baby.”

“Take me away. Make me forget.”

I take her mouth again, deeper, spearing her with my tongue. She purrs and her nails score my arm. Holy fuck her mouth is so soft and wet.

This is going to be a dangerous addiction.

I pull back. “We can’t take this back. You’re sure you want this?”

“You, Eli. I want you. I want you to chase away my demons.”

I growl and tighten my hands on her. “Babe, I need to fuck you so bad.”

Mia turns her face in the darkness and finds my palm with her mouth. She presses a kiss there. “Eli, when I said I wanted you, I knew what I was getting. I want you. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. Take me easy or take me hard. I don’t care what you do, but I need this. Now.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mia

He slides down my body, pressing kisses to my neck, rolling my nipples under his thumb, teasing me through my shirt and bra.

I shudder with every brush of his fingers. God. I love his hands. They're so big. hot, and strong.

When he stops, he frames my pelvis, digs his fingers into my hips. "I love your size. Just perfect for me."

I've never felt more alive with want in my life. As I rub my thighs together, he laughs.

I beg, "Please let me spread my legs."

"As soon as I get these off of you." He slips down the bed, and I lay vibrating as he takes off my orthopedic boot—so not sexy—then he slides his hands up my legs, taking the hem of my skirt with him. When his fingers hook in my panties, I let out a moaning breath.

"You're so fucking primed. I can smell your sweet scent already."

I'm nearly out of my head.

"Oh god, Eli. I'm going to come from all your dirty talk."

"Good, then you'll be even wetter when I taste you for the first time."

I grip the comforter and pant as he shimmies the tiny bit of silk fabric down over my ankles. He's so tender, so careful with my leg, that tears sting my throat.

Eli removes my sling and helps me out of my sweater and skirt.

Each time he stops to kiss me. Then he puts the boot and sling back on. I'm naked except for the orthopedic fashion accessories.

The man must have built-in night vision. As if he's reading my face, he says, "Don't even think about asking me to take them off."

The bed dips when he shifts, and I jump when his mouth brushes my collarbone. Oh. Yes. *Yes*.

He attacks my neck with scorching open-mouthed kisses.

"Fuck, honey, you're shaking. I love knowing I do that to you."

His fingers trace down my stomach, finding the perfect path right to my center.

A wave of pleasure swamps me and steals my breath as he glides his thumb along my aching flesh. I'm frozen for a few beats before I can inhale. "Oh, yes. Right there."

He circles my clit so slowly. It's agonizingly beautiful. *Lord*. Yes. I almost start singing.

I fumble for him and get a handful of shirt. "I want to touch you."

He shifts again. The bed quakes. Clothing rustles, and his warm masculine scent invades my senses.

The bed dips again and he finds my hand. "That's better."

I murmur my agreement. "Definitely."

Gently, he places my fingers on his bare abs. “Touch all you like, babe.”

This is like a braille porno. I smile into the dark. “Oh, Eli. Your body is...incredible.”

He groans as I stroke the ridges and contours of his stomach. When I let my fingers trail lower, he goes stock still. I continue my exploration and wish that I could see his face as I listen to his ragged breathing.

“I know you’re big. I saw your erection in your jeans.”

I reach lower and wrap my fingers around him for the first time. Whew. I was right. He’s long and thick. My imagination was pale in comparison to the real thing. I whisper, “But I had *no* idea.”

His warm, sexy laugh rumbles between us. “I’ll be easy.”

“Please don’t,” I reply quickly.

His cock jumps and heat races through me, making my legs tremble.

His voice drops to a growly tone. “Do you like it rough?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know. But when I read about rough sex in romance novels, I get hot.”

He laughs again. Huskier this time. “You’ll have to tell me what you read.”

I lick my very dry lips. “Or you could just show me what you know.”

“Fuck, yes.” He slides his hand into my hair and says, “I’ll take you any way you want. It will be my pleasure.”

I circle his head with my fingertips, and as I imagine him penetrating me, my core clenches. His cock pulses in my hand.

I’m startled when his lips crash into mine, and he kisses me hotly until the dark room is filled with stars. This time when the bed shifts, he’s between my legs, pressing my thighs wider with his shoulders. His hand presses flat on my stomach, nearly spanning me from side to side.

My heart stutters. Oh *no*.

My body locks up—becomes a rigid plank as I realize what a huge mistake I've made.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“I...”

I should never have let things get this far.

He rumbles, “It’s okay. We can go slow or stop.”

He’s going to know.

I whimper when he presses a kiss to my inner thigh, and before I can do anything, he swipes his hand across my stomach in a move that I know he means to use to soothe me. But it does the exact opposite.

I have to force myself not to leap off the bed. With a shaky hand, I push his hand off my stomach.

Only, it’s too late. He knows. I can feel it in the energy bristling from him.

His sharp inhale is my confirmation. “Babe—” The width of his shoulders disappears from between my legs. Cold air rushes in to replace his heat.

I clamp my thighs together and curse myself. I was such an idiot. This is a huge mistake. What got into me? How could I even think about having sex with him?

I’m not ready for him to know the dirty truth.

The bed shakes as he climbs around and lies down next to me. Before I realize what he’s doing, he rolls me onto my good side and pulls me into his arms again—nestling his chest against my back.

His breath stirs my hair. The tip of his nose nuzzles my ear. But the real trouble comes when he whispers, “Tell me about the scars.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Eli

The darkness turns to boiling hot water as I wait for Mia to answer. We've just jumped into the kettle with all four of our feet.

Please let her say the tangle of scars on her stomach is from an accident. *Please.*

With my throat tight, I hold her. But without her saying a word, my radar says something terrible happened. All the puzzle pieces lock into place.

This—whatever this is—is the reason she's so damned afraid.

Finally, she speaks in a hushed tone. "I don't want to talk about it."

I hold her tighter. "I want to know everything about you."

She huffs and tries to pull away. "Eli, drop it."

When I slide my arm around her and span her bare stomach with my hand, she freezes. The scar under my

fingertips is long. It's thin, hard, and has puckered knots every few inches. The scar under my thumb is round and dense.

“If you think these make you any less beautiful, you're wrong.”

So damned wrong.

They only make her stronger. More beautiful.

But before I can tell her, she growls, “You don't have to like them, but don't lie to me about that. It's the worst kind of slight a man could make.”

I reach behind me and flip on the light on the nightstand. With a click, the room is washed in a pale yellow light.

“Damn you,” Mia mutters a curse at me, but I don't let her go when she tries to curl into herself.

Instead, I hold her tighter. “Roll over and look at me.”

She pushes at my arm. There are tears in her voice. “Please turn the light off.”

“If you want me to close my eyes, I will, but I want you to see something.”

“What?” she asks in a tentative voice.

I kiss her shoulder, release her, and slide from the bed. “Promise I'll keep my eyes closed for now. But I need you to look at my body.”

I do as I promise and close my eyes as I stand beside the bed. Squaring my shoulders, putting my body on full display for her. For the first time ever, I want someone to see the damage on my body. All the lines and holes that mark my torso and thighs.

Mia inhales sharply. “Eli, what are all those from?”

“War.”

I don't offer any gory details. None are needed. War summarizes everything—the atrocities, the heartbreak, the loss of more than words can ever explain.

Her breathing grows loud. But she doesn't move for a long time. "So many wounds. How many times were you hurt?"

"I stopped keeping track."

The bedding rustles and cool fingertips press against one jagged, raised scar on the left side of my chest. Her breath whispers over me. "This had to hurt."

Yep. Like a fucking bitch.

"It still does."

But not for the reasons she thinks.

Her hand falls away and the heavy silence returns to the room. I stand perfectly still and let her look at me as she processes her own ghosts, and I deal with mine.

Hoping I know her answer, I ask, "Do you want me any less because of them?"

"No," she returns immediately. "They show your strength."

And my failure.

"I'm opening my eyes now."

She meets my gaze and doesn't pull away when I slide my hand into the thick mass of her dark hair. She's hurting so bad. Mia's pain crushes me, but her beauty is what truly breaks me.

I tip her face up and the soft light is like early morning sunshine on her skin.

"The only thing that upsets me about your scars is that you had to endure whatever horrible thing caused them."

Her lips part on a shaky breath.

My throat gets tighter, making my words husky. "You're beautiful just as you are. Let me see you and do everything I can to take the pain away."

I can't stop myself from brushing my thumb across her bottom lip.

"Eli..." Her body sways into my hold.

I drop to my knees in front of her and I take her lips with mine in a kiss that lays it all out there. Leaves no question about how much I want her. Or how fucking far over my head I am.

Her fingers twist in my hair and her breath speeds.

I rasp, “Let me see you.”

She tenses when I tilt her back, but then eases down onto the bed. Making sure I’m careful of her ankle, I catch her knee and hook her leg over my arm.

As I look down at her, heat spears through me. Courses up through my chest and throbs at my temples. I want to roar. I want to break things. I’m furious at whoever did this to her.

But that’s for later.

She deserves more than that.

I go slow, tracing my gaze over her, inch by inch. I use my free hand to skim up her other leg and across the angry scar that runs from her hip to her inner thigh. Fury starts to well in dark places inside of me.

The cut is thin and brutally close to her pussy—any woman would be self-conscious. Another deep stab wound is just above her pubic bone in the soft hollow of flesh there. Right over her womb.

A knife made these marks.

They have all the hallmarks of a violent sexual crime.

That sickens and awakens a primal animal inside of me. I want blood for her sake.

There are more cuts on her inner thighs, but these are haphazard. Some are thick. Some are thin and shallow. Marring her skin from mid thighs up to the juncture of her core.

Holding her breath, she watches me.

I murmur, “It’s okay. Just breathe.”

The words are as much for myself as for her.

Breathe.

Fuck *me*. It hurts. There's a fist inside my chest. There's a war drum inside my head.

But I force my lungs to move and my hands to go slow.

Her body trembles in my hold as I trace one finger over each scar, wishing I could turn back time and take away whatever happened.

She swallows roughly. Her eyes are misty and wide with fear and sorrow. "They're hideous."

"No. They're part of you. They will never be hideous. Your beauty is too deep for something like this to define you or ruin you."

Her chin trembles. "You say things like that and steal my breath."

Holding her gaze, I say, "You just plain steal my breath."

Truth.

Her eyes soften. The tenderness in that look rocks me.

I crawl up her body and drop a kiss on her forehead. "The decision is yours. Do you want me to turn off the light and hold you till you go to sleep or...do you want to keep going?"

My heart pumps double-time as I wait for her reply.

Tentatively, she asks, "Can we turn off the light and keep going?"

That's a *no*.

I'm greedy, but more importantly, she needs to feel how beautiful I think she is. I cradle her face in my palm. "I'd rather see your eyes when I'm inside of you."

Her lips curl in and she blinks. Followed by more blinks that push tears out onto her thick eyelashes. When she speaks, it's in a rough whisper. "You just refuse to let me hide, don't you?"

Now she gets it.

"I told you, I don't stop until my job is done."

“I’m your job?” she asks.

I trace my finger along her collarbone, up the silky skin on the side of her neck, and along her jaw. I lean in and press my mouth to her ear. *“Now you understand.”*

When I lift up, a little grin is tugging at the corner of her mouth. My heart palpitates. That fist in my chest loosens just enough to feel the heat there.

I ask, *“Now, where was I?”*

She slides her fingers into my hair, tightens her hold, and pushes me toward her legs. *“Down there.”*

Chapter Thirty-Five

Mia

Never in my lifetime did I think a man would look at me like Eli Fortier does—as if he doesn't see the scars as dirty.

That I'm not ruined.

When his lips hit my lower belly, he touches a place that always felt revolting to me, but his mouth draws something else out of that place—a deep need to be seen. Accepted. Touched.

My head falls back as he kisses lower. Tracing his tongue over the angry raised marks, down, until he's nipping my inner thigh. And tracing his tongue over the scars there.

When I tighten my hold on his hair, he murmurs, "Good girl."

Those words drive my desire higher.

His mouth moves again. Closer to my clit. My hips start to shift, but he pins me with his large hand and laughs. Hotly, he says, "You're not in charge here."

I make a pout and grumble. When I look down, his eyes are smiling as he kisses the other thigh.

In that moment, I decide that Eli needs to smile more. The big, tough SEAL doesn't have enough joy in his life, and I want to do something about that.

"Maybe this once," I tease.

"Every time," he clips.

The scrub of whiskers on tender skin is delicious. Goosebumps and heat chase the places where he touches me. I clamp my teeth on my lip when Eli teases a thick finger through my folds.

I whimper at the yummy tease.

"We need to get you nice and wet again," he whispers hotly.

I will not object.

Slowly, he works his finger inside of me. The sensation is so good that I moan. Delicious torture.

Then his mouth—*FINALLY*—lowers to my clit.

Oh, my god.

Eli licks a slow circle before he applies pressure with the broad part of his tongue. I breathe, "Yes, Eli."

He growls his approval and draws the tender tissue into the suction of his mouth. My eyes slam shut, my body goes electric.

Sounds come out of my throat that I have no control over.

The heat of his mouth scorches me, driving me mad. He laps at me until I'm writhing, then drags his tongue down and around the finger he's got buried inside me. And God, I love looking down at him between my legs.

Totally hot.

I can't hold my begging for another second. "Please don't stop. Yes. Oh. Ah..."

But damn him, he stops, smiles up at me again, his dark eyes sparking with hunger. I want to scream, then he wipes his hand over his mouth, licks across his lips, and really drives me crazy.

“Your pussy is so sweet, babe. Perfection!” He thrusts his face down and devours me.

Fire leaps on my veins. Eli shifts and presses a second finger into me, taking me to a new high.

There’s no room in my mind for anything but his mouth, his fingers, and the insane pleasure he’s delivering.

I can’t hold back the loud moan in my throat.

I add my second hand to his hair, then wince when my shoulder twinges. He freezes. “Don’t hurt yourself, sweetness.”

I lift my head and stare at him like he’s lost his mind. “Do you really think I’m in control of my body when you’re doing that to me?”

“I’ll stop if it’s going to make you—”

I groan and flop back down on the pillow. “You stop, I’m going to chase you and have my way with your banging body, whether you want me to or not.”

His laugh vibrates deliciously against my skin.

He proceeds to work his magic, and when he reaches his hand up to catch my nipple, I shiver with pleasure. Oh yeah. I growl and breathe, “Getting *close*.”

Boy, was that the right thing to say. Eli goes for it. His fingers hit *that* spot, his tongue lashes my clit. My body starts to do things it’s never done before.

Shivers. Shakes. Rolling against his mouth.

“Fuck, sweetheart. That’s it, chase it,” his husky words urge against my pussy.

It’s coming.

Racing toward me like a tornado.

Oh. God. Yes.

“Now—” I rasp as my thighs lock tight around his shoulders. Deep core muscles spasm. Coming. Coming. *Coming apart.*

I buck against his hold as white-hot pleasure tears through me.

I deliriously wonder if that’s me screaming?

Oh, good God.

That’s embarrassing.

When I stop gasping, I whisper, “Please tell me Beckett is out of the house.”

“Long gone.”

“Me too. Only, in a very different way. Hold me down on the bed. I might float away. I might not ever be the same again. That was incredible.”

Eli adjusts my leg, carefully letting it down across his thigh, and climbs up my body. I almost drool when he rises up above me on his knees with his cock bobbing between us.

The expression he’s wearing—hungry—makes my heart go wild. His eyes spark in the low light and steal my air. My body aches for him to fill me.

A feral grin makes my already pounding pulse palpate.

In a husky timbre, he says, “There’s more fun to be had.”

I track his hand as he reaches for something on the nightstand. A silver condom wrapper flickers in the light.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I didn’t even think to ask.”

“I’ve got you, babe.”

Yes. Eli does. He’s got me. The word *‘always’* whispers through my mind.

But I brush it away. I refuse to look past this moment.

Watching my face, he works the condom on. His fingers are glistening with my juices—that makes my core pulse as I

enjoy the view.

He's so freaking hot. Eli's cock is heavy, wide, and long. A tangle of veins covers the shaft. Everything about him is perfectly proportioned to his big body.

"Damn, woman, you watch me like that much longer and I might blow my cork before it's time for champagne."

I let out a throaty chuckle. Much to my delighted surprise, the head pulses and grows even more when he settles the condom's ring around the base.

"Now that would be a real shame because I've never seen a more beautiful sight."

He catches my rapt attention when he says, "We're going easy tonight."

"Oh drats," I tease. "If you insist. But seriously if what you just did was easy, I'm on board."

The corners of his eyes crinkle attractively. "She's a talkative one." His grin spreads and drives a tiny spike into the center of my heart. Yep.

Eli's a heartbreaker.

This is gonna hurt.

Not my body.

But my worries and my vocabulary disappear as he advances. When he presses the insanely thick head of his cock against me, nothing else in the world exists but that place. Him and me coming together. I loop my good leg around his hip.

Ohhhhhh. Yes.

His breath catches as he pushes forward. "Mia...so good."

Slowly, he slides in.

So deep.

"God. I knew it. Fucking perfect," he hotly whispers.

When Eli begins to move, he kisses me. Slowly, matching the pace of his strokes.

It's too good.

My heart can't take it.

Tears bead in my lashes, I try not to think, but it's impossible. I want this.

All of this.

Him.

Me.

Us.

The heat of a tear drags down my cheek and falls into my hair.

I want this. *God. Heaven. Angels. Whatever, please hear me.*

Eli makes me feel safe. More than I've ever felt. I want to stay in this bubble forever.

When his hand slides below my head and he lifts my face against his neck, my world shatters.

This. Is it.

I'll never recover when it ends.

I bite my lips so hard that the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth.

Can he feel the disaster ahead?

He builds us up in a slow, long-stroke rhythm that robs me of air, and makes my body flush with heat. I can't even describe the pleasure. It's so deep. So all consuming, that I get lost.

And when I come, he follows, jolting with a roaring thunderous contraction. Growling roughly in my ear, "Ah, god, yes, babe."

I let myself drift away in his arms and pretend that this is my life. Just for one night.

Because nothing as good as this will ever happen for me.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Eli

I come awake in a flash. Shit. Where am I?

For the span of a few seconds, claustrophobia grips me. The dark air is heavy, almost suffocating. As my pulse speeds, waves of adrenaline push through my body.

The need to move is urgent. Cooler air hits my skin as I kick a leg out to the side.

Then a soft whisper of hair against my chest brings me back.

I swallow and suck in a few lungfuls of air. It's okay. There's no threat. Nothing to fight.

Mia's tucked against my side. Warm and peaceful.

I brush aside the strands of hair, letting my fingers slide through the heavy weight, as I lay listening to my heart pounding in my ears.

But a feeling of unease lingers. What woke me?

Click. Click.

My mind locks on as my system revs for battle. Someone is on the patio outside the bedroom.

This side of the apartment has a long concrete span of patio that stretches across the space of the two bedrooms that face West.

I slip from the bed, snag my briefs, and my Glock off the nightstand.

The scrape of footfalls confirms what I expected to see. I step back from the door, grab my phone and ring Beckett. I whisper, "We got trouble on the balcony."

I nudge Mia. "Wake up, Mia. I need for you to go get in the closet inside the bathroom. Lock the door when you go in."

She bolts up into a sitting position. I press my finger to her lips. She nods against me.

"It's okay," I whisper. "We've got it. Don't open the door until I come get you."

I tug her toward the edge of the bed, then gently push her toward the bathroom. When the door lock clicks, my heart slows to a much more normal pace.

Beckett eases into my room, he's got on a pair of NVGs and passes me a set.

Once I've got mine on, he gives me a ready sign. We move to the balcony door for a look. There's a slender man wearing black clothing and a climbing harness, crawling along the patio. A rope is still attached, which means he's planning on a quick getaway.

When I glance at Beckett, he shrugs.

I very carefully unlock the latch, and right as the man crawls into the space in front of me, I yank the door open. "Move a muscle and you'll go home with a few extra holes."

"Shit." He freezes on his hands and knees.

I snatch his arm and pin him to the floor using my knee, but somehow, he slithers out from under me. He scampers across the deck on his belly like a lizard.

By the time we grab him, the man's halfway over the railing.

I grab his ankle and jerk him backward. "Oh no, you don't!"

I think I've got him subdued until his other foot lands a kick against my head, knocking the night vision goggles sideways.

Beckett gets two hands on him, but the skinny bastard shucks out of his shirt and lands a punch in my partner's gut.

What the fuck is going on?

I unhook the anchor that he must have shot over the balcony railing and hold it up. "Move again, and I'm shoving you over the rail. Rope and all."

That gets the fucker's attention. His eyes skate to the ground far below us. He grimaces in defeat.

"Right? Long way down. Now. Let's try this again."

Beckett wrenches the man's arm behind his back and slams him to the patio flooring face down.

"Okay, okay, I'm not moving," the man grumbles.

I take over securing him and Beckett raises his fingers to his own eyes, then motions that he's going to have a look around. I nod my agreement.

Once I've got the man bound, both feet and hands, I drag him to the open doorway. The man hisses in pain. "Fuck, my arm."

"Shut it. Your arm is the least of your problems. You should just be glad you didn't get caught on my grandmother's porch. She'd have fed you to an alligator without even blinking."

I drag him through the bedroom and down the hallway to the laundry room. His bare skin squeaks and catches on the tile floor causing more cursing.

Once we hit the laundry room, I kick the door closed behind us.

I toss my NVGs aside and flip on the blinding overhead light.

Fuck. Dude is young.

Chest pumping, lips snarled, he's seething with anger.

He's also a Marine. A big, and well-done USMC tattoo stretches across his chest.

I cross my arms and glare down at him. "My partner's Force Recon."

He flinches and looks down.

"What the fuck are you doing on my balcony?"

Dragging long inhales through his nose, the young jarhead considers his options.

"You know you're not leaving until I have answers."

His dark eyes flick to me. We stay like this for a long time.

Finally, I say, "I've got all night and day. But I bet you're supposed to be somewhere come sunrise. Either on base or going to work."

He mutters, "Fuck you."

I lean against the wall and chuckle. "I'm not opposed to getting my answers the hard way."

The muscles in his jaw flick, but he goes back to staring at the floor.

Beside me, the knob on the door turns and Beckett steps into the room. The first words out of his mouth are, "Shit, a Marine?"

"Yep."

"No SEAL remarks," Beckett growls. He leans over, rests his hands on his knees and asks the guy, "What unit?"

After a short staring match, the perp mutters something under his breath. Since it's Marine crap, I don't know what it is.

Beckett stands up and plants his hands on his hips. Cutting me a look, he asks, “Why don’t you leave us alone for a minute?”

I’d rather not. I want blood. I want answers. And I want this fucking bullshit to be over.

But Mia needs me more than I need to stand here when Beckett is more than capable of dealing with the punk.

“I’ll be back.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Mia

I can't count the times I've hidden in closets. It has to be in the thousands.

With my back against the wall, my bare butt on the floor, I sit shivering. It's not the cold floor. It's the desolate reality of my life that has my body wracked with shakes.

Fear is my old friend.

The most toxic drug.

Fear for me. But now I feel it for Eli and Beckett.

I press my face into my knees and wish. *Please let them be safe.*

I can't stand thinking something is happening to these men because of me and my jacked-up life.

I tighten my arms more around my knees.

I'm living in a dreamland if I think that I'll ever be free.

It was supposed to be safer after all the things I'd done. But the facts add up to prove just how foolish I've been.

I tried to be safe.

But I got caught in the alley.

Then someone was in my apartment.

Now this.

I might have been able to lie to myself about one thing, but this is too much.

The only option is to run. But Eli's right. I don't have the money. The thousand he gave me would have helped, but it was in my purse that night of the attack. That money's long gone.

Tears prick at the back of my throat. My shoulder aches.

Not only am I broke, I'm broken. Inside and out.

Yeah. I'm so screwed. I don't even know where to start.

"Mia?" A voice calls through the bathroom door.

I stiffen in the dark silence.

Then the voice says, "Unlock the door, babe. It's clear."

"Eli?"

"Need a code word, babe?"

I crack the door of the closet and stare at the locked door that leads to the bedroom. The bathroom is only lit by a dim night light. "Yes, please."

"Red cashmere sweater."

I roll over to my knees and crawl to the door. When I open it, I say, "I recognized your voice. I just wanted to see what you'd say."

Eli drops onto his knees in front of me and gathers me into his arms. "Hello, beautiful."

"You're so casual, as if you didn't just catch an intruder."

He kisses my neck and inhales against my hair. "Just a day in the life of a SEAL."

A day in the life? Yikes. I tense all over from my scalp to my toenails. That's not what I expected him to say.

“What's happening?”

“Beckett's currently interrogating the man.”

“Are the police coming?” *Please say no, please say no.*

“Depends.”

I pull back so I can see Eli's face. “What is the alternative?”

He grins wickedly. “Sweetheart, if the sight of my bandage made you faint, then you probably don't want to hear about the hundreds of alternatives.”

I meep and press my face into his chest. “You're right.”

My distaste for violence is never-ending.

His warm chuckle against my temple almost makes me forget about how terrible this whole situation is.

But sadness sweeps in and wraps around my heart. This isn't forever. This thing with Eli is temporary. I need to do what's best for Eli.

That means one thing—the end of us.

Against my hair, Eli murmurs, “Let's get you dressed. I need to go check on things.”

Things. That's an interesting way to put the fact that there's a man that tried to break into the apartment somewhere being interrogated.

Eli scoops me up, helps me into one of his T-shirts—much too large—and a pair of his running shorts. Also too large, but he folds the band over and kisses me swiftly. “You're so damned adorable.”

He slips on a pair of jeans and tucks a very large pistol into the back of his waistband. My gaze locks on his abs. Holy smokes. How are abs like that even possible?

Eli is a sight to behold.

Heat comes tumbling back into my body.

It's a reminder of how complicated things are with him. Not only do I crave him, but he sees me and doesn't even flinch at my scars.

He's tender with me but won't let me hide.

I never knew how liberating that would be.

Walking away is going to be hard. For so many reasons.

I grumble at him when he picks me up.

"I'm carrying you, so you can just bite your tongue."

"How about yours?"

He chuckles, "Later, I'll take you up on that."

As we turn into the kitchen, Eli freezes, turning into a statue that's soon vibrating with anger.

Beckett holds up his coffee cup, "Everyone, meet Blake."

A man I've never seen before raises his head and looks at us with color riding his cheeks.

Eli takes a step back and carefully lowers me to my feet, then tugs me close to his side. "What's going on?"

Beckett says, "We're having coffee. Would you like some?"

The rise and fall of Eli's shoulders is abrupt. "I don't know. Tell me if we're going to sit around and have a chat over coffee."

"That's exactly what we're doing." Beckett places his mug on the counter and picks up the pot from the coffee maker. "I made a big batch."

Eli gives his head a little shake. "Should I make breakfast? I think I need food for whatever we're going to talk about."

The young guy's eyes widen with pleasure. "Man, that would be amazing. I'm starving."

Lowering his head next to my ear, Eli says, "I don't know what's going on, but do you want to help make biscuits?"

I babble something, but end with, "Sure."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mia

Things continue to get weirder. I'm officially in the twilight zone. There's a guy that tried to break into the apartment sitting at the bar having coffee. Beckett looks totally undisturbed other than his hair being roughened from sleep. He's almost cheerful.

Eli's oddly at ease as he guides me to a stool and proceeds to pull the ingredients out for breakfast.

Me? I'm freaking out on the inside and feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin. How is everyone so calm about a man breaking into the apartment?

I can't take the silence. "Forgive me, but I just have to ask. How did we go from guns and burglars to having breakfast and conversation?"

Beckett fills a mug for me and passes it across the counter. "Blake wasn't breaking in."

Say what? Sure sounded like that's what was happening.

"What do we need, sweetheart?"

I blink at Eli. Huh?

He says, “Biscuits.”

“Oh, we’ll need flour, baking powder, salt, butter, and buttermilk.”

Eli opens the fridge and tags a package of butter and a gallon of milk that I pray they haven’t been drinking out of.

He says, “No buttermilk, but it won’t make much difference.” One by one, he finds and delivers the supplies I need. Soon, the counter in front of me is covered with baking supplies and tools.

I’m still scratching my head—figuratively. “How do you know that about biscuits?”

He offers a shrug. “I grew up with a grandmother that made all the kids learn to cook.”

I say, “Oh. That makes sense. But can someone answer my other question?”

Blake looks over at me and makes a face. “I’m just as confused as you are.”

I start to laugh. Then Blake does. Then Beckett does. Eli’s mouth twitches.

After a moment, my laughter dies. “I’m going to start freaking out if someone doesn’t tell me what’s going on.”

“I work for a private investigator,” Blake says.

Beckett tips his chin at the guy. “Tell them the rest.”

Something like embarrassment starts to color Blake’s angular cheeks. “I’m not proud of this. I’m transitioning to civilian life after the Marines. Money’s an issue. I took the job because it paid well and I have the rope skills to get onto your balcony.”

After a quick grimace, he adds, “It looks bad, but I wasn’t going to do anything to hurt you.”

Eli freezes with an egg held over the edge of the skillet and says matter-of-factly, “So, you weren’t breaking in.”

“Nope. I was planting cameras on the windows.”

Eli’s left brow goes up and he cracks the egg with a little too much force.

“For what?” I prod.

Blake looks between Eli and me. “Someone hired the P.I. that I work for because he said that his wife is cheating on him. He wants proof for a divorce.”

I groan and close my eyes for a long beat. “Let me guess. *Me?*”

Blake reaches into his back pocket and pulls a crumpled photo. He smooths it flat and slides it across the island. “You tell me.”

My stomach clenches. A wave of nausea rolls over me and completely down to my toes. I’ve never felt so violated. I don’t know how famous people stand having paparazzi swarming their every move. It’s horrible.

I shrink back, pulling the mixing bowl into my lap, as if it can protect me from the ugly truth lying in front of me.

The photo was taken through a telephoto lens. It’s a little grainy because it was taken at night, but it’s obviously me.

I clear my achingly dry throat. “Where was this taken?”

Blake lifts the photo and studies it. “I was tailing you as you were following some guys on Hancock Street. You were ducking in and out of alleys and doorways. Took a while to get that image.”

I flinch. *Oh god.* No. He did not just say that.

I try to deflect the attention to Blake’s declaration. I rush out, “That’s me. Yep. I was taking a walk. I like walking at night.”

Blake chuckles darkly and rubs a hand over his hair. “Strange place to be taking a walk, if you ask me.”

I jerk my eyes to Eli. His back is to me, his hand is on the fridge door, and his shoulders are as rigid as two gigantic boulders.

I knew the other shoe was going to fall. Well, it just did. I've been outed. Eli's too smart to miss a remark like that.

How am I going to explain?

But that's not what makes me drop the bowl, causing a thunderous explosion of breaking glass to echo across the kitchen.

It's the tattoo on Eli's shoulder.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Eli

Shards of glass rocket past my feet. *What the hell?*

I'm instantly in motion, rushing to Mia's side. There's flour everywhere. Big shards of ceramic are scattered all over the kitchen floor. "Fuck, babe, are you okay?"

Mia blinks up at me as if she's just waking up. "Um... yeah. I just...it slipped. I'm so clumsy with this sling on. I'm so sorry."

"Somebody, get a broom."

Both Blake and Beckett jump into motion. Blake wipes shards of glass off of the counters. Beckett comes around the island with a broom that he retrieved from the laundry room. His gaze slides over Mia as his brows draw into a hard slash. "You sure you're okay? Looking a little pale there."

I couldn't agree more.

"I'm just rattled," she replies in a thready voice.

Mia looks more than rattled. More like outed. If we didn't have an audience, I'd be all over Blake's remark. But that shit

is going to have to wait until we're alone.

I walk behind her and wrap my arms around her, pressing my cheek against hers. "It's okay. Nothing is going to happen to you here."

Her body's stiff, and her heart is pounding. Any second, she would fly off the stool and run if she could run.

I ask, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"It's just upsetting to know someone was watching me."

I lean down to her ear. "I know. It upsets me too. But this is a good development. We can get to the bottom of who hired him. Blake's going to help us."

Blake slumps on his barstool and his relaxed expression turns into a resigned scowl. "I figured this was coming."

I clean up the mess, and the entire time, I'm fixated on Blake's remark about Mia following someone.

Who would she be following? But more importantly, why the fuck would she be out at night, ducking into alleys and doorways to eavesdrop?

Mia and I will be having a conversation about that when we're alone.

I file those thoughts somewhere in my tight gut and get another bowl. I ask Blake, "So, how much does your boss tell you about the clients?"

"I don't know who the clients are if that's what you're asking."

"How about we make a deal?"

The young Marine's head cocks to the side. "I expected that from you. I mean, no one catches someone climbing over their balcony and then feeds them breakfast."

I go back to cracking eggs. "That's on Beckett. He sees something redeemable in you. Me? I'm still not sure yet, but I know you're not stupid enough to do anything else here today."

“Yeah?” Blake asks, but I can tell in his eyes, he’s fully aware that Beckett and I can take him again.

I hold up the whisk. “You know I’ve got mad kitchen skills.”

For a beat, everyone stares at me. Then the slow chuckles begin. Beckett first, Mia next, then Blake. Finally, everyone takes a breath.

It’s the best I’ve felt since I was ripped out of the bed when chucklehead climbed over the balcony.

Blake’s laughing as he scrubs his hand over his chin. “I see that. And, man, I’m sorry for kicking you in the head earlier.”

I throw him a scowl.

Mia instantly reacts. After her quick intake of breath, her gaze darts between Blake and me, “He kicked you in the head?”

I stare at her as that hits home. She cares.

That feels damned good.

I let myself look at her pretty face as I let the heat of that sink into my chest. With a small smile, I say, “Just a graze, sweetheart. And I can’t blame him. He was fighting for his life.”

She shudders and dips her chin. “I’m glad I didn’t see. I do not have a stomach for violence.”

That’s one of the things I dig about her. Shielding her from it is a priority. I don’t want her to have to see anything violent ever again.

Blake huffs and motions his coffee cup at me, “He does. Your man threatened to throw me and my rope over the balcony.”

Mia’s intake of air is a gasp this time. Shit.

I warn, “*Blake...*”

The young guy’s eyes glint with humor. “Sorry, what?”

I shake my head and cast a look at Beckett. “Fucking Marines. All y’all.”

Now I’m going to be stuck working with both of them.

Beckett’s wearing a shit-eating grin. “You know you love us.”

As I toss an onion on the cutting board, I mutter, “God, I’m surrounded. Beckett, get your ass to mixing those biscuits because Mia isn’t going to do anything that might compromise her shoulder, even if she thinks she’s fine.”

The man throws me a look but gets up and washes his hands.

I say, “Back to the conversation. Let’s get down to business. You need money?”

Blake blinks at me like I have two heads. “Would I be scaling your building if I didn’t?”

“Then you’ll be happy to make a few extra grand to help me.”

That snaps Blake upright. “A few extra grand? I like the way that sounds, but I’m not agreeing until I know what you’re talking about.”

I say, “How does five thousand feel?”

Blake shakes his head and wraps his hands around his coffee mug. A smirk slides onto his face. “Feels too good to be true.”

“I want to know who hired your company.”

“I told you that I don’t know. And if I don’t agree?”

I shrug and wave the knife toward the guy. “I don’t know. What would you do if you were in my shoes?”

Beckett stops kneading the biscuits and looks over at me.

The room goes electric.

Blake blows out a breath. “I just can’t fuck up my life. You know. My father needs me to stay on the right side of a prison cell. But you are right. I’d go all in until I got the answers I

wanted. Obviously, she means a lot to you since you've got her face tattooed on your shoulder.”

Chapter Forty

Mia

I keep my shit together until we're done eating. But barely.

The guys talk about a plan. I can't follow. I'm inside my head.

It's a terrible place to be. A hamster's wheel fueled by crack.

What am I going to do?

The food turns to cement in my gut. My body goes numb. I'm dying inside. This has to end. I just don't know how to stop the nightmare.

Blake says, "I'll report back tonight. Thanks again for... not tossing me over the balcony."

Eli tips his chin as the man picks up his rope and climbing harness. Beckett walks Blake to the door after saying, "I'm out for a while, too. Catch you two later." But he doesn't leave. He sticks his head around the corner a second later. "Don't eat all the leftover biscuits."

Eli flips him off. Beckett leaves and the exterior door closes with a thud.

Ooof. Yowza. We're finally alone.

The apartment grows deadly quiet. The noise inside my head grows unbearable as I struggle with things I can't understand. Eli and I need to have a conversation about that tattoo. But I can't even breathe a word about it without freaking out.

The tattoo is not new. The ink is faded enough from the sun to mean it's at least a year old. So, it must be the woman he mistook me for.

Obviously, she meant a lot to him.

Maybe she still does.

It had to rattle him to see me that night in the bar. But did it rattle him as much as me seeing that tattoo?

Debatable.

I still can't take a full breath.

Eli's quiet as he wipes down the kitchen counter, but I feel his eyes on me every few seconds.

I finally work up the nerve to speak. Though not about the fact that he's wearing my face around on his skin.

"Thank you for getting my cookbook and the contacts I had stored in it. Do you have a phone I can use to call my friend?"

"I'll get you a burner today. I already have a SIM card. We can just pick up a smart phone. I was going to suggest that we take a ride, get the hell out of here for a bit."

I'm still wearing Eli's T-shirt and sweats. "I should change first."

"Of course. Do you want to walk or do you want me to carry you to the bedroom?"

As I slide off the stool, I say, "I should probably be walking. You can't carry me around forever."

Eli's silence is unnerving as he escorts me down the hallway, staying observant and close, in case I make any missteps. His proximity is a dichotomy. Both soothing and upsetting to me.

Things are so out of control that I don't know which way is up. My body wants him. My heart is confused. My logical brain says I have to run, for his safety and mine.

But I can't leave yet.

I can't go back to my apartment. I don't have money to flee right now. And I need to figure out where I'm going to go.

When we hit the guest room where my belongings are being kept, he flips on the light and moves to close the curtain. "Do you need any help?"

I try to make my voice even when my whole brain and body is a hurricane inside. "I think I can do it. It might take me a few minutes."

Eli steps in front of me and tugs me into his arms. "How are you doing?"

I pretty much lie. "I'm holding up."

He smooths a hand over my hair and kisses my temple softly. "Are we going to talk about the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room?"

The room turns to static as I stand frozen in place.

When I can't take it any longer, I glance up into his dark, determined eyes. I quip, "There are too many to decide which one to talk about."

The warmth of his hand falls away from my scalp as he sighs. He scrubs his hand over his face, before a hard expression tightens his mouth. He spits out, "The tattoo."

I want to shrink back from the way he studies me for a reaction. But I force myself to hold perfectly still. Inside, I'm a disaster.

My heart rages against my breastbone and I feel the vibration all the way to my toes as I wait for him to continue.

Brokenly, he says, “Her name is, was, is Nyx. *Fuck.*”

I tug the corner of my lip into my mouth as my insides begin to shake. When I try to shrug out of his hold, he lets me go. Eli dips his head and lets out an anguished breath.

Pain is a palpable thing in the room.

The walls seem to close in until the only thing that remains is two hurting souls.

I whisper, “Is she dead?”

He looks at the floor for a long time. Slowly, the cords of his neck tighten until they’re standing out in stark relief. His voice is full of agony when he speaks. “I don’t know. I refuse to believe that she has been killed.”

He loves her.

Loves.

Not loved. *Loves.*

Eli’s holding onto hope that Nyx is alive.

A dagger pierces me clean through, cutting my heart in half.

I didn’t expect Eli to be my future. That’s impossible, but the way he looks at me made me feel like I’m flying.

Guilt is a quick second to punch me in the gut. I should only be thinking about him. He’s lost someone that means the world to him.

It’s greedy to be thinking about myself. The man is in agony.

But the truth is, I’m not that big of a person.

I’m gutted.

Because now I know that he sees *Nyx* when he looks at me.

Christ, that *hurts*.

Everything hurts. I’m tearing apart inside. To the very bottom of my soul. I flinch and have to hide my sudden inhale when the pain gets so intense I think I could pass out.

I've known pain all of my life, but this is like a bone saw slicing through anything that I thought was armor.

I'm bare to this man.

Totally vulnerable.

Something I said I'd never be with a member of the opposite sex.

Eli walks to the door with his head down, his shoulders rounded. He stops to rest a hand on the frame. Slowly, he looks back at me. The demons in his eyes are clearer than they've ever been before.

Or maybe mine are so close to the surface they see his for what they really are.

I breathe into my aching chest and try to speak. "I'm sorry."

Sorry for him. Sorry for me. Just sorry that life is so damned hard.

His jaw tightens and his voice drops low and rough, "So am I. *So* fucking sorry."

Chapter Forty-One

Eli

Mia's back is straight when she returns to the kitchen. She didn't wear the clothes I bought her today, except for the black combat boot she's got on her good foot.

The black hoodie and black cut off shorts match the mood. But that choice really says more to me. Mia's retreating into her old world.

Neither of us speak as we take the elevator down. Glacial cold is wedged between us.

It's understandable.

I can't talk about Nyx, the pain is too deep.

I know that's what Mia wants. I can see the questions in her hurting gaze. But I'm not ready.

Fuck. I may never be ready.

"Wait here, I'll bring the truck around."

With her lips pressed tight, Mia nods.

I stalk to the rented SUV and start the engine. Just as it cranks over, my phone vibrates.

Fuck time for a phone call.

“Fortier,” I answer.

I already knew it was Marshall Lake, owner of Agile Security, thanks to caller ID.

His deep voice rumbles, “Ah. Good to hear your voice, Eli. Got my SITREP?”

Fuck. Yeah, that’s a negative. I take a breath. “About that. I have an unexpected situation, not related to the original mission. We made some headway on the Rush case, but something happened on Saturday night. I’m helping a woman that was involved in a brutal attack in an alley.”

A leather office chair creaks on the other end. But my new boss says nothing, so I go on. “I’ve been on the streets hunting her attackers since.”

His next question is immediate. “Did you find them?”

“Not yet, but when a P.I. sent a guy climbing over our balcony railing to put cameras on the sliding glass doors, we had a bit of a break.”

“As in broken extremities?”

“Close and that’s part of this story. Hang on. I need a minute here, be right back.”

“Copy.”

I set the phone down as I pull up to the curb next to the building. I lean down and scoop her up. “Sorry, I was taking a work call.”

Once I’ve got Mia settled into the passenger seat, I grab my phone off the console. “I need to wrap this call. I’ll be done in a second.”

Her widened eyes follow me as I close her inside.

God, I fucking hate the abyss between us right now. I crave seeing that soft look in her eyes again.

“I’m back,” I tell Marshall as I walk far enough from the SUV that Mia can’t hear what I’m saying.

He says, “Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“I’ve got a sixth sense, and the more I dig, the more questions I have. But first, I’ve got to find those guys.”

“Your reputation precedes you. They have no idea the kind of trouble they’re about to find on their heads.”

I scrub a hand over my eyes. He’s right. I will rain hell on them once I find out what’s really going on. Which is going to require Mia to open up.

“This isn’t the best way to start a new job, but I’m in uncharted territory here.”

Silence stretches. Marshall starts to pace in the background. His shoes clip on some kind of solid flooring. “Tell me about your situation.”

“She’s a single woman living in a shit apartment. I went to her apartment to get some of her things and got a gun in the face. Then some guy shoots an anchor over our seventh floor balcony to plant cameras to watch her. My skin is crawling on this one. I’m not just walking away.”

In his no-nonsense clipped tone, he asks, “Was she targeted in the original attack or was it random?”

I pace another lap on the sidewalk with my skin standing on end. “That’s what I’m trying to find out. But lots of clues are starting to show up. I hope that this is about to break wide open.”

Without hesitation, he says, “We’ve got your back.”

The relief is overwhelming, and the support feels fucking good. I exhale and let that sink in. “I appreciate that. I’ll be back on task on the Rush case when I get this wrapped.”

Matter-of-factly, Marshall says, “You *are* on task. Now tell us what you need.”

“I’ll let you know when I figure that out. Right now, I need to go have a talk with Mia. I’m also securing her a burner

phone this morning. But she's pretty incapacitated with a sore shoulder, which was dislocated, but I took care of. And she's got a sprained ankle, so I'm keeping her at the apartment."

He stops pacing. "Mia, huh?"

"Mia Marie Bailey, or so her I.D. says." I've already finished speaking by the time I realize that my voice is thicker than normal.

Marshall finishes with, "Watch your six. Tap our resources when you're ready."

"'Bout that. Already did. Mako's doing her background research."

He makes an appreciative grunt. "I knew I liked working with you. A man that sees trouble and acts. I need more men like you. If you know of anyone looking for a stable gig, let me know."

"Speaking of, the guy that was crawling over our balcony railing before daylight—oh shit, you're a Marine, so you'll understand this—Beckett found out the guy is just out of the Corps and is down on his luck and took some shady work for a private investigator. So, we are trying to convert him to our side."

After chuckling, Marshall says, "Well, that's a twist I didn't expect."

"Yeah, he's going to try to score some intel. Kid's got some serious balls. And he took on both of us in hand-to-hand before we secured him. So, I promised the young buck I'd pass his name along if he does his deal for us."

"Sounds like I might be hiring again soon."

I stop pacing, my fingers tighten on the phone. "Speaking of—if you want to drop me off the payroll or fire me, that's fine."

Marshall huffs. "You obviously don't know how we work. We got your back."

Again, that makes me stop moving.

“Thank you. Look, I hate to cut this short. But I gotta go. Mia’s waiting in the car.”

Marshall whistles the Wedding March.

“You might be whistling Taps if she has her way,” I say and he laughs as he disconnects.

When I turn to look back at Mia, that definitely is not love in her eyes. It’s not hate either.

It’s a pain so deep that it makes my marrow burn ice cold.

Chapter Forty-Two

Mia

Eli climbs into the driver's seat. His mouth is grim. His eyes are slits, and he doesn't look at me.

Thank god. Because I'm in freakout mode.

Eli has a tattoo that looks eerily close to me because of a woman he loves.

God. *Is he a stalker? Does he want me to replace her while he searches for her?*

My heart starts to race. Cold sweat beads under my breasts. The car feels like a tomb. My need for air grows unbearable.

My fingers are tingly when I reach for the window button.

Why didn't I think about Eli being a stalker before?

He just showed up at the bar. He immediately started caring for me after. He brought me home. He's done everything right to earn my trust. Even down to the food that I like to eat.

The way he worshiped my body...

My stomach twists painfully. God.

After I really soak in those facts, the truly crazy ideas start to unfold in my head. Was Eli somehow in on the attack in the alley?

That makes me ill.

On top of that, is he's somehow caught up in whatever was going on there... or was he following me because of who my brothers are?

My breathing speeds, my hands start to shake. I need air. I need to get away. I have to plan an escape.

Beckett won't be any help. Obviously, he's in on whatever is going on.

I need to call Casey. But I need to be careful. If I don't play my cards right, or the police get involved, there could be a horrific shootout. People could die.

Oh my god. I can't be responsible for that.

Maybe I can get away while Eli is out and Beckett is in the office.

Casey's help would be critical. I need to get a phone. Everything hinges on a phone.

Eli's hand lands on my thigh. I jump and scream, "*Oh, Jesus!*"

He pierces me with a worried look. "Babe, you're hyperventilating."

You think? Because I thought I was barely breathing. I might turn blue and faint.

Ohgodohgodohgod. Breathe. Breathe.

A little groan slips from my throat.

Focus on something. *Anything.*

Snap out of it!

Eli's attention sharpens. He quietly asks, "What's really going on?"

You. This. My brothers. The past I thought I'd evaded. Everything. I almost scream. But I shatter inside instead.

Brokenly, I rasp, "It's just all too much."

Truth. Too much for one human to bear.

"I know," he replies softly as he reaches up and cups my face. "You'll get through this. I'm here to help you."

A promise he shouldn't make. How can he know I'll survive? My brothers could be on my trail.

I close my eyes and try to get my racing thoughts under control. I need to have my act together to get out of this. I need to let Eli take me to get a phone. That's the first step. I whisper, "Give me a minute. I think I'll be okay."

His hand slides away from my leg and the cool air that replaces his touch reminds me that I need to be cold. Objective. Smart. Calculating.

Everything that doesn't come naturally to me. An uneasy breath shudders in and out of me. Yeah, what I feel for Eli is far more troublesome than loathing the very air my brothers breathe. Their cruelty made it simple.

But if Eli manipulated me, then I may just learn to hate him as much.

Chapter Forty-Three

Eli

The wall that Mia's erecting gets taller by the minute. But fuck if I can figure out how to tear it down.

The conversation about Nyx left a gaping wound the size of a meteor crater in my chest. Rendering me fucking tormented and too bound up to even finish telling Mia the rest of the story.

But would telling her serve any purpose?

When I catch her gaze, she's fighting something in her mind.

When I want to pull her into my arms and hold her, I question whether I'd be doing it for her or for me.

I say, "There's a Verizon just around the corner. I'll drop in there and grab a phone for you. You can just relax."

She nods tightly and fidgets with her shoulder sling.

The last few minutes of the drive are silent. She's growing more distant, which pisses me the fuck off. I'm angry at the world right now.

When I park, I decide to break the awkwardness. “I can hear the questions in your head. I just can’t make out what they are.”

For a beat, she stares at the building. Customers coming and going through the glass doors, yet I’m almost positive she is not watching them. She looks a million miles away.

She slowly turns to look at me with clouded emotions in her eyes. “Why did you go into Richter Scale that night?”

Well. Fuck. Me. Talk about hitting the mark.

I lean back and turn my shoulders so I’m facing her.

“I was looking for Nyx.”

Her whole face tenses. There’s a shudder in her chest. “I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Are you familiar with facial recognition?”

Her body jolts, then she quietly says, “Yes. Vaguely. I mean, I don’t know how to use it or anything.”

Dread tightens my gut. It’s not fair that I’ve waited this long to tell her. Mia needs to know. “I went to the bar because there was a hit on a very advanced facial recognition software for Nyx. I knew it probably wasn’t her because it was in the U.S., but I was close by for a job, so I went immediately.”

The hurt and confusion in her expression makes me feel lower than a snake’s belly. She asks, “How close do I really look to her?”

“Very similar.”

Looking right into my eyes, she says, “Why did you come to my apartment?”

“Because I wanted to make sure you were safe after you left work.”

Something darkens her eyes. “Why?”

“Because I was worried about you. You seemed rattled, scared. Something was off.”

A deep red flush creeps up her neck. Her nostrils flare as she turns her head to face the windshield. “I want to call bullshit.”

“I respect that. But it’s the truth.”

Her jaw tightens. Staring straight ahead, Mia asks, “Are you obsessed with me because I look like her?”

“No. That’s obviously how this started. I was there because you look like her. And after... I was just hung up on *you*. But I’d be lying to you if I told you I can separate the two. So, the fucking truth is, I don’t know where that blurry line is. What I do know is that I’m just plain obsessed with you. But Nyx was never this to me.”

She starts jamming her finger into the seat belt buckle.

I grab her hand and release the clip for her, “Easy, don’t hurt yourself.”

“Eli, I’m going to hurt something and I’m not responsible for what. You just told me you stalked me, you *are* obsessed with me, and maybe all because I look like some woman that might be dead or might be alive. AND you used facial recognition software to find me.”

I growl and drop my chin to my chest and stare at my thigh. “I know it sounds totally fucked up, baby.”

She shoves her door open. “It *is* fucked up, Eli. It doesn’t *sound* bad. It is.”

I’m on her side of the truck before she climbs out, blocking her from exiting. I’ve got a boulder in my gut that feels a lot like toxic waste. *Way to fuck this up, man.*

I roughly whisper, “You’re safe. I’m not a deranged stalker.”

That makes the heat flaming in her cheeks rise all the way to her hairline. Baring her teeth, she says, “I *thought* I was safe, but now I’m not sure. Now I don’t know what to believe, except that you’ve got a serious problem.”

She’s right. I do.

Chapter Forty-Four

Mia

Thirty minutes later, we emerge with a cell phone. As Eli holds the door open for me, a shiny black Dodge Charger pulls into the parking spot right in front of the Verizon store.

I do a double take when I catch sight of the driver. Beckett. He's behind the wheel with a pair of dark sunglasses on.

Great. Tag team. Just what I don't need. My gaze snaps toward Eli. "Why is he here?"

"To get you."

To get me. As in take me away?

For a long minute, I don't know whether to be scared or hurt.

I decide on hurt, because I'm already scared. And I want away from Eli, right?

It's for the best. But him calling Beckett makes me feel... like I'm being thrown away.

"I see," I reply tightly.

The sting is real. Sharp and penetrating in my gut. Eli called his roommate to come deal with me.

When Beckett slides out of the car, he gives Eli a cursory nod. “Since you’re on the company car, I brought your rental.”

As he walks up to me, I say, “So, you’re the one that gets to deal with me?”

“Deal?” he asks and makes a face. “I like your company.”

I wish I believed that was true. “Where are you taking me, Beckett?”

He grins, “Wherever you like?”

That irks me. “Really? Somehow, I don’t think that’s true.” I glance between them. “Because if I told you to take me to the middle of Venice Beach and drop me off, I think you’d pitch a damned fit.”

They both look at me like I’ve grown a unicorn horn.

“Venice Beach?” Eli finally asks in a growly rumble. “Why don’t you just let Beckett drive you home.”

The nerve.

“Home?” I shriek.

A woman that was walking into the phone store is so startled that she drops her purse.

Ignoring her glare, I gape at Eli.

“*Home*,” Eli says in an uncompromising tone. “Where we can keep you safe.”

I bite out, “That’s not my home.”

The thundercloud over Eli darkens ominously. “You know what I mean.”

Back stiff, jaw tight, I ask, “So, am I a prisoner now?”

This time, a Verizon employee peeks out the glass door. The young guy asks, “Is everything okay out here?”

All three of us bark, “Fine!” at the exact same time.

With a horrified expression, the guy shrinks back inside, and locks the door.

I mutter, “Great. Now the police will be coming because there’s a domestic dispute.”

Beckett says, “Which is why you and I are leaving now.”

His hand is gentle on my arm as he guides me to the passenger side of the rental.

“Let’s go for a ride so everyone can cool off.”

“I’m cool,” I snap as I try to tug my arm free of his hold.

He laughs at me. “Hun, your temper’s showing.”

“Just be glad I’m still banged up. I might have to hurt you both.”

He opens the door and somehow magically has me inside and buckled up before I realize what’s happening. Eli’s standing on the sidewalk with a murderous expression. Only my gut says it’s not aimed at me.

Or Beckett.

I think Eli hates himself for something. Maybe he realizes how fucked up it is that he followed me, seduced me, and...

God. He didn’t seduce me.

We...

We.

He and I had sex.

I have to take equal blame for that fact. But that was before I really understood that I look like a woman from his past. A woman he cares so much about he has her likeness in a tattoo.

He walked right into that with his eyes wide open.

That hurts bad.

I duck my head as I simmer on that. And when Beckett fires up the Charger and backs out of the parking spot, I try not to look at Eli.

But when I fail and search for him, he’s gone.

Chapter Forty-Five

Mia

I'm lost in a deep, dark place inside my head when Beckett asks, "Where would you like to go?"

I give him a flat look. "Seriously? You're going to tote me around wherever I want to go?"

"How about an ice cream?"

I double blink.

Sarcastically, I ask, "So what, it will cool off my temper?"

He smirks as the car glides smoothly between traffic. "Something like that."

I fume for a few minutes. "I'm glad you think this is so funny. Because my life is a disaster. A stalker took me home to his apartment, a guy tried to shoot the stalker. Some P.I. says he's investigating me for cheating on my husband..." My voice keeps getting higher and higher. "And! And Eli has a tattoo of a woman that looks exactly like me—a woman who he obviously loves—on his shoulder!"

By the time I finish, I'm yelling.

“Understandably upsetting.”

I balk. “Are you serious? *Upsetting!?!?*”

Beckett’s infuriatingly calm.

“You need chocolate ice cream.”

“I don’t need ice cream. I need an ax.”

He smirks for a split second. “No, you definitely do not need an ax or any other sharp objects. What you need is answers.”

I’m fuming. My blood is pumping. My skin is hot and tight. I want to punch something. Not something... I want to punch everything. And kick it too.

“Let me guess, you don’t have them?”

He glances over. “I have some.”

“But not the ones I want or need.”

He drives and doesn’t look at me for a while as he taps a finger rapidly on the steering wheel. When he does look over, he says, “Look, I know things seem complicated, but I can’t and won’t talk about some things. Other things are unknown to me.”

He looks at the road again, but this time his finger’s not tapping, his hand is clenched around the wheel. His jaw is tense, and his eyes are narrowed. “It’s dangerous to talk about things you don’t understand because that can escalate. If you think Eli stalked you, I don’t think it’s the kind of stalking you’re thinking about. Now, I’m gonna ask that you leave this for him to explain. The man deserves a fair chance to get his shit off his chest without me fucking that up. Just like you deserve to explain yourself to him.”

Half the steam goes out of me. I give him props for being so in control of his words. As I stare at his profile, I ask, “Why are you driving me around, but more importantly, why are you getting involved in the mess between Eli and me?”

He signals and gets off the road. After he parks in front of an ice cream shop, he says, “Because Eli’s a good man. We’re

both new to Agile, but I've got his back. He wants you safe. I'll do everything I can to make that happen."

Well, that takes some more steam out of me. Because I can't think about Eli, and I won't think about myself, I grumble, "You're a mystery."

He turns to look at me. "I'd say you're the mystery. I'm gonna ask you a question that you can choose not to answer, but I'm gonna ask because I'd like to know." He pauses long enough for me to get really worried. Then he asks, "What are you running from?"

I freeze. Look away, and swallow hard.

Not going there.

But he keeps glancing my way. Frying me with those looks.

Fighting a tremble that wants into my voice, I say, "My past is bad. Let's just leave it at that."

"Mia, I think your past might not be so far in your past."

I'm not going to admit that.

I pivot and deflect. "What's Agile, by the way? I still don't know what you two do."

"Eli and I work for a private company that specializes in private security and hostage recovery, amongst other things. It's called Agile Security & Rescue. It's one of the world's leading high-stakes rescue and protection companies."

A cold slithering awareness drops into my stomach. Private security.

After a beat, he adds, "Basically, we hunt, find, recover, and protect people."

His words sink into me like lead. I feel heavier and heavier, until I'm plastered against the seat. "That explains what happened with the intruder situation this morning. You both obviously know how to take down a threat."

With a sympathetic glance, Beckett says, "I know it's too much to absorb at once. You've been through a lot and Eli

comes on strong. That's a SEAL for you. He'd either punch me or fist-bump me for saying that. But the reality is that you're in emotional limbo and I'm guessing you've been that way for a long time."

That tremble and creakiness hits my vocal cords. "How do you know that?"

He rubs the heel of his hand over the steering wheel, "After you've been in this line of work for a while, you start to recognize that look."

"I have a look?" I ask quietly.

His gaze shifting to me gives me my answer. He says, "Eli was tuned into it immediately that night at the bar."

"I remember," I admit. Damn it. I remember that protective, alpha vibe that was roaring off him.

I close my eyes as I start to tremble all over. Within seconds, I fall into the memory of him taking me into the corner of the bar, looking at me like I was his to protect. And then after the attack, at the apartment. He's locked on. I'm his to guard or own, or whatever it is that he wants.

Or needs.

Needs... that thought echoes inside my head.

Is he taking care of me because he needs to fix whatever he can about Nyx?

But that might not matter.

A man like Eli would be impossible to escape. Even with the help of people who know how. Eli would know those same things.

Cold sweat springs up on my skin, the nape of my neck starts to get damp. It takes every mental resource I have to keep my breathing steady.

"Eli's going to go to the ends of the Earth to take care of you."

A bitter laugh comes out of my chest. "Because he thinks I'm a replacement for a woman named Nyx."

He's quick to snap out, "You're not a replacement."

So, we're going there. To the place Beckett said he wouldn't go—Eli's business. That makes me wonder what made him change his mind. Maybe it's the raw chest-caving hurt I'm wearing like a sign.

I look away as I bite out, "Honestly, I find that impossible to believe."

"Look at me," Beckett says.

When I turn back, he's glancing between the road and me. "Did he tell you about Nyx?"

Feeling hollowed out, I breathe shallowly. What is it about these men that make me feel so exposed? Like they see everything, yet have nothing but questions.

My voice is repellent to my ears when I say, "Not really."

"The story is ugly."

So is mine.

I sigh and dig my teeth into my bottom lip. I've got a secret too. My story is far uglier than they know.

But I find myself holding my breath. Hinging on whatever Beckett's going to say. Eli's darkness is as much of an unknown to me as mine is to him.

The playing field is level. If only I knew what the game was. Or if I wanted to win or lose.

The thudding of my pulse grows harder inside my veins to the point I can feel it everywhere in my body. "How ugly?"

"Eli feels responsible for what happened to her."

"For her death?"

He's silent.

Dead silent. With demons in his own eyes.

"Beckett, what? *Please.*"

His hands wrap tighter around the wheel, and for a beat, his knuckles go white.

There's an unsteady wobble in my voice. "You're scaring me."

His gaze turns into a thousand-yard stare. Full-force freakout commences. The interior of the car grows oppressively hot, or maybe I'm cooking from the inside out.

"Beckett..."

He shakes his head.

Oh god. Why won't he tell me?

Chapter Forty-Six

Eli

I've never been happier to see a deserted parking lot in my life. As I swing into the city beach lot, the tires squeal on the chilled pavement.

A cold marine layer clings to the shoreline. Thick gloomy fog blankets the whole area. Punctuated by a biting sea mist.

Fairweather souls can't deal with this.

Perfect for me, otherwise my tornadic mood would have them running.

Kicking my ass the whole drive didn't help one damn bit. Fuck if I know how I made it here because I was not thinking about speed limits, traffic signals, or other things that prevent death and mayhem on the pavement.

I kick off my boots and socks and hurl them into the passenger floorboard of the Navigator. Seagulls startle and scream when I climb out and slam the door.

They swoop around, their piercing cries splitting dense, wet air. Their screams mirror the pain inside my head. Acrid.

Shrill. Piercing.

My head's fucked. And it's all my fault. All of it.

Every. Fucking. Last. *Thing*.

With a violent yank, I rip my shirt over my head, and slam it to the ground. The sand is cool and pliant beneath my feet as I trudge across the sand toward the crashing waves.

I should have told Mia everything from the beginning. I should have known not to send Nyx out that day. I *should* have known.

My hands are shaking with anger as I rip open my fly and shove down my jeans. Biting out a curse, I hurl them aside, not caring that my phone is in the pocket.

Fuck that too.

I surge into inky water, duck under a towering wave and start swimming. Pounding the water with my arms, slashing my feet, until I'm far offshore and surrounded by nothing but fog in the gigantic Pacific swell.

The cold tightens my muscles, but the fire inside me is far too hot to be drowned by it.

A primal yell builds inside me and I force my face under the water where I scream bloody murder into the cresting waves.

Goddamnit. Fuck! Fucking motherfucking fuck.

Agony tears at me.

I don't know how long I swim in circles. But my arms are shaking, my lungs burning raw when I crash through the shore break and drag myself onto the sand.

Leaning over, I fall to my knees as my breath saws in and out.

"You alright, young man?"

My head snaps left. But my jaw stays clenched and I don't rise.

A hoodie shadows the man's face. He's holding a blue beach towel out toward me. With a grunt, he shakes it.

Grudgingly, I accept. I'm in no mood to engage, but I press my face into the clean, soft cotton.

That's when the first crest of pain wells up into my eyes in the form of acid. A choking sound wrenches from my throat.

His hand wraps around my wrist. In a roughened voice, the man says, "I'm a Team guy too."

How does he know?

He points to my tattoo. Ah. Dead giveaway. Or maybe the fact that I've been swimming for god-fucking-knows how long in nothing but my briefs.

I squat down as I continue to press the damned towel into my face to hide the stream of water that is now running out of my eyes.

He asks, "Have you called your brothers?"

By this, I know he means my team.

"Not yet," I rasp as I try to hold the gut-wrenching thing inside of me that's trying to break free.

"You need to get this shit out."

I nod with my face buried again in his towel.

"Where's your phone?" he asks from beside me. Closer now, like he's kneeling on the sand.

But I can't reply. A deep, agonizing sob tears from my chest. His hand moves to my shoulder and he presses me down and back, until I'm sitting on my ass on the cold sand.

"Let those fucking tears come, man."

I haven't cried since I found out that Nyx was taken. I thought I didn't have any left in me. But how wrong I was.

Raw, animal sounds come out of me as I wrap my arms around my knees.

He tugs the towel out of my hold and drops it over my shoulders.

“Most people would think you’re dying of hypothermia,” he remarks casually.

“But you and I know how far the human body can go,” I return through shredded vocal cords, between chest twisting sobs.

He’s quiet for a beat, then he says, “We also know how strong the mind is.”

I scrub both my hands over my face. My teeth are clacking together painfully from the cold. Every muscle has gone stiff. But the pain in my chest overrides it all.

“The enemy within.”

“Your strongest tool,” he counters.

I know this. *I know this*, but this thing with Mia cut the legs from beneath me.

He’s silent, but he stretches his legs out, crosses his ankles. As if he’s in for the long haul. “Wanna tell me about it?”

No.

I grit out, “Man, you don’t—”

He raises a hand. “I’ve done more, seen more, killed more, destroyed more than you could ever imagine. So, there’s nothing you can say that is gonna shock me or make me get up and walk away without knowing you’ve got what you need.”

Then he leans back on his elbow like we’re having a picnic in the park. What the fuck?

But I open my mouth and the vile, destructive story of me losing Nyx just comes out. How I ignored my gut, went against my internal compass, and cost her her freedom and probably her life. How we’ve run private missions with no success. How the rest of the team has already mourned her loss, except three of us—who hold onto... nothing.

He nods but doesn’t say a word.

My throat is tight with anger and hurt when I say, “Then I meet this woman that looks just like Nyx. This woman’s in some kind of trouble. And I...”

I try to swallow down the jagged rocks in my throat. “I can’t let her down. She’s pushing me away. But I can’t walk away and live knowing that I didn’t help her. But what if I’m not enough... What if she gets hurt?”

That’s when he raises a hand. “Have you told her everything?”

Christ. “No.”

“Why are *you* holding *her* away?”

I shake my head, but the full body shivering makes it hard to move. “She deserves better than me.”

He huffs and folds his body up until he’s mimicking my exact posture. Arms wrapped around legs, shoulders hunched. His piercing blue eyes lock on me. “You’re wrong.”

Something ancient and stoic passes through those unmoving eyes. It locks my chest up tight.

He asks, “Is she damaged?”

The image of her haunted eyes, the fear, the uncertainty fills my mind. “The ghosts in her eyes gut me.”

“Do you want her any less?”

“No, I want her more.”

He tilts his head and raises a brow.

I groan and drop my head before I meet his hard gaze again.

This time, I sound ancient when I speak. “I may not ever get over what happened on that mission.”

“You won’t. But you’ll live. Just like you are not dead yet from that fifty-degree water.” His jaw hardens and he looks away. “You’re fucking wrong about this. I know what you want. You want me to tell you that you should leave this woman alone. You think that you’re broken. That you failed and can never succeed at doing what’s right again.”

Those words are razor-sharp knives, cutting me to shreds.

He stands up, unfolding a body that's lithe from some kind of training. "Keep the towel and get your shit together. Stop lying to yourself. You're worth fighting for. So is she. I know this because I've been right fucking here. Right on this very beach with my head in a blender of bullshit."

The man takes a step back and slides his hands into his back pockets and peers at me from beneath his hood. "Remember this, 'One is none'."

One. Is. None.

That hits me like a missile.

One is none.

It's a mantra we use in the Teams.

But I have been going it alone.

With Mia, I finally felt something come back to life inside of me. Like a fuse had been plugged back in.

He watches me until a dawning awareness makes me clutch my chest.

He grumbles, "Call your team. Tell them the Bullfrog said get their asses here yesterday."

Wait.

What?

I squint as I look up at him. Well, shit. "Eric Thompson?"

How did I not recognize the man?

He tips his chin, gives me a tight smile, and without another word the man walks away.

Good. God.

The longest serving active-duty SEAL just gave *me* a pep talk.

His words echo over and over.

One is none.

How can I deny the words of a man with that kind of credit?

I drag my ass off the beach. In the parking lot, I shove my damp legs into my jeans and climb into the Navigator. As heat starts to pump out of the vents, I dial Beast and Hardknox on a three-way call.

I need my team.

I need Mia.

Now I just need to fight for a chance to prove to Mia that I can be the man to take her pain away.

That's going to require unraveling her baggage. And dealing with mine.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Mia

The sunny colors on the windows of the ice cream shop piss me off. Or maybe it's just everything.

I sit in the car as long as I can. Until my irritation and desperation get the best of me. I shove open the car door, drag myself out.

God. I can't wait until I can throw this freaking walking boot into a dumpster. *After* I burn it.

I carefully tug open the glass door to the Ice Delight Ice Cream Shop and step inside. I'm hit with the sugary scent of waffle cones—vanilla, brown sugar, and nutmeg.

A woman in a bright yellow uniform yells, "Welcome to Ice Delight, where everything's amazing."

Not.

If I had something to hurl at her. I'm pretty sure I would.

Poor woman. She doesn't deserve my anger, but I'm all out of polite.

I limp toward Beckett who's busy paying the woman. He's not smiling when he turns, but he's got two cups of chocolate-something in his hands.

He grumbles and pushes a cup at me. "Here. You need this."

I refuse to accept it, moving my hand behind my back. "I need answers."

He gives me that look. The expression on his face is familiar. It's the 'no information shall pass Beckett's lips before it's time' look.

Infuriating.

He asks, "Are we gonna grow old with you asking me for answers and me telling you to ask Eli?"

"No," I snap. "I won't stick around that long."

Definitely not growing old with Eli or Beckett.

He ignores me and walks toward a row of plastic tables and chairs—also in sunshine yellow.

The overall effect is irritating beyond measure.

After placing the two cups on the table, he holds out the chair for me.

I'm fit to be tied, not placated with chocolate, but I throw myself into the chair. He scoots me in.

"I'm not a little kid."

"Could have fooled me," he says with a chuckle.

Okay, so maybe I am a bit tantrum-ish right now. But can you blame a girl?

I grumble, "You're really cruising on thin ice."

"Speaking of ice...cream, hope you like Double Dutch with Rocky Road."

I pick up a spoon and stab the teasing mound of sugar and cream and whatever else they put in their recipes.

“My gut isn’t too happy right now, I could throw up,” I warn.

“That will be entertaining.”

I shake my head. “Said like a true Marine.”

That makes him chuckle again.

I smash the ice cream around and ponder whether it makes sense to eat when my stomach feels like someone clamped a vice on it.

“Ice cream makes everything better,” he murmurs around his spoon.

“What’s the deal with you?”

“Me? Nothing.”

I tilt my head. “Right. There’s no reason you’re a grumpy, ruminating thirty something that has yet to mention any women. Yet, he looks like a GQ model on steroids and probably has a dozen ladies on speed dial. But nope. You stalk around in the night, you keep your nose buried in your laptop. Something’s up.”

His mostly light, teasing expression shifts. He stabs the spoon into the chocolate. “As in?”

“I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. But you’re cogitating over something.”

He leans back in the chair, hooking his arm over the back as he eats. When he finishes with the mouthful, he says, “Is that a real word?”

“In my book, it is. And you’re doing it. Not that I’m not. I mean, I practically burn up the gears in my head. Like I’m doing now. But I can’t figure you out. So, what are you thinking about?”

“As humans, we’re always thinking about something. That’s how the car was invented. How we dreamed of flying to space. How someone invented the freezer that keeps this ice cream cold.”

I give him a flat look. “Aren’t you full of yourself today.”

“We make good company, then.”

I take a bite and have to hide the little moan of pleasure that the chocolate causes when it hits my tongue. Maybe he’s right. Maybe ice cream does make everything better. Some of my anger dissipates.

After I swallow, I say, “Call it woman’s intuition, but something’s eating you.”

Beckett’s piercing eyes leave my face, and he goes back to his dessert.

“Am I wrong?”

He mutters, “No.”

“So, you were a Marine?”

His gaze slices to me, full of insult. “Once a—”

“I know. Once a Marine, always a Marine. But what else are you?”

He stabs his ice cream and takes an oversized bite. After, he doesn’t meet my gaze for a while.

I say, “I know there’s more to this story. What got you here, working here in California, doing security?”

His jaw tightens, his eyes cool, and for a few minutes I think he’s going to cut this conversation off.

Truthfully, I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation.

I’m mad. Hurt. Upset and unsure.

I want to go somewhere—anywhere but that damned apartment—and yet, here I am. Having ice cream, talking to a man that I’m pretty sure has a background full of ghosts and secrets.

I move my gaze to the window. People pass by. Normal people.

A mom bends low and talks to a young child as they walk past the door. A college-aged guy and blond girl laugh

together as they cross the parking lot. Their hands are clasped. Their happy faces are so young. So innocent.

He tugs her to him and kisses her before opening the door to the ice cream shop. Light laughter echoes through the store as he loops his arm around her.

Their innocence is so palpable that a guttural envy makes me look away.

That's when it hits me.

That's why this conversation is happening.

This is my tribe.

The normal world doesn't fit me. No one would understand what it's like to be the sister of two of the most wanted criminals in the world. But these men... they might understand what it's like to have darkness and loss and pain deep inside your marrow.

That's what I've been craving, but never knew how to articulate.

Or find.

I need to feel like I'm not alone, not the only one with a crap-tastic past. Not the only one that wakes in the night sweating, moaning from nightmares.

Eli made me feel that. Like he could take me as I am. Really am. Not Mia Bailey the cocktail waitress soon-to-be hairstylist. But Mariah Siblio. Daughter of a criminal mastermind. Sister of the men who provide half of the guns to all the terrorist organizations in the world.

Eli has scars. There's something behind those haunted glances. And I could take all of it. *All of it.*

All of him.

Whatever carved him into the man he is.

But he stalked me.

That's a breach of trust that I can't overlook. I fought too hard for my freedom.

I sag into the seat and spoon up another bite. Only this time, it tastes bitter.

Eli is a problem.

All six-foot-four-inches of him.

My body perks up and offers its two cents. *Come on, you know you love the way he makes you feel.*

Damnit. Clenching my legs together, I fight off the rush of heat a single thought about his body causes to race through my veins.

I've never craved anything more than I crave him.

But it's not just the pleasure, it's the way he worshipped me, protected me. Carried me. Looked at me.

Shut up. I do not crave him. He's just acting out some weird obsession.

I'm so lost in my head, I jump when Beckett leans forward and drops his elbows on the table.

"I worked for the ATF," Beckett says, drawing me out of my rumination-turned internal argument.

ATF. The Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms.

Hold on.

What?!

The air tries to wheeze out of me like a popped balloon. The ATF is all over my brothers and their gun-running businesses.

"Past tense," he adds.

Another wave of fear slithers through my veins.

ATF. But his last remark could mean anything. I force myself to speak. "Why did you leave?"

"I broke the rules. Truthfully, I hate the system."

Is Beckett a bad guy?

The yellow and white walls seem to crush in on me. Sunshine gone rogue. For a long time, I'm frozen, until I get

my hand to cooperate enough to push the ice cream away.

Does Beckett know who I really am?

My insides start to tremble.

Eli and Beckett could be somehow connected to my brothers. Eli could have stalked me because he works for the two most evil men walking the face of the earth. I could be living in the lion's den right now.

"I've had enough," I say in a barely-there whisper.

Beckett watches me as he finishes his cup. He stands, tosses our trash, and offers his hand to help me up.

I let him help walk me outside because I'm spiraling into panic. Breathe, walk. *Keep your focus.* Get healed and get out.

A man's voice shouts, "Mia! Mia!"

Beckett and I turn at the same time to look at the man across the parking lot. His hand is raised in a friendly gesture.

I have to blink to reconcile what I'm seeing.

Oh my god. I cannot believe my eyes.

A freight train of relief hits me.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Eli

“Come *on!*” I groan as I grip the steering wheel. The traffic is dragging ass, as usual. Christ, I can’t wait to get out of Los-fucking-Angeles.

Really, bro? What about Mia?

Scratch that.

Wherever she is, that’s where I will be.

Until this thing runs into the ground or something comes of it.

My phone rings and I snag it from the console. Probably Beast calling to make sure I’m really okay. He’s good like that.

So, I’m surprised when it’s Mako’s voice I hear as he demands, “Where are you?”

“Don’t you have some kind of tracking device on this vehicle?”

He chuckles tightly and says, “Actually, I do.”

“So, you know I’m on The Five.”

I can hear his smirk. “Just confirming.”

“What’s up?”

“In all seriousness. At the airport. Marshall, Andre, and I just landed. We need a meeting with you STAT.”

A tone sounds in my ear. “Hold on, my phone’s making some kind of noise.”

I pull my phone away from my face and look at the screen as traffic starts to move a little faster. “Shit, my battery is at one percent.”

“Plug it in.”

After flipping open the center console and feeling around, I grunt. “Would if I had a charger. Someone must have stolen it. Talk fast.”

“This isn’t a phone conversation.”

The hairs at the back of my neck prick. “Is that why you have backup with you?”

“Yes, and we need to move fast on thi—”

Bloooooop. My phone dies a fast death.

“Mako?!”

Dead fucking air.

I don’t even know which airport!

I yell some very unfriendly curses into the air. Some motherfucker must have stolen my charger while I was on the beach. *Shit*. Did they take the rest of the gear out of the back too?

Marshall’s going to have another reason to fire my ass. Maybe he changed his mind. But the whole team wouldn’t be here for that.

“Well, fucking hell.”

I signal and try to change lanes. The dick behind me in a tricked-out BMW blares his horn. If I wasn’t in such a hurry, I could just stop this car, go back there, and punch out his windshield. *Then* he’d have a reason to honk away.

Finally, someone lets me cross. I take that lane. Then another and another. After lots of flipped birds and angry shouting, I make it to an exit.

It takes another five minutes using the old-fashioned way of searching—looking with my eyes, not Google maps—to find a gas station.

When I slam the vehicle in park and jump out, I draw the wrong kind of attention. A bunch of gang kids climb down off the concrete wall that surrounds the station and start ambling toward me.

Great. I picked the wrong fucking part of town to stop in.

I'm halfway to the gas-station kiosk—which is one of those locked places—when the first kid approaches. He's barely past puberty. But his face is hard, like he's seen more than his fair share of shit already.

“Sup?” I ask as I slide my hand toward the pistol in my back waistband. This is the last thing I want to have to do.

With a sneered lip, he demands, “What you doin’ *man*?”

“Just getting a phone charger, then I’m on my way.”

He looks me up and down. “What is you?”

“Just an idiot that was talking to his girl when his phone battery died.”

Small lie. But hey...

Was that a smirk on the kid’s face?

“*Maaan*, you better get yo shit together.”

“You have no idea.”

My shit is as tangled as it can get. But that voice in the back of my head says, *One is none*.

The kid and I stare at each other for a beat. His guys start to circle.

“What do *you* want?” I ask.

“Your car?”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Seriously? You don’t even look old enough to drive.”

He makes a quick flip of his hand. A blade catches a glint of sunlight. Things just got a whole lot less friendly.

I don’t take my gaze from his. I don’t have to look down—I can see the six-inch blade he’s got pointed at my gut from my peripheral vision just fine.

I rumble, “You don’t want to do this. I’m a former SEAL. I’ll take your knife, and you and the others will be the ones bleeding. I promise.”

First, his face draws tighter, then he makes some kind of signal to his boys.

He lowers the knife, and a goofy smile splits his face. “Your lucky day. My brother is gonna be a SEAL.”

My brows shoot up and I grin back. “No shit, that’s awesome.”

His dark gray eyes start to burn with pride. Clear as day. “He’s tough, they ain’t gonna break him.”

I have a feeling he’s right if the kid is anything like his little brother.

“What about you?” I ask.

“Me? I’m not cut out for that.”

I say, “I’m getting something out of my pocket. K?”

That proud look on his face turns suspicious. But he doesn’t move and doesn’t pull his knife on me again. I fish out my wallet and pass him my business card. I add a couple hundred-dollar bills to it.

“How about this. When I’m not in hot-fucking-water, we can talk. You got balls, kid. You learn some other things and I think you’ll be a fine addition to the U.S. Navy. But let me make one thing clear. Stealing cars isn’t the way to get there.”

He inspects my Agile Security & Rescue card. As he tilts his head, and returns to looking at my face, his eyes narrow on me. “You for *reals*?”

“About all of it.”

That streetwise expression returns to his face. He tips his chin up. “I’m gonna call you.”

“Tomorrow. Right now I’ve got to get that phone charger or...”

He grins this time and he looks his age for once. “Or you in the doghouse. My daddy is always in the doghouse.”

“Already there. In so many ways.”

He steps aside and I jog to the booth. The gas station attendant is wide-eyed. Her voice comes through a little speaker. “Don’t know what you did, but Amen. I’m not ready to watch no murder this early in my shift.”

“Lucky break. Now, for the love of god, please, tell me you’ve got an iPhone charger behind that bulletproof glass.”

She tsks and shakes her head causing her ringlet curls to bounce. “Honey. We don’t sell chargers.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Mia

As I stare across the parking lot of the little plaza, a chill comes off Beckett.

“Who’s that?” he demands in a commanding tone.

“A friend. I need to talk to him.”

This is apparently the wrong thing to say. Beckett steps in front of me. Putting his big wall of muscle right into my line of sight.

I growl, which he ignores, so I poke a finger into his back. “Excuse me, I can’t see.”

Beckett’s whole body is on alert. From head to toe his muscles are bunched up, ready for action. In a raised voice, he says, “Put your hands in plain sight.”

I gripe, “It’s my fr—”

Beckett shoves me behind him again. This time, he growls at me like a bear. “I’m not letting anything happen to you on my watch.”

Even though I can't see through Beckett, the distinct sound of approaching boots on pavement tells me this is about to get really interesting. And not in a good way.

"I'm sorry, Casey," I say loudly from behind Beckett.

Without any preamble, Beckett starts to grill Casey, "How did you know she was here?"

Casey, in an unhurried pace and casual tone, says, "I just happened to see Mia coming out the door with you."

I push on Beckett's back, but he growls. I say, "It's okay. I promise. Let me introduce you two. Casey, this is Beckett. Beckett, this is my friend, Casey."

Casey says, "Look, man, I know you're just being protective, but Mia and I go way back. I'd like to catch up with her for a minute."

"See, he knows my name," I say as I try once again to maneuver around Beckett.

He moves in front of me again. Expertly keeping me shielded. He rumbles at Casey, "Keep your hands where I can see them."

I finally manage to duck around. When Casey sees me, he jolts. "Damn, it's good to see you. I was worried sick when you stopped calling."

"I... um, I've been busy. As you can see." I lift up my sling.

Cringing at my sling, then my ankle brace, he says, "I can tell, how'd you get banged up?"

"Long story."

Casey turns his attention to Beckett. "I'd like a word with Mia. Alone. Would you mind if she and I go sit on that bench over there?"

Ooh. Wrong thing to say. The way Beckett's face changes is downright scary. His stare turns deadly—Beckett looks like he's going to tear Casey limb from limb as he spits out a reply, "Fuck yes. I mind."

Crap. *Not another fight!*

They're both formidable. I don't even want to think about who would win or what might get damaged in the process.

All these alpha men...

I wave a hand toward Beckett, hoping I'm not mimicking a cape waving in front of a bull. "Let us talk, please. You can watch. This won't take long."

Apparently, Casey is also trying to avoid the confrontation because he pastes an affable smile on his normally hard face. "Keep my keys, sport. If that makes you feel better."

He tosses a set of car keys toward Beckett. They get snatched out of the air. But the icy glare doesn't change.

I try to soothe the beast. "I won't be long. I promise."

Beckett's crackling with angry energy as he says, "You get five minutes. I'm going to be right here. Ready to do whatever it takes to keep Mia safe. Do you understand that? *Whatever* it takes."

Beckett's glare wheels to me. "Your friend makes one wrong move and you are going to find out just how serious I am."

I try my best to give him a bright smile. "Thank you. I'll be back."

Whew.

Beckett strides away and takes up his watch position leaning against the Charger.

As we wait for two cars to pass so we can cross the travel lanes in the parking lot, Casey lowers his voice, "Keep your eyes peeled. Your cover's been blown. I sent you a message with some information."

My body jolts. Jesus. I was afraid of that. Especially after finding out that I showed up on facial recognition and that Eli and Beckett are both working in black ops type work.

"Let's go." Casey grumbles when the traffic is past. I teeter and it takes me a second to step down from the curb. Stupid

ankle.

I'm looking down and don't see the car coming. It's a flash of gray and glinting chrome.

A rush of air knocks me over.

The ground comes rushing toward my face. Then I register a horrible, unmistakable thud.

When I raise my head to look—the car is racing away, and Casey is crumpled on the asphalt.

A scream tears itself from the pits of my broken soul.
“No!”

Chapter Fifty

Beckett

It all happened in a second. The car. The body. The crushing fear that Mia was hit.

Then her hands move and she opens her mouth to let loose a piercing scream. Thank you, god. Thank. You.

I'm on the pavement next to her within a heartbeat. "Were you hit?"

"N-n-no."

I drag her into my arms and turn her away from the bloody mess that was left when the car sped away. "Thank. Fuck."

"Is..."

"I don't know. You are my priority."

She shudders and sobs. "He can't be dead."

Sirens wail in the background and I crane my neck to see what's going on. A group of people are gathered around the

man. Someone is holding his neck in traction. A guy is straddling his hips, compressing his chest.

“There are some guys working on him. The sirens are getting close. Can I move you? I don’t want you out here in the open.”

She tries to push me away. Through sobs, she says, “I’m fine. But he’s....”

“You’re not fine. And don’t argue with me on this. I want you in the car until the ambulance and cops get here.”

I lift her and stride to the car. She buries her face in my chest. “I can’t look.” Her sobs grow louder and louder.

“You shouldn’t.”

When I lower her into the passenger seat, she’s crying inconsolably.

“Try to breathe.”

“I can’t... did someone do that on purpose?” she wails.

I look her in the eyes and say, “I’ve got the plate.”

When she curls into a ball, her sobs turn to violent wracking wails. I rub her back, offering the only thing I can think to say. “The ambulance is pulling in now, they’ll take care of him.”

I dig my phone out of my pocket and hit Eli’s number. It goes straight to voicemail. “Brother. Call me the instant you get this. There’s a situation. Mia is safe but things are serious.”

I send a text with the same message and shove the phone back in my pocket. Fuck.

“Mia, hun, can you let me get a look at you?”

She buries her head deeper between her knees and cries harder.

Come on, Eli. Fucking get your ass on the phone and get here. I can’t give her what she needs right now.

A half hour later, Mia’s in the back of the ambulance getting a quick check. Her face is ashen. She’s not talking.

The paramedic keeps glancing at me. I return a shake of my head.

“Alright, Ms. Bailey. Best I can tell, you’re just a little bruised up. Put some ice on your jaw when you get back home.”

Mia’s chin quivers as she stares at the sheet covering her legs.

“Mia, what do you need?” I ask from the rear door.

For the first time since the drive-by, she raises her eyes to me. “Where’s Eli?”

“I can’t reach him. I’ve been trying.”

She stares at me with unseeing eyes. A sob claws its way out of her throat. The paramedic slides along the bench, and says, “I’ll give you two a minute. I need to talk to the driver of the other unit.”

He climbs down and gives me a concerned glance as he leaves.

“Mia.” I climb into the bay and take up a spot next to her. “Who is that man Casey to you?”

Green eyes wide with fear, swimming with tears, she says, “He was my handler. And my cover’s blown. I need to run or I’m a dead woman.”

Holy shit.

I grab her, clamp my hand over her mouth, and hiss. “Don’t say another word, it’s not secure here.”

Chapter Fifty-One

Eli

No fucking charging cables?!? How can you operate in the damned twenty-first century and not sell charging cables?

The speaker box on the gas station booth squawks. “Honey! Honey! Don’t go hurtin’ yourself. You look like you’re gonna pop an artery. I got you, boo.”

Unless she’s gonna pull a phone cord out of her ass, she definitely doesn’t have me.

The woman shouts, “Look. I got you!”

A bright pink phone cord appears in the small metal money tray. “I wasn’t going to leave you hanging but you didn’t give me time. That’s my extra cord. You can take it. Whatever’s wrong, you look like you need it more than me.”

I grab the cable as I shake out my hand. “You have no idea how much I appreciate this.” I stare at her for a beat through the glass as I push a fold of bills through the glass. “I’d kiss you if I could.”

She flutters a hand in front of her face. “I’d take you up on that, but I’m married to a big old motorcycle Prez.”

I hold up my hands. “Won’t be kissing you, then.”

She’s still laughing behind that thick window when I leap into the SUV and bust the fuck out of there.

Twenty-five minutes later, I’m pulling into the airport—now that I know which airport. Mako, Marshall Lake, and a guy named Andre are waiting in the terminal.

When I open the door, they all stand and grab their gear. Backpacks, duffels, and a few rolling Pelican cases.

What the hell are these guys planning to do? “You’re loaded for bear.”

Marshall says, “Not sure what we’d need.”

Mako passes me and heads right for the SUV. “Hey,” I call out, “When are you going to tell me what’s up?”

He hooks a thumb at Marshall.

The grim expression my boss is wearing makes my gut twinge.

Andre passes me and says, “Hold onto your shit, Cajun boy. It’s about to get real!”

That kicks me into gear, I fall into stride with them. We load the back of the Navigator to the ceiling.

Fortunately, the gear that was back there is still back there, which means that some kid stole my phone charger but didn’t mess with the rest.

When the four of us are loaded up, I say, “Okay. Time for someone to start talking. You guys are giving me a case of the paranoids.”

Marshall clears his throat. He slides his hat off and runs a hand through his hair.

My phone starts ringing before he starts talking. I snag it off the floor where it fell while I was driving.

When I see the caller ID, another kind of worry slithers into my stomach. “Hold on. This is Beckett.”

The first words out of the Beckett’s mouth are a shouted, “Where the fuck have you been?!”

That worry that slithered into my gut turns into a fire-breathing dragon.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been trying to reach you for an hour. There’s been an accident—”

“Who?” I shout into the phone, cutting him off.

“Mia almost got hit by a car in a drive-by.”

“Fucking hell! A drive-by?” I realize I’m yelling but can’t stop myself. “Is she okay?”

Beckett says, “Just shaken up. But when I say shaken up, she’s freaking out. Look, there’s a whole lot of shit going on. I can’t talk about this on an unsecure line.”

I start the engine and throw the Navigator in reverse. “Where are you?”

Beckett growls. “If you’ll give me a damned second, I’ll tell you, but there’s a whole lot more to this than the near miss. We’ve got some serious shit on our hands.”

That’s why the team has arrived.

I swivel my eyes to my boss. Something big is happening and everyone knows but me. “Beckett, I just picked Marshall, Mako, and Andre up at the private air terminal.”

From the back seat, Mako says, “It’s related to some research I was doing for Eli.”

Beckett shouts through the phone, “DO NOT SAY ANY NAMES OUT LOUD!”

Mako looks affronted. “I wasn’t born yesterday, Jarhead.”

Marshall holds up a hand. “Enough! Beckett, where are you two?”

“On The Five, near Burbank.”

Marshall says, “We need to figure out a place to meet.”

“Copy that,” Beckett replies.

Before he disconnects and I lose my shit completely, I bark, “Beckett!”

“Still here.”

“What does my girl need?”

He’s silent for a beat. “A lot. She’s asking for you. Eli, she’s dealing with a serious blow right now. Her so-called friend was taken down in the car that nearly swiped her. Right now it looks bad, like he might not make it. But she told me something that’s got me seriously concerned.”

The hair on the nape of my neck tightens. “What friend?”

“Some guy named Casey, big red-head mother fucker.”

I almost drop the phone as my vision hazes over. “Six-plus feet, with an ugly haircut?”

Beckett grunts. “Yep.”

“The son-of-a-bitch from the apartment.”

Everyone looks at me.

I clarify, “The one that put a gun in my face before he said he was her boyfriend. And his name was *not* Casey.”

Mako scratches his head. Marshall’s scowl turns to granite. Andre mutters, “Things in L.A. are always jacked as fuck.”

I just didn’t realize how right he was until I disconnected the call. Marshall holds out an EMF blocking bag and says, “Phones off. They all go in this.”

We all power down and drop our phones into the bag. He seals it and throws it in the glovebox.

Then he gets down to business.

“I don’t know how to soften this blow, so I’m not gonna try. Your girlfriend is using a fake identity, and she’s an undercover informant for the DEA.”

Wait.

What the fuck?

“Undercover...” I wheeze out. Everything I know just got flipped on its head. Snippets of my conversations with Mia start flying through my brain. Did I miss something?

Of course, I missed something. My fucking dick was driving the ship.

Furious at Mia, furious at myself, I snap, “Somebody better start talking fast.”

Mako jumps in. “I don’t have much, but on the dark web she’s started to get a reputation and not the good kind. The wrong people are talking about wanting to find her. My guess is that the attack in the alley was someone making a grab for her.”

Fuck. Fucking motherfucking fuck. “Undercover,” I repeat numbly. “As in she’s a plant?”

Mako says, “Yep. Mia Bailey is a fake identity. She just shows up in her neighborhood about fourteen months ago, rents her apartment with cash, and starts building a life. Someone wanted her there for a reason.”

The urge to punch something—again—makes my muscles itch. *Lock this shit down, man. Stay objective. Get the facts.*

Right. Like that’s gonna happen.

Hoarsely, I ask, “Why there?”

Marshall grunts, “Good question. DEA must be onto something there.”

Scrubbing my face with both my hands, I fight to staunch the hemorrhage inside my chest. “So, does that mean she’s employed by the DEA?”

Mako says, “I thought that myself, but when I dig, I can’t find anything. It’s like she’s been scrubbed off the face of the earth. No social presence. All image searches fail.”

Andre shifts in his seat and looks over at me with the same worried-puzzled expression everyone else has. “Until she shows up on the facial recognition thing.”

“Which makes sense,” Marshall says. “That network is getting better every day. Someone must have added a private security feed that finally picked her up outside the bar. Otherwise, she’s been laying low and avoiding all of the usual places someone’s face gets picked up like toll booths, intersections, airports.”

I got no indication that Mia has a car. From what I could tell, working at the bar and sleeping in her apartment was about all she did.

With a sick feeling in my gut, I add another line of thinking to the mix. “Or someone like the NSA or CIA is scrubbing her image every time it hits. Is that possible?”

Mako huffs as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “These days anything is possible.”

A deadly silence settles in the Navigator as I kick myself mentally for not seeing more red flags. I sit forward and drop my head in my hands.

“I heard she might be using a fake identity. It was lost at the scene of her attack. But the other big red flag was her demands not to go to the hospital to get treated. She was adamant about not wanting to be found or entering a system. Truthfully, I thought that could have been related to a violent ex-boyfriend or spouse.”

Somehow, the scars on her stomach play into all of this.

Whatever happened to Mia in the past is bad. It’s driven her to this point. If I’m right, it forced her to go undercover.

But my judgment isn’t reliable any longer.

That ended the day Nyx got taken.

There’s a rumble in the back seat, when I glance in the mirror Andre’s scowl has darkened. He says, “Guys, think about this: Beckett said something big happened today. Some friend of hers just got mowed down in a drive-by, but she didn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” the man replies, “but it’s something to keep in mind. Maybe she’s an assassin.”

Where did that come from?

I’m shocked into damned silence for a minute.

Mako scratches at his jaw as he ponders the spaghetti of secrets. “Could be she’s a criminal that became an informant.”

I whip my eyes to him in the rearview and telegraph him the threat of bodily harm.

“The fuck?” I snap. “The woman can’t stand violence, she can’t be an assassin. What else did you find out from your background research?”

Marshall shifts in his seat. “Start driving. We’ll fill you in on everything.”

The back door pops open. The whole vehicle rocks side to side. Andre strides around to the driver’s side, jerks my door wide open.

“Out.”

I glare up at the crazy fucker. “No!”

His lip snarls. “Out. I’m not riding with you when you look like a grenade with the pin pulled.”

Marshall plants two hands on my shoulder and pushes me toward the opening. “I second that.”

When I lurch out, Andre narrows his eyes as he peers down at me. He’s a big mother, but I got no problem with that. The big ones fall the hardest.

Lord, my grandmother would kick my ass if she knew all I wanted to do was punch everything and fight anyone like I was fifteen again.

Andre stares down at me. “Got a problem, Squid? We can take it to the mat.”

Oh, I see. Now I get it. “Another fucking Marine?”

A feral grin spreads over Andre’s square face.

I turn to glare into the back seat, “Mako, you should have warned me that we were up to our eyeballs in—”

“Don’t even say it,” Andre warns.

He pushes me out of the way, gets in the driver’s seat and slams the door.

Mako slings open the back door. I launch myself inside. Truth is, I’m glad he’s driving, because I’m a goddamned wreck.

Every possible horrible scenario my mind can conjure clogs up my head.

The lump in my throat is so tight, I can barely say, “You better get this damned truck in the wind. I got a ton of shit to figure out.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

Mia

Beckett scoops me up in his arms and carries me out of the ambulance. He strides to the Charger, puts me in, buckles me up and tears out of the parking lot.

“Don’t say anything important.”

I grab the bar over the door and hang on.

After he takes another hair-raising turn, he says, “Do you know how to drive?”

“I can drive. I don’t have a license.”

“But you can handle a vehicle?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’re going to be ditching this and I may need you to follow me for a short time.”

“How are you going to get a car?”

“You’ll see.”

He drags his phone out of his pocket, “Call Eli.”

I almost drop his phone when he pushes it toward me.

I cue up his contact for Eli, but before I dial, I say, “You know I could be putting him in danger.”

“Call him,” he snaps.

Eli answers on the second ring. “Beck—”

The sound of his voice cuts right through my heart. “Hey, it’s me.”

There’s a swift inhale on the other end of the call. “Babe, are you okay?”

“No new injuries.”

Beckett says, “Change of plans, we’re heading out of town, gotta meet some friends, kind of a sudden thing. You know, sometimes you just feel like you gotta get out of town.”

Another swift intake of air on Eli’s end. “Copy that.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Beckett says as he tips his chin toward me. “Disconnect.”

My finger hovers over the red button that would end the call. I’m dying to say something. Anything. It could be my last chance.

Pain squeezes my chest, climbs up my throat. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, “I’m sorry, I won’t forget you.”

Beckett reaches over and punches the ‘End’ button. There’s something new in his expression now, it’s awfully close to sadness.

“This is not the end of you two,” he resolutely says.

Then he drives until he spots a rental car place.

“Climb over here into the driver’s seat. Be ready to roll when I am.”

I shove aside the sadness that thinking about never seeing Eli again makes me feel. And I replace it with determination. And apparently a healthy dose of nerves.

My skin gets tight, my stomach turns nervous, and I feel a tremor start in my hands as I climb over the console. One of

our drivers taught me how to do this. But it's been so long.

The car's on. *That's good.*

And this is... the gear shifter.

I fasten my belt and feel for the lever to scoot the seat up. But I can't find it.

Shoot, I'll never reach the pedals without moving the seat. Beckett's too tall. My hands scramble all over the bottom of the seat. "Come on. Where are you?" I beg.

Then I find a button on the side. It raises me up. That's interesting. I can see better. But it doesn't move me forward.

Beckett and a man walk out of the store. They head for a white cargo van. I'm frantically searching for another button, or the lever, or whatever stupid gadget moves the seat.

I'm in a panic by the time they shake hands. Then it gets worse when Beckett opens the van door and climbs inside.

Oh my god. I can't reach!

When the van starts moving, I really freak out. Which I know, is the worst thing to do.

Okay, girl, keep your head together.

I unbuckle my belt and scoot to the edge of the seat. Ridiculous, I know. But it works. I press the brake. Try the lever for the gears and the car jolts. I take that as a good sign.

Okay, all or nothing. I grip the wheel far too hard and press-test the gas pedal.

The car lurches forward. Throws me back against the seat. And to put the icing on the cake—the tires squeal.

Holy smokes! That wasn't subtle. It wasn't quiet. It was just the kind of attention I don't need.

The only thing I can think of is to throw my arm up and flip the bird at some imaginary person, like I meant to do that.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Eli

“A damned hour. I thought he’d call by now,” I bitch toward Mako. Until we hear from him, we don’t know where to go to meet them.

I’m not even processing the fact that Mia said goodbye to me. That’s not happening.

Hell no.

I’ve already decided, I don’t care what kind of shit she’s tangled up in. She and I have things to work out.

But good Christ, an informant?

CIA? ATF? FBI? Some kind of alphabet soup agency bullshit...

Not to mention that she doesn’t exist. The woman’s a ghost. She’s a *fucking* ghost.

The more time goes on, the more my mind makes a knot of the details. As the minutes go by, a new kind of desperation sets up camp inside me. I need to see her.

We need to talk this out face-to-face.

I need her eyes on me. Want her to face me when she tells me everything. That's all I need from her. The truth. I don't care what it is.

I need to get the fuck out of this gas station parking lot. Seems like all I do these days is loiter.

Mako tosses a balled-up piece of paper into an old coffee cup for the hundredth time. "Want to try? It helps pass the time."

"No." I pace some more instead. Andre's asleep behind the steering wheel, arms crossed, sunglasses on, he looks like a mannequin. Marshall's stretched out on the back seat snoozing.

Me? I'm nowhere near being able to sit down, close my eyes, or hold still.

Mako misses the cup and the paper rolls toward me. He says, "You know Beckett's got his act wired tight, right?"

I can't breathe when I think about what he does or doesn't have wired. It's too personal now.

Mako scoops up his improvised ball and throws the wad of paper at my head. "I know he's not a Team guy, but Marshall trusts him. That says volumes, man."

"Good. Fucking good. But you know what? I can't trust myself, man. I missed too many things."

"Eli," he scolds.

But when he doesn't go on, I slowly turn to look at him.

He gives me a dead-eye stare. "You gotta quit beating yourself up."

"Right." I'm not even giving air to this conversation.

He shakes his head and picks up the paper. He goes back to his game of whatever as I take up a spot on the curb, sit my ass down, and hang my head between my hands.

"What will you do if she's gotta run?"

“Go with her.”

He chuckles darkly. “Somehow, I knew that’s what you’d say. You’d just throw your life away?”

I lean back and look up at the tree swaying overhead. “What life?”

“Family? Friends?”

“My grandmother’s all I got. She knew I was as good as gone when I left for the SEALs. We said our peace.”

He stops moving and shakes his head. “Fuck, dude, that’s hard.”

“It is what it is. Knew I might not come home. How’s this any different?”

“You’d just be able to walk away from that?”

I turn toward him, “You tell me, would you run with your wife if she needed to?”

“Fuck yes. But this woman’s not your wife. You’ve only known her a few days.”

“When you met your woman, did you doubt for a minute she was your one?”

He stops with his hand in the air, before he releases the paper. His hand falls to his side. “No, I didn’t.”

“Then you get it.”

He sighs and takes the shot. It’s a dead ringer.

Suddenly, my voice is rough. “I’m not afraid of who she is. I’m afraid of who I’m not without her.”

Mako drops his hands onto his hips and looks at the ground. “Not gonna lie. You say that to her, she’s gonna want to marry your ugly ass.”

“Not likely. But I’ll take what I can and run with it.”

“Right on, brother. Right on. You call me when you say those vows. I’ll come wherever, even if I have to go undercover.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

Mia

Thank god, we don't drive far. Beckett turns into a busy Walmart parking lot. My eyes go wide. Oh crap. Tight spaces are not a good idea.

He stops near a few open parking places, parks the van, then hustles around to the driver side of the car. "Scoot."

I climb over the console. "Figured I need to park, or you might run someone over."

"You saw that?"

He smirks at me, then forces his serious expression again. "Everyone saw that."

"I couldn't reach the pedal! You left me hanging."

He's shaking his head as he slips the Charger into a spot. "Let's go."

I hustle as fast as I can to the van. When I'm buckled in, he pulls out. This time, he takes a more leisurely pace.

"Why a white van?"

“Because there are a million of them in every town.”

When I glance around, I realize there are three of them within throwing distance from us. “I see. Good point. Now what?”

“We’re going to a remote little place I go to from time to time.”

“You know you’re living dangerously dragging me around, right?”

“I’ve lived dangerously for my whole life.”

I sigh. “Me too.”

After that, he falls into a focused silence. He drives, I watch the buildings go by. Then the land starts to open up. After a while, the houses grow more and more sparse. Finally, it’s just wide-open stretches of desert.

“It’s pretty, but I expected more cacti,” I say.

“Never been here?”

“I haven’t been many places.”

With a distant look, Beckett says, “I’ve been to a lot of places, most of them I didn’t like.”

My soul sighs this time. “I haven’t liked the places I’ve been.”

He glances over but goes back to looking at the road. “Maybe you’ll like this place.”

“I hope,” I say quietly. Because it could be my last stop. If my cover was blown. This could be it. My brothers could find me. Not that I was particularly hard to find, but Casey promised he’d done all he could. So, I tried to lay low, fit in, and do my job. Jobs.

I lived this long, so... I guess he was right.

Sort of.

Until it all fell apart.

The sun fades into the desert as the rattle and hum of the cargo van lulls me into a numb state. I’m not sure how that’s

possible, except I remember a time when I first ran that I felt like this. Like I was outside myself looking in.

“We’re close,” Beckett says.

“Good, I’m going to need a hot tub to work out these kinks,” I mumble without looking at him. My body is sore. Hitting the ground again compounded my already achy muscles. And we’ve been driving for hours.

While getting out of the van will give me some physical relief, I don’t expect it will help my heart. That’s pretty much beyond repair now. I’m not sure why I let myself hope that Eli and I could have something. But it was stupid. My brothers will just—

I shudder.

I can’t even think about what horrible things they’d do to Eli.

No. They won’t. I won’t let that happen.

The sky turns dark as my mood gets more tenebrious. Stars begin to sparkle above, and it feels like we’re driving off the edge of the world into some black void. To a place where creatures and people hide.

I can’t remember the last car we passed. “You weren’t kidding when you said we were going somewhere remote.”

“I like to get away.”

“Do you live out here?”

“I don’t live anywhere,” he weirdly replies.

“You know, I think I’m the same.” After pondering that for a minute, I ask, “What about the apartment?”

“It’s a safehouse that belongs to Agile.”

Oh. Wow.

“Now it makes sense.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s very sterile.”

He chuckles and rubs the back of his neck. “Clean, you mean?”

“That too.”

“It’s a nice place,” he remarks, “but it’s just a shell. Not a home.”

I say, “It could be, I guess. All depends on who is living there.”

His mood shifts and I wonder why the change, but I know Beckett doesn’t like to talk.

He doesn’t comment farther and neither do I, but I wonder if Eli is the same as Beckett. Does he live on the road for his work, bouncing from safehouse to other rented properties?

He said he was from Louisiana, but that was it.

A long while after dark, we roll into a tiny town. He turns into a vintage-style motel—complete with a big pink sign—and drives around the back where he slowly cruises past a row of guest rooms.

If we weren’t here under such stressful circumstances, I’d think the place was adorable, the kind of place for a sweet couple’s getaway. Right down to the vintage patio furniture. But my head is pretty clogged up right now.

The van finally comes to a stop and the silence that follows the engine cutting off feels like a little slice of heaven. For several beats, we sit in the quiet stillness. But my need to know wins and I finally ask, “Is Eli coming here?”

“Already here.”

I bolt upright from my slump. A volcano of emotion goes off inside of me. The mixture is potent—regret, fear, guilt, worry. I breathe out my next question, “Where is he?”

“I’m about to find out. Hold tight.”

Beckett, gotta appreciate the guy, he’s a get-shit done kind of fella. He has had my back at every turn. I won’t forget that when these days are long ago memories. *If I live that long*, I remind myself.

He unfolds from the van and strides to the small office. An ancient looking clerk in a blue leisure suit, is all smiles as he talks and waves his arms.

Beckett's chuckling when he returns. He holds up a key and crooks a finger in my direction.

While I was excited about getting out of the passenger seat, it proves to be hard. *My god, I'm stiff.*

Patiently, he walks me to a door with a sign that reads, 'The Presidential Suite.'

"Fancy," I joke because I'm now nervous as hell. I have no idea what Beckett's told Eli, or how Eli's going to react to whatever he does know.

"Nineteen-fifties fancy, just hope the mattresses are new," Beckett replies as he scans the area. When he's satisfied by whatever, he knocks.

There are some sounds of footfalls of someone walking inside the room. Two locks click, then the barrier swings wide. A big, mean-faced man glowers down at me. "They're here," he announces.

Eli shoves past him. Relief hits the second my eyes land on him, weakening my knees.

Until I see the fury and how cold his nearly black eyes are.

I draw back, but he grabs me up in his arms, secures my injured arm, and holds me in a fireman's carry with a snarl.

"Eli!" I squeak.

I hang onto his shirt with my good arm as he strides through the suite, past some guys I've never seen before, and right into a bedroom.

He kicks the door closed with his heel and stomps to the bed where he gently sets me down.

Honestly, I thought he might throw me onto the bed with the head of steam he had going.

But that's where his patience ends. He steps back, shoves his hands in his hair and roars at me.

Roars—peel the paint roars.

Whatever comes out of Eli is so raw and ragged, it's not even words. That fury spears into me and twists like a knife blade.

I fold over on myself from the pain. I caused this. I hate knowing that.

When he stops, he's panting. His eyes are midnight black. The cords in his throat look like they might snap. My hands burn to reach out and touch him, to help him.

But I don't have the nerve to. Or maybe I have too much respect for his pain and how he has to process it.

With a grumbled, "Dammit all to hell," Eli rears back and kicks the fifties style melamine trash can. The smack of plastic against the wall is loud. I reflexively flinch as I watch the thing splinter.

One of the guys in the other room yells, "You guys okay?"

"I'm fine," I return loudly.

But Eli's not okay.

Very not okay.

I get it. And if experience tells me anything, he needs his space to work this out. That doesn't mean it isn't killing me to sit still. I've never wanted to wrap someone in my arms and take their pain more in my life.

He double fists his hair this time and rocks forward until he's bent at the waist. In a throaty voice, he growls, "Fuck, Mia."

I open my mouth and stop. There's something stuck in my throat. Pretty sure my heart is clawing its way free. Leaving this body, this place of such dark agony.

I want to go to Eli, hold him. Take this anger into me, into the hollow dark vessel I've become, because I want him to live. To love. To be free. All of the things I'll never truly be able to know.

Finally, I risk a soft, "Eli—"

He holds up a hand. “Don’t talk yet. I’m trying to keep my shit together here.”

That hand goes to his face scrubs hard and he resumes the pacing. Only this isn’t really pacing, it’s stalking. It’s bitter. Angry and barely controlled.

I’m not afraid of Eli. He’s been so caring, but I try to call up my armor because whatever Eli’s going to say is going to hurt far worse than my two brothers’ fists ever did. Far worse than a knife slicing across the tender skin of my stomach.

My eyes widen when he moves across the room to me. Still breathing wildly, he looks down from his towering height. I reach for him, but he pushes my hand down and away. “No.”

Letting my hand fall to my lap, I wait with my heart throbbing painfully. When he says nothing, I stand up and move past him. “I’ll just be out here.”

“You walk out that door and I’m coming to get you and carrying you back in here again.”

A huff rolls out of my lips. That sound is a last gasp from something deep inside of me. “Why? So you can yell and curse and not talk to me?”

He lasers in on me and all that anger makes my skin heat. He demands again, “You don’t see it, do you?”

I open my mouth and shock myself at the hateful words that come rolling out. “That I look like a woman from your past? Yeah, I see it every time I look in the mirror, or look at your back,” I say with bile stinging the back of my throat.

Eli’s big body rocks back. “No, that’s not it at all,” he says hoarsely.

“What, then?”

Chapter Fifty-Five

Mia

The change in Eli is explosive. His hand snakes out, grabs the back of my neck and before I know what's happening, he's nose to nose with me. "This," he rasps out, then he slams his mouth into mine.

All that pent up energy scorches me. He doesn't tease me or toy with me. Eli owns me with his tongue. My body comes alive. Electric from head to toe, nipple to clit. Tingles skate along my skin. A deep moan builds in my chest as he pulls me up toward his height.

This is the kiss of all kisses. Even in my confused lust-filled state, I know none will ever compare.

This is total annihilation. Eli inhales me, devours me. As he holds me still with one hand at my nape and his other hand fisted in my hair, I disappear into sensation.

The strong, hot thrust of his tongue sends need crawling through me. Every brush of his five o'clock stubble makes me shiver.

The pressure of his demanding lips only makes me crave more.

Eli takes me to a place I've never been before.

Total surrender. His power and control over me is complete, but that hammer is wrapped in velvet tenderness. Eli's silent message sweeps me up, washes over me, invades every cell with an undercurrent of something so big it shatters my mind.

When he pulls back, he pushes me over the edge with his rough voice.

"You don't see that I fucking love you, Mia."

Oh no.

No. Not that.

I sway on my feet. Love...

He loves me?

Something hot blooms inside me, like I'm bleeding out in there. My throat goes dry, my eyes burn like I've walked through fire. When I catch my breath, I whisper. "You shouldn't."

"You can't tell the heart that. It doesn't work that way, and you know it."

"Don't ask me to stay. I can see that whatever you found out about me has pushed you to the brink of control."

He inhales roughly and brushes his thumb across my cheek. "You're right. I have been pushed to the edge."

Swamped by sadness, I let my gaze drop. "I'll have one of the other men take me somewhere. I just don't know where yet."

His hand falls from my hair and clasps onto my hip. As he squeezes, stormy energy pulses off of him so strongly it sends a shiver down my spine. I look up into his hard eyes, breathless, heartbroken.

If only...I wasn't who I am.

Not Mia. Not the name he growls. Not the fictitious person that thought she could have a life.

His eyes spark like dark diamonds as he looks down at me. “I fell in love with you on the fire escape.”

Oooof.

The edges of his eyes crinkle as the hardness in his gaze softens, “When you fought me even though you were injured and scared. I fell hard. There’s no getting rid of me. I love you, Mia. I know it’s fast but fuck it. We only have now. And I know with my soul that our dark hearts belong together.”

His last word is tangled in a raw growl.

I burst into tears.

What has this man done to me?

Eli rocks back and falls to his knees in front of me. His arms lash around me like two steel bands. When he buries his face in my stomach, I lose control and a lifetime of emotions steamrolls me.

His big chest jolts. The hard circle of his arms draws even tighter. “You made me feel alive again,” he rasps.

All the old dark emotions whoosh out of me. Forced away by something new. I wrap my good arm around him, shove my fingers into his hair, and pray that I never have to let him go.

He shifts his face, kisses my stomach through my shirt, and tilts his head up and gives me his tortured gaze.

Eli’s eyes are bloodshot, his face is lined from stress. He looks utterly shredded. Seeing him like this hits me so hard it steals my breath.

I whisper, “I fell for you when you stocked the fridge.”

His lips twitch. “Good to know the way to your heart.”

My voice goes all husky, “Oh, sweet Eli, I’m just kidding. I fell for you when you had me at the bar. And harder still when you didn’t see my scars.”

When he places his hand on my stomach, I have to fight the natural instinct to flinch. But his throaty voice is like balm when he says, “I see them, babe, for what they are. Proof of how strong you are.”

“I’m not what you think I am Eli, and if you know what’s good for you, you need to let me go.”

That earns me a sharp slap on the ass. Ouch.

He makes himself very clear with his tone. “If you say that again, we’re going to have fighting words.”

“I’m serious, Eli. Not joking here. You don’t even understand what comes with me. It’s so bad...” My voice drops to a threadbare whisper, “So bad. You won’t say you love me after you find out.”

“Babe...,” he rises and gets in my face as he wraps his arms around my back. “I’m not letting you go. I’ll hunt you down if you run.”

I flinch and try to cover my reaction by forcing myself still.

Can I lie to Eli for his safety? I’ve told so many lies in the last year and a half, I’m not even sure of the truth any longer.

My heart starts to burn with heat as he cups my face. It flares to an inferno when he brushes his lips across mine, then kisses my forehead.

God. I want this.

“Now we need to get down to business,” he says as the expression on his face completely transforms. Gone is the blazing emotional tornado, back is the stern, calculating SEAL.

Evident by what he says next, which your average girl would take as cold, but I know is simply the truth.

“It fucks me to say this, but you need to know. Informants that have been outed on the dark web don’t have very long lifespans.”

And the depth of my situation hits even harder.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Eli

This time she jolts. Her chin dips down, gaze falls to the floor as her mouth goes slack.

My words sound cruel to my own ears when I follow up with, “The gig is up.”

Maybe I’m so harsh because I want her to want me. To need me.

“I know,” she whispers.

Stay. Stay with me because you want me.

She watches me with misty eyes as I rub the back of my neck. Yeah, I’m proper fucked. Because, despite her words, if this is a one-sided love affair I’m gonna be a beast to deal with.

If there’s any hope of us having anything beyond life on the run, we need to deal and deal fast. “Who do you work for?”

Slowly, she licks her lips as she looks everywhere but at me.

“Mia, we got to get this shit out in the open.”

When she blinks and refocuses on me, there’s shame behind that clouded look. “I don’t know who I work for.”

What? No.

Anger fires along my spine. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“The Department of Justice, I guess. But I’m not sure. I’m in WITSEC, and I just do what I’m told.”

I tilt my head back and stare at the ceiling like there might be some answers up there. The fuck? Witness protection? That revelation makes zero damned sense.

Mia takes the opportunity and skirts around me. She gingerly walks across the room and picks up the broken trash can. As if I don’t feel guilty enough about kicking the stupid thing like a teenager in a tantrum, now my woman’s picking up the pieces.

“Don’t. Leave it. I’ll take care of it and pay the hotel.”

She glances at me, surprised.

“I’m not a total dickhead believe it or not.”

“I know that,” she pronounces.

I hold up a hand. “But I’m going to push you hard until I can get to the bottom of that shitstorm.”

Her teeth latch onto her lip and she stands there looking at me as she holds those shards of plastic.

I stalk toward her, take those broken pieces, and get in her personal space again until I’m so close she has to look up at me. “What do you mean, you’re in WITSEC?”

“Witness protection...” she murmurs softly.

“I know what WITSEC is.”

“Then you know—”

“You do what you’re told, as in, you keep a low profile, you get a job, start a new life.”

Her hand comes up and fists her hair. A tired sigh drops her shoulders. “That, and I have to gather intel on people.”

Wait. What? “On people related to the case you’re being protected for?”

“No. Just stuff. Like drugs. Human trafficking. That kind of thing. Whatever is happening around my neighborhood.”

Fuck, what’s going on here? Scowling, I say, “That’s not how WITSEC works.”

Her long lashes flutter in a series of blinks. “Yes, it is.”

I toss the trash on the dresser and stride for the door. When I jerk it open, I bellow, “Who out here knows the most about WITSEC?”

Andre grumbles something, then raises a hand, “Probably me.”

“Get in here.”

His stone face turns into a stone-faced scowl as he shoves off of this chair. “Some SEAL is feeling bossy.”

When he walks through the doorway to the bedroom, he looks between us. “What’s up?”

I ask, “Have you ever heard of someone in WITSEC gathering intel?”

“About people outside their own case?”

“Yeah, you know just general informant kind of shit. Like a street informant?”

Andre draws back. “That’s a hell no. The whole goal of WITSEC is to get you in some low-key everyday mom and pop kind of role. So you can disappear and live happily ever after with two point five kids and a picket fence.”

I watch Mia’s face the whole time. The confusion hits first. Followed by a jerk of her body like she’s been slapped.

“I don’t understand,” she says as she looks at Andre, then me.

Neither do I.

I ask, “Why are you in WITSEC?”

That’s when Mia’s expression turns full-on terrified.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Mia

I've never felt so many extreme emotions in one day. Like I'm on some seesaw and have no idea what's going to be at the top or bottom next. But this time, fear jolts up my spine and out to my hands which go instantly cold.

"I'm not supposed to talk about it. Truthfully, it's not safe for you to know." I tuck my hands.

Eli reaches for my hand and links his fingers between mine "Sweetheart, we're deep already."

Beckett appears in the doorway. "Maybe it would be a good time for all of us to have a talk."

"He's right. The team needs to know so they can help make you safe."

I rush into Eli's arms. I don't want to tell them.

"Come on," He guides me to the sitting area of the suite. "Let's get this over with. Then you can get some rest."

All eyes are on me. Five men. All intense. Every one of them looks battle-hardened.

“Trust us,” Eli urges as he guides me to the sofa. He sits first, and pulls me into his lap, wrapping his big arms around me.

“What do you need to know?” I ask. The sound of my voice is weird to my ears. It sounds outside of me, like I’m a million miles away.

Eli snugs me closer. “Why don’t you start by telling us what the case is that you went into witness protection for.”

Christ. That first?

My stomach gets tight and my blood starts to boom inside my head. “It’s a case against my brothers,” I say, easing myself into the story.

They all hold perfectly still.

“They’re criminals. The worst of the worst. And I turned them in.”

Eli’s breath is held, I can feel his heartbeat pounding now against my side.

“Is it safe for me to say confidential things here?”

A man I’ve never met before nods. “I’m Marshall Lake. I own Agile Security and Rescue. We swept the rooms and all the phones are in protective bags to prevent any listening.”

I wish that made me feel better, but it doesn’t. I’ll never truly believe that I’m safe from my brothers until they’re locked deep in the bowels of some prison. Or dead.

I suck in a breath, exhale hard and say, “Do you know the last name Siblio?”

Every single man in the room sits forward, including Eli. His chest bumps into my shoulder and he repositions me on his lap. “Yeah, I know it,” he grumbles near my ear.

“Well... my name is Mariah Evelyn Siblio. My brothers are Ruben and Mel Siblio.”

Beckett curses, “Fuck. You mean, the arms dealers?”

I nod. Eli goes rigid beneath me and roughly says, “Holy fuck.”

For a long time, everyone just looks at me and the silence is agonizing. I want to throw Eli’s arms off me and run outside, run far away. Pretend this isn’t my life.

Only, it won’t do any good. I brush a tear off my lashes with my wrist and in a raspy voice say, “So, you see why I told you that it’s not good for any of you to be involved.”

“You’re wrong, we’re exactly who you want involved,” Eli says firmly.

“I second that,” Marshall says. Then Beckett, and then the other two guys confirm. Now every single one of them has a pissed-off, determined face that makes me have hope.

Wait. Did I just think that?

Hope?

“We’ve got a lot of work to do,” Beckett says.

Eli brushes a kiss over my temple. “Sweetheart, tell them about the arrangement you had for your witness protection situation.”

I grimace, “Well, you made it sound like it’s not exactly normal. But this is how it went.”

I lay out all the details. How I called the ATF and talked to Casey. How he met me at a coffee shop and gave me a few thousand dollars, a driver’s license—even though I’d never legally had one—and a plane ticket.

“He told me where to live. Where to work. And even told me to take the cosmetology program down the street. Then he’d ask me to do little jobs. You know... listen for someone to talk about this. Or to watch for people exchanging money. Keep my eyes open for women that might have been in trafficking situations.”

“Why would he do that?” Eli asks the guys.

“Hell if I know,” Marshall says. The others agree.

Then Eli says, “Did you *have* to do this work? What were the consequences if you didn’t?”

“Yeah, I had to, or my protection would be canceled.”

He curses and his hands flex on me. “So, he was blackmailing you into doing shit, for some reason.”

A heaviness hits my chest. It’s the feeling of being betrayed. I know it well. “I guess maybe he was. I didn’t know.” That realization leaves me winded and tired.

“Do you really think he was lying to me all along?”

No one says anything.

Tears start to sting at my throat. “You mean that no one is building a case against my brothers?”

Eli brushes my hair aside. “Sweetheart, men like us have been hunting your brothers for years.”

I jolt. “You have?”

“They’re some of the most wanted criminals in the world.”

“My brother Ruben wants me back, I know it,” I whisper.

“I’m sure he knows you could help bring him down.”

It takes a few beats of my raging heart before I can get my next words out. “That’s not all he wants me for.”

The room goes electric, but I don’t get a chance to say anything else. Eli stands up with me in his arms.

He barks out an order, “You guys, get lost,” and strides into the bedroom. He shuts the door quietly and carries me to the bed.

“You do not have to tell those men anything that you don’t want to tell them. They know enough now.”

Through a throat full of tears, I ask, “What about you?”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Mia

The look on Eli's face is a storm of angry emotions. But his voice is gentle when he asks, "What do you need, baby?"

Mia rasps, "You." You. *You.*

His pupils dilate as he draws in a deep breath. When his hand moves to stroke my hair, there's a tremor in his touch. "We have a lot to talk about. But you need to rest first."

I nod as a lump starts to clog my throat again. "I need to tell you some things—" I can't even find words.

Eli's gaze rakes my body and apparently what he sees makes him pissed. With a hard look in his eyes, he says, "You're exhausted. You're in pain. You've gotten the shit scared out of you. You're pale."

With a huff, I say, "I know I look like shit. You don't have to elaborate."

His face softens as he pulls the throw blanket over me. "I didn't mean it like that."

A tired sigh slips out between my lips. My body is starting to shut down now that I know I'm safe. Eli will protect me.

I say, "You did. It's okay. I know I do."

"When's the last time you took something for pain?"

I try to do math, but it's hard. My brain is mushy and clouded with physical pain and painful thoughts. "About eight hours ago."

He shakes out a pill for me and unscrews the cap on the water bottle. I watch him with rapt attention as he presses the Motrin to my lips and holds the bottle up for me to drink.

Eli's incredibly gentle for a man his size. For a man who wrecks my heart.

My heart...

When he's finally satisfied that I've taken my medicine and had enough water, he moves around the room closing the blinds to block the remaining evening light. The room grows shadowy. I'm not sure if I like that or not.

Fear starts to build in my veins.

"Eli, can you leave a light on in the bathroom?"

His footfalls retreat and a soft light comes on in the bathroom. When I expect him to open the bedroom door and leave, the bed dips behind me.

"What—"

"I'm not leaving you alone. Not after what you've gone through today."

"Eli," I exhale. "My whole life has been a series of traumatic events."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I'd take that all away if I could. Since I can't, I'll be right here. Right with you. You're not ever going to be out of my sight again."

Ever.

Ever out of his sight again.

A warm flush starts to build in my chest but my head ruins it. Douses that sunshine with ice water.

And when he stretches his big body alongside mine, I stiffen. There are so many things in between us right now.

Nyx, whoever *she* is, is in the room—in this bed—between us.

I force myself to speak. “Can I ask a question?”

His head turns in the darkness. Not that I can see him clearly, but I feel those powerful eyes of his on me.

“Would it be better if you let your brain have some rest before?”

“No, not this,” I whisper.

“Then if it will help you rest easier, ask away.”

I stare at the ceiling. The words feel awkward on my tongue, like misshapen blocks that won’t fit together correctly.

“Are you still in love with Nyx?”

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Eli

I should have known. Fuck. Me. Why didn't I think...

As I roll onto my side, I cup Mia's cheek. Her pretty eyes have a sheen that burns bright in the darkened room.

"I went about everything wrong," I start. "I didn't tell you everything about Nyx because I wasn't ready. I see now what a fucking huge mistake that was."

I'll never be ready to talk about Nyx and the mistakes I made until she's safe, but Mia deserves the truth. I was stupid for not seeing how she could think—

Her breath catches, she turns her face so she's looking at the ceiling.

"I was wrong. Maybe I can't take this right now. Pretend for me tonight. Just tonight. Pretend you're not in love with her."

I've never had a knife to the gut, but I'm pretty sure this is what it feels like. I'm such an idiot and I've made Mia hurt because I was too blind to see what she sees.

“Mia. I’m not in love with Nyx.”

She says nothing and holds perfectly still. Not even a breath whispers from her.

The knife twists and the pain grows almost unbearable. Rendering me paralyzed as I lay on the bed next to her.

“Baby, do you hear me?”

In a shaky voice, Mia asks, “But you were?”

“No,” I reply in a rough whisper. “I mean, I love her like a little sister, but I’ve never been in love with her. I’ve never let anyone into my heart that way until now.”

Now.

Right fucking now.

Christ, it hurts.

Now I know that I’m helpless to it. Whatever spell Mia has cast is deep. Pulsing in my veins. The need to protect her. To make her mine.

An agonizing silence drops between us. It’s a living void, teeming with danger and unseen obstacles.

Say something, idiot.

I struggle with finding my way. My compass falters. I don’t know what to say to get this right. But I know in the bottom of my soul that this is the moment that makes or breaks this fragile thing between us.

Mia beats me to it when she says, “Who is she and why does she look like me?”

I shift and move to the edge of the bed so I can reach the light. I need to see her face when we talk about this. I want to hide in the shadows, hide my pain and failure. But we’re beyond that.

This stops tonight.

The truth will be said.

The wounds bared.

From her and me.

I wanted to wait until she had time to recover from the trauma of the day, but that's not happening.

“Cover your eyes, sweetheart. I'm turning on the light.”

When I face Mia, her heart's in her eyes. Tears brim on the lashes, darkening the color. She bites at her lip, as she waits for me.

I clear my throat and fist my hands. “Nyx was an interpreter that worked with my team.”

The words sear a fresh path up my throat. “She was funny, brave, and utterly determined. Foolishly so, sometimes. But Christ, we all admired her grit. Never complained. Never...”

Emotion swells up from my heart, sealing my throat tight. I sit with my pulse pounding, my chest locked, and my mind scorching with memories of that day.

Mia's fingers touch my arm, making me jump. Softly, she asks, “Are you okay?”

I shake my head. No more lies. No more hiding.

Her fingers tighten on my wrist. “What happened?”

Choked words rasp out of me. “I fucked up.”

“How?”

I can't look at Mia with those eyes that are so much like Nyx's right now. It hurts too fucking bad. I raise my gaze to the wall. To the stupid floral wallpaper that Nyx would have loved.

“One time, Nyx had this magazine, fuck if I know where she got it. But it was a Home and Garden thing. She fondled the pages till they were tattered, talking on and on about what her house in America would look like one day. She wanted flowers. Fucking flowers everywhere—”

My chest bucks as a sob crushes the air out of me. “Fuck, Mia. She was so innocent. She never even had a boyfriend.”

That dangerous silence returns.

Steeling my jaw, I try to hold back the tears, but they sting so bad, push so hard, like a bulldozer, breaking the wall I try to keep them behind.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Mia scrambles to sit up and wraps her good arm around my shoulders. “Tell me. Let all that out, you can’t hold it in.”

My arms fly around her and my face crashes into her neck. My body bucks as the anguish locked inside me tries to tear me in half.

“I made the wrong call. I sent her with a four-man team for a quick meeting.” My words drop to a ragged whisper. “The team was ambushed. The tangos grabbed her.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry, Eli. I know you didn’t do anything wrong—”

“I did. I fucking did, Mia. My gut was on fire that day. Something was wrong. Something was screwed, but I ignored my biggest strength and I sent—” My voice gets foreign to my own ears, “The most vulnerable member of the team into the *goddamn* snake pit.”

The venom of my last words makes Mia jolt against me. Then her arms tighten around me even more. “You did not do that, Eli.”

I did. I was the one in charge of the mission.

I fucking did it.

I got her kidnapped.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You did the best you could,” Mia whispers.

I’m numb to her remark.

I’ve heard it all. But I’ll never forgive myself.

I rasp out, “I have to find her.”

Mia pushes me back. She forces herself into my line of vision. “You will. You *will* find her. She’s going to come home. She’s coming to America. Do you hear me? She’s going

to have a house with flowers and someone to love her and protect her. You have to keep believing that for her.”

God.

Please.

My voice hitches as I say something that I’ve never said aloud before. “Sometimes, I pray she died fast.”

Her hand brushes across my chest and stops over my sternum. “I understand. More than you will ever know.”

I cup Mia’s face. Sweet, beautiful Mia. Before I knew who she is, I might have said she has no idea of the vile cruelties of the world, but she does.

She knows.

Yet somehow, she wants me to keep hope...

“You will find her,” she vows.

I study her perfect face, letting myself really see both Nyx and Mia there. I swallow hard around the fear inside of me, and say, “I want that.”

Those three words mean so much more than Mia thinks. I don’t just want Nyx home. I want Mia.

In my bed. In my arms. In my broken fucking heart.

But the devil on my shoulder says, *you’ll lose this one too.*

Fuck him.

Fuck that bastard.

Yet, the seed of doubt has been growing inside me since that night at her apartment.

Chapter Sixty

Mia

Oh no. No. Not now.

I demand, “What just happened, Eli?”

The transformation happened in a flash. Now Eli’s locked down so tight the cords of his neck are standing out.

“Tell me,” I encourage. “Eli. Don’t lock me out.”

For a long time, I hold my breath.

I’m desperate to help him by the time he breaks the tense silence by saying, “I’ve been down a dark road these last couple days. There’s this voice in my head that has been trying to tell me that I can’t keep anyone safe. I called my Team guys. Got my head back in the game. That’s why I need to say some things tonight.”

A tiny bit of relief hits me.

“I’m glad you reached out to someone. I’ve heard you guys get really close.”

“We do. I miss them,” he grumbles as he draws a deep breath. For a long time, he just looks at our clasped hands. “I ran into someone today that told me all the things I needed to hear.”

I squeeze his hand and duck down so he’s looking at me again. “I’m glad. I don’t like seeing you in pain.”

“Obviously, I needed someone to snap my shit into shape.”

“Don’t I know. Someone told me that you can’t let the demons in your underwear drawer destroy your faith in yourself.”

His head cocks to the side. “The underwear drawer?”

“Isn’t that where your demons live?”

His mouth turns down at the corners, and he mumbles, “Uh, no. Do yours?”

I scoff. “Of course,” I say in a teasing voice. Then I let him see my real feelings.

Soft. That’s how Eli makes me feel. Warm, soft, and gentle. I never remember feeling that way in my life.

“It’s a terrible time to joke around, but I can’t stand to see you in agony. It hurts me.”

Those eyes bore into me. First, my eyes, then my lips. Until I’m feeling like the creamy part of a roasted marshmallow inside.

He quietly says, “Babe, here you are, comforting me when I am the one that needs to be taking care of you.”

“You are. Just being here with me,” I whisper.

He tips me back onto the bed, cradling me as I go, and crawls on top until he’s straddling my pelvis. His big frame towers over me and I love the sight of him. All the strength and intensity.

Without a preamble, Eli says, “I want you.”

I don’t hesitate even for a nano-second. “Take me.”

He goes silent then, and lets his gaze cascade over my face, down my neck, to the center of my chest. Where he lingers for a long time. He isn't seeing, he's feeling something.

I feel it too.

It's powerful, and primal.

Unexplainable.

It's right.

Something is calling us together. No matter how crazy our circumstances are.

His hands slowly start to skim my body, gently covering the contours with the heat of his palms.

"We're not done talking," he remarks.

I nod, because my lungs are vacant. He's stealing the air with that hot gaze, and those strong hands.

I want to freeze the moment. Capture it. Seal it away so I can have it forever. Because I know that trouble's coming.

But even my brothers can't take this moment from me. It's mine. Mine to have and keep.

I sigh and arch up into Eli's hands. "Please go slow, but please hurry."

I'm burning inside, desperate for him to fill me up and drive out all the fear. Chase away the ugliness that I can't face right now.

A smug, sexy grin transforms his face. He moves at a leisurely pace, tugging my clothes off, piece by piece, careful of my shoulder and ankle. Studying my body with his eyes and his fingertip.

He settles his body between my legs. Spreading my thighs with his hands as he wedges his broad shoulders in between. Warm, soft breath brushes over my electrified skin as he leans closer to the scars on my lower stomach.

I don't even want to hide them from Eli now.

He takes me as I am.

Broken. Tainted. Tattered.

I shiver when he touches his lips to my tummy and murmurs, “Mine to heal.”

Everything stops.

For a beat, it feels too good to be real. Then he brushes his lips over my stomach in the softest kiss and I zoom back into my body.

My breath catches as I let the feeling of his words wrap around me.

His.

His to heal.

I can’t even begin to say how much I love that.

My heart has a lot to say about it, though. It spasms. Beats too hard, and makes itself known between all of my ribs, down my tummy. All the way to my toes.

His. To. Heal.

My throat stings with tears as I raise my head to look down at him. His eyes swing to my face as he spreads one large hand over my stomach, spanning me from side to side.

In a deep, sexy rumble, Eli says, “You’re so strong, Mia.”

A quiver makes my lips tremble. “For you,” I whisper. “Only for you.”

A tumbled-gravel sound comes from his chest. His eyes heat, his gaze narrows as he stares at the aching place between my legs.

Oh, yeah. Eli does it for me.

Everything.

He moves at lightning speed. Drops his mouth right onto my clit, growls like an animal, and proceeds to make me scream.

Oh god. Yes.

I don't care who's in the room next door. I'm loud and proud because he makes me lose all control.

All control.

Eli eats me like he's starving. Devours me. Alternates between sucking my clit and pressing his whole mouth against my drenched pussy as his tongue dives, and sweeps, and owns me like I'm his favorite dessert.

I'm helpless to the pleasure.

My throat is dry and raw already, so I know I'm a long way from quiet.

And when he slides his hands under my butt and lifts me so he can lick me over and over from back to front, I cry out.

He growls. "Fuck, yes."

"Don't stop. Please..." I sob, "Please..."

I should know that Eli's not the kind of man that stops before the job is done. And god, am I right.

But he does it his way. As I'm beginning to realize is his M.O. in life.

He adds one of his thick fingers to the pleasure. Then a second, and I get so close to nirvana, that my eyes are filled with stars. But my body fights me, afraid to let go.

Terrified of the cataclysm.

His voice is like a whip crack. "Give it to me, Mia."

"I want to," I pant. The heat grows even more intense in my pussy. Yet, my orgasm remains elusive. "God. Don't stop. I'm so close."

He returns to my clit, but that's not all. He presses his thumb against my second entrance.

I tense from the surprise, but my pussy floods with slick heat.

Eli lifts his head and rasps, "Do you want more?"

"I need..." My head throws back, my throat works. "I need you."

“You’ll get me. But do you want this?” He increases the pressure against the sensitive ring.

My hips swivel, desperate for all the sensations. “Yes. Yes.”

“Fucking sexy, Mia.” Then he slowly breaches me with just the tip of his thumb.

Pleasure races through me.

My lungs stop working. My mouth opens in a silent scream, but my head nods. *Yes. Yes. God, yes. Right there.*

A look of extreme satisfaction fills Eli’s eyes.

And when I detonate, he holds my gaze.

We never break the connection.

I surrender again. Over and over to this man.

He catches me when I fall.

Chapter Sixty-One

Eli

I can't take one more second of not having Mia wrapped around my cock. I rip my mouth off her sweet pussy, climb up her body, rolling her as I go. She makes a startled gasp as I flip her on her stomach and hitch her hips up, chest still on the bed, so it doesn't put pressure on her bad shoulder.

“Right there, beautiful. I want you right there where I can have access to all your tight little places.”

I brace myself on one hand and guide my cock in with the other. She arches and pushes back.

“Give me your mouth, baby.”

When she turns her head and offers her delicious mouth to me, I take it. I take it and drive my cock home, making her groan and whimper against my lips.

Yes. *Yes*. Just like—

When I pull back, I watch my cock slide out, lock my eyes on the way she coats me in her juice, at the way I stretch her wide. It makes me crazy.

“Tell me if I’m too rough,” I bite out between clenched teeth.

She reaches back with her good arm and digs her nails into my thigh.

“You good?”

“So good,” she says on a moan.

I drive in again till I hit bottom, until she’s stretched so tight around me that I see stars. “God. Damn, Mia. You feel so good.”

Her nails dig deeper. I stroke again. She cries, “OhMYgod!”

I find her clit with one hand, her perfect little budded nipple with the other. “This too?” I grunt.

“Yes, p-please.”

When I strum her clit and pinch her nipple, she goes wild. When I add a hard stroke and keep doing all of it, she locks her eyes closed and pants, “Oh, Eli. Don’t stop.”

I lean down and find the soft spot at the juncture of her neck and sink my teeth in. That’s when Mia truly comes apart in my hands. Her body twists, her mouth opens in a silent scream, and she jolts so hard that I have to freeze to keep myself from coming.

“Not yet, beautiful. I need this.”

“I can’t hold—”

“Come now, and you have to come again with me.”

Her laugh is husky, followed by a quip. “Darn.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s what you want?”

“I want it all,” is her sultry, breathy reply.

That rockets hot blood down through my body and shoves it into my already engorged cock.

I have to breathe it out for a beat. Shit. She wrecks me. Vibrating from the strain of controlling myself, I lean next to her ear. “You want me to take your pretty little ass?”

Her lashes snap open, color flashes onto her already flushed face. “God, you’re dirty.”

“You love it.”

“I might,” she whispers.

I tease her ear with my tongue, “Might love that I’m dirty, or might love for me to stretch you wide.”

“Both.”

While I didn’t care if she said no, I love hearing her say yes. In a big, hard, throbbing way.

“I’ll be easy, babe, promise,” I murmur.

Her fingers search me out and squeeze my thigh. “I know you will.”

That right there. Trust. That crashes into me and knocks the wind out of me. I don’t know what I did to earn her trust, but it feels so damned good.

I kiss her again. Slowly, this time as I glide my fingers over her clit, enjoying the feel of her tight little pussy wrapped around me. Anticipating the pleasure of taking her another way for the first time.

When her juices are dripping between us, I glide my fingers over her back entrance. “So fucking sexy, so damned hot.”

She writhes against me.

“Play with your clit,” I order.

Her hand immediately goes to her folds.

“Good girl, just like that, don’t stop.”

I grip the thick base of my cock and drag it out of her pussy. Fisting myself, I rub my head across her folds, and further back, teasing her with the heat and pressure.

She moans and twists her hips. I do it all over again, loving the way she reacts. My voice has gone rough when I say, “You like that, don’t you, beautiful?”

“So much...”

“That, right there. That’s my head. Relax onto me.”

She relaxes against me.

My neck tilts back. I want to watch her, but I’m riding a razor thin line of control. It takes every bit of my power to hold still, it feels so damned good. But I want Mia to drive this show.

And she does. She slides back against me. For a few seconds, she pants, then she moves again, and an instant later, she comes hard, squeezing my cock so tightly that the air rushes out of me on a growl.

I let myself go over the edge with her.

The orgasm that hits me is undefinable. It’s beyond measure. Off the scale. When I peel my eyes out of the back of my head, she’s grinning a sexy little vixen grin. Her hair’s tossed all to fuck, her legs are trembling on either side of my thighs.

“Babe, you rocked me. Safe to assume you enjoyed yourself?”

“No,” she teases. “Not at all.”

I slide my hand up the soft skin of her thigh—one of my favorite spots, smack her ass—another favorite spot, then lean over and kiss her good shoulder.

“You need sleep,” I rumble, “But first, I’m gonna clean you up.”

“Do I have to move?”

“Shower?”

She sighs. “With you?”

“Of course. Told you I’m not letting you out of my sight ever again.”

“Okay,” she replies in a dreamy voice. “Deal.”

If only I knew what was coming, I would have not only carried her to the shower and washed every perfect inch of her, I would have locked her to me.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Mia

It's four thirty-one a.m. when I sit upright in the bed. "I need to use a computer."

Eli throws a ridiculously heavy arm over me and drags me back down onto the pillows. "Babe, go back to sleep."

Any other time I'd find that move totally sexy.

I try to push that tree trunk off my pelvis. "No, Eli, wake up. I need to get online. I can't believe I forgot that Casey said he sent me a secure message about my cover being blown."

Eli goes stiff, not his cock—although that might be stiff too, but I'm ignoring it. I'm talking about his whole body is like slab of rock beside me. He growls, then mutters, "Fuck."

"Is that your favorite word?"

He relaxes, nuzzles his face into my hair, and sighs. I love it when he does that.

In that sexy rough voice I also love, he murmurs, "When it has to do with your sweet curves below me, it is."

A flash of heat ignites in my core. The tips of my nipples start to tingle. “Oh no. No more dirty talk. I need—”

He hotly whispers, “To let me get you off again.”

I groan, “Not sure I can.”

“Dare I prove you wrong?”

I snicker and relax. “You’re impossible.”

He rolls on top of me. Kisses me sweetly and hitches my legs up around his waist. “Lay back and let me do the work.”

“Oh, alright, if you insist.”

He chuckles as he nips my neck.

“Ooooh,” I moan as I arch up against that wicked mouth of his.

Soon all laughing is over. Panting, whimpering, and begging resume. Lord. The man is sex on a stick.

He’s swinging heavy, and I freaking love every pounding inch of him.

This time, when I’m about to unravel, he demands. “Eyes open, look at me.”

Through a haze of lust, I find him staring down at me. Those eyes are dark, fiery embers in the early morning light.

“What?” I whisper.

“Love you, Mia.”

Oh. My heart.

“Eli. I love you, too.” I have to catch my breath, “As crazy as this all is, I love you.”

He lowers his weight to me, wraps me in his arms and takes us up and over that mountain one more time.

I fall asleep with him inside me. Sated. Warm. Safe.

It’s six when I wake again and I slip from the bed.

The pale sunlight crisscrosses the room, cutting between the curtains. I stand beside the bed in complete awe, looking at

Eli. He's sprawled on his stomach, one arm over his head, the other down by his side. His long legs are splayed across the bed with the sheet tangled around them.

He's a beautiful sculpture with scars and ink, and stories carved into his body.

My heart contracts so hard it makes my knees weak.

How did this happen? How did I fall in love?

"Babe," he rumbles.

I can barely rasp out my reply. "Yes?"

"The bed feels wrong without you in it."

That's how I fell in love.

The things he says and does.

But I take a step back, because I need to do this. "I'm going to get dressed. I need to get on a computer."

"Not yet."

"Yes, sweetie, I can't wait any more, it's driving me crazy," I counter as I fish around in the low lighting for my clothes.

With a growl, he raises his head and pins me with those dark, sexy eyes. "You're trouble." He throws the sheet off and stretches. My eyes go wide.

His cock draws my focus like a magnet. "No, not." I babble incoherently, then I get my tongue in gear. "I'm not trouble. That's the trouble right there."

He chuckles and drops his hand to his erection. Watching me, he gives himself a lazy stroke.

The devil.

After a yawn and another stretch, he rolls out of the bed and stalks toward me. All six-feet-four of him, a walking, talking specimen of perfection.

As he brushes a kiss on my temple, he wraps an arm around me and hitches me against his chest. Of course, I melt into him.

Then he really makes me melt by saying, “I’m looking forward to waking up next to you every day.”

“Me too.”

But I can’t breathe. I feel too fragile right now, too overwhelmed with the intensity of it all. Compounded because my mind is clogged with worry about the message I need to read.

An hour later, a guy named Mako—also a SEAL, I’m informed— hooks me up with a laptop and leaves me to do what I need to do.

Eli’s in the adjoining room talking to the team over takeout and coffee from the little diner down the street. They’re reviewing intel about my brothers, eating and talking smack about each other.

I could get used to them. It’s the first time I’ve felt at home with a group of people.

They don’t look at me like I’m... Mariah Siblio.

Christ. I’ve wanted that all my life.

And I’m going to have to take the next step to make that happen. I’m going to have to go all in on helping their team and the *real* feds find my brothers.

I know what’s coming. I’ll be sharing what I know about their locations, their operations. Everything I know. But first, I need to see what Casey sent.

I use my two passwords and log into the email account we shared where we stored messages in the drafts folder.

My finger hovers over the return key for a beat.

Am I ready? *No*.

But avoiding whatever bad news he sent is not going to help this problem.

It’s a long message. Far longer than anything Casey has ever written before.

I lean closer as I read the four paragraphs of text. Every line makes my throat drier, my hands shake more.

“Oh no. No. No, no,” I whisper.

I read it again.

My heart begins to race, my vision gets wavy, I can't catch my breath. “Eli!” I scream. “Eli, c-come here!”

Chapter Sixty-Three

Eli

There are very few sounds that truly scare the hell out of me. Mia screaming is one of them. I'm not the only one that leaps off the couch, the whole team explodes into action. I hit the bedroom door first, and skid on the linoleum as I round the corner.

The sight that hits me makes my blood seize up.

Mia's got her hands over her mouth. She's shaking all over, rocking back and forth, saying, "No, no, no."

I don't ask what's wrong, I grab her out of the chair in a fierce hug, pressing her face into my chest. "I've got you. It's okay."

"No, Eli, it's not okay, it's never going to be okay." She fists my shirt. The sound she makes against me is part scream, part yell, one hundred percent agony.

I don't know what's going on, but some motherfucker is going to pay. There will be carnage.

As I look over top of Mia's head toward the team, they each return a murderous stare. Shit's going down. We will put an end to this.

I turn Mia and walk her to the other side of the room and pull her down to sit on the loveseat with me.

Mako takes up station at the computer. It's not long before he mutters, "Christ. No fucking way."

"Brother," I growl.

He slices his hard eyes toward me. "You need to call your teammates and get them ready to go wheels up."

The look I return demands answers.

He says, "Mia, do you want to tell Eli, or do you want me to?"

That's when her whole body starts violently shaking.

That's also when I know that my world has gone from fucked up but breathing new life to fucking destroyed without anyone saying a word.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Mia

“Leave,” I rasp. “Leave. Everyone!” My voice rises until it’s more than a command, it’s a screamed order.

Eli’s arms tighten around me, but the other men’s feet retreat, and the door is closed.

I try to face him, but I can’t. “Read it,” I whisper.

For the longest time, Eli doesn’t move. I can’t even tell if he’s breathing.

“Tell me,” he says finally.

“My brother has your friend.”

His muscles tense from head to toe and a violent transformation turns his eyes to steel. “Come again?”

My throat is thick with emotion as I say, “My oldest brother has your friend, Nyx.”

“What the fuck?” he spits as he sits me away from him. His eyes are wild, burning with fury and hope.

“It’s all there,” I whisper. “If it’s true. But now I don’t trust Casey.”

He storms to the laptop, jerks the cord out, snatches it up and comes back to the loveseat. What I don’t expect is for him to wrap an arm around me and hug me to his chest as he balances the thing on his knee.

I don’t want to see those horrible words again. But we read it together. Through tears, I read the four paragraphs as a glacial chill sets up in my bones. Every single letter drives more and more fear into me.

Eli must read at the speed of sound because it’s not long before Eli bellows, “I need a phone!”

Beckett slings open the door and stalks in. He tosses Eli his phone. “Need anything else?”

“Standby. I’ll give you a full report in five.”

He jabs his phone, and a few seconds later, he’s got a three-way call with two men.

“I know where Nyx is,” he opens.

After a collective sucking of air, and some prayers of thanks, the guys simultaneously say, “When are we going?”

“Tonight.”

That one word is the knife that slices me wide open. I can’t contain the terror inside of me any longer. I rasp out, “No. It’s not that easy.”

Eli’s arm tightens on me, and he murmurs, “It is. This is what we do.”

Tears pour down my face, my voice is ragged, full of fear and heartbreak. “You don’t understand who Ruben is. What he’s going to do. He might have already done it. He might have already killed her!”

Eli snaps, a choked sound comes from his throat. “We go tonight.”

Confirmations on the other end. Then one of the guys says, “What are we looking at here?”

Eli says, “Let me call in the guys I work with. We’ll go over this once all together. Be on the lookout for a secure call coming on your computers.”

“Copy,” one guy says.

The other replies, “I’ll be ready.”

When the line goes dead, Eli shoves the laptop aside and reaches for me. He wraps his hands around my face and makes me look up at him.

“This is not your fault. Do you hear that?”

“She could die because of me,” I whisper as I look at the demons in his mind tearing down the man that just told me he loved me. I know in that instant, I’ll do anything—anything—to shield him from that kind of pain.

He glides his lips over mine, kisses my forehead, and tells me. “When this is all over, I’m taking you to Louisiana to meet my grandmother.”

Okay. I thought my heart couldn’t hurt any worse. But it does. God, how it aches.

I simply nod because there’s no way I can promise Eli everything will be okay. I know Ruben and Mel too well to believe that fairytale.

When Eli draws back, his expression is determined. He covers my ears with his palms and yells, “Get the hell in here!”

The bedroom door gets a workout again when it crashes against the wall. Four big men stalk in and take up position in a semi-circle around us. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love that. But now I have even more people to be terrified for, because I know the true evil that they are about to face.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Eli

Grim determination has set up shop in the room. The contrast to the cheesy fifties decor is dramatic as I look between the hardened faces of the two SEALs and the two Spec Ops Marines. When we call up Hardknox and Beast, we round out the mix to a solid six operators.

As I position the laptop on the table so Mia and I can both read the communication, I find her hand and weave my fingers between ice-cold ones.

I slip back into command mode. “Listen up, everyone. I’ll go through this once. Questions after.”

Mia tips over and rests her head against my shoulder. Her cue she needs more. Instead of leaving her there, I pull my hand free, and scoop her up till she’s sitting in my lap.

Then I get down to business.

“This is from Mia’s supposed WITSEC handler, whom we suspect is a fraud. Initial reports say he was fired about eighteen months ago. The very month Mia was supposed to go into the protection program.”

She flinches in my hold. I just learned this while she was reading the message from the bastard, so I know the news is hard.

“So,” I continue, “we didn’t know his motivations until Mia got this message. But now the optics on this have changed significantly.”

I pause and draw in a deep breath to calm my nervous system because I’m running hard on adrenaline. “Alright, boys. This is the communication word for word. ‘Mia, I’m not sure if you’ll get this because you’ve gone dark. But if you do read this, you’re probably doing it after I’m dead. And since that’s the case, there’s really nothing to hide, and I thought you deserved to know the truth for once in your life’.”

Mia shifts in my arms and hides her face in my neck.

I continue reading, “Your brother Ruben called in a marker that I owed him eighteen months ago. You had escaped him after he hurt you, and he knew you were going to the ATF. He pulled some kind of fucking strings and made sure I intercepted your call. After that, I was to babysit you. Keep you on ice where he could get you when he was ready’.”

Beckett’s mouth goes slack, then he scrubs his face with his hand. He mutters, “Bastards.”

I go on. “So that’s what I did. I kept you busy. Hid you, actually, because I didn’t know what kind of fuckery your brother would pull, so I tucked you away from all the places that might have facial recognition cameras. By the way, your intel was quite lucrative. I’ll stash some of the proceeds I scored from intercepting those deals in your apartment under the couch cushion. I gave the rest to my sister, but I’ll explain more on that later. But the money might not do you any good. Ruben is ready to use you against your other brother as you knew he would. But this is where things get weird’.”

Before I read the next paragraph, I have to stop to breathe. The fury that’s building inside of me is so hot now, I can barely get any past the inferno.

Mia's arms tighten around me, a sob racks her slender shoulders. I hold onto her too tight. With almost crushing force. For her. For myself.

Mako says, "We'll fix this, Mia. You count on that."

I look across the room, and seeing the strength standing before me gives me a fresh rush of hope.

"This is the last bit. But this is gonna be hard," I warn.

Then I tell my SEAL team buddies exactly how fucked up this situation is.

"Casey writes, 'Ruben called me to his place on Hellibore Island. When I got there, I thought he was probably going to kill me. But I was wrong. But that's not the point of what I need to tell you. There's a woman there that looks exactly like you. I mean, fucking exactly. Your asshole brother bought her at an auction. He's got her as back up. When he's ready to use you against your brother, he can do it, even if she's a fake. He said he'd just use a voiceover on the torture video because she's got a British accent. He knows that your younger brother will cave when he sees you being tortured, and finally hand over the reins of his operations.

"Ruben will be the king of arms dealing. At last, he'll have all the power he's been drying to have. I wish I knew what to tell you to do. But I don't. I'm sorry I fucked you over, but Ruben threatened my little sister and her infant. I gave them the rest of the money and taught her how to hide. I couldn't take a chance on them paying so I did the best I could do. Too bad it may never be enough. Stick with the man I met at your apartment. I checked into him. This is my end of watch. It's his turn now. He's your chance to get out of this. Watch your back, Mia. Signing off until another lifetime'."

Marshall Lake is the first to move. "I'll have the jet on the ground near here in an hour."

The other men dip their heads and stride out of the room. Go mode.

The line is silent on the secure internet call, but I know my brothers are there. "We'll pick you up in Vegas," I tell Beast.

“Knox, are you—”

“In Dallas. I’ll be ready. We’re bringing her home. Don’t think for a second we’re not,” he seethes.

I just hope it’s alive.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Mia

By 3 p.m. we're on a private jet. When I say we, it's loaded down with the Agile Team and Eli's former SEAL teammates. The energy is crackling with testosterone when I sit down at the private jet's table with them.

Agile's jet is decked out to be an operational hub so by table, I mean full-on digital table with computer touch screens, areas for writing that automatically get generated into digital text, and all kinds of features I've never seen. It also has a bedroom, and a bathroom that rivals the one my apartment had.

Mako opens a map and zooms in on an aerial view of the grounds of Ruben's estate.

"Alright, Mia. Give us the low down on this place."

I draw a shaky breath and pull my hair back from my face as I lean over the image. "This is the main entrance as you can see. This, this, and this are the other entrances. He's most likely holding Nyx in this wing. That's where he had me locked up for the last two months that I was there.

Eli's hand tightens on my thigh. The other men react similarly with growly sounds.

"There's a torture chamber in the basement." I can't stop the full body shudder. Eli's eyes bore into mine when I turn toward him. He knows. This is where my scars came from.

"Sick fuck," he mutters.

"It was one of his guards," I say quietly to Eli, before I turn back to the group. "Everyone should watch out for the gray-haired guard. His name is Victor. He's known for his knifework. He's also going to be a problem if he's watching Nyx. He's got a thing for... toying with prisoners."

"Could be an opportunity," Marshall says curtly. "He might be distracted."

Distracted. My gut pretzels. I know exactly what kind of distractions Victor likes and I pray that Nyx hasn't endured them. I give myself a mental shake. "He could be, though Ruben wasn't happy when he caught Victor cutting me. But it was actually the thing that let me get away. They were in such a huge argument that I slid out of the room, out an open window and swam to the marina."

"Fuck, Mia," a guy named HardKnox says with approval in his words. "You're a badass bitch."

For some reason, that makes my mouth twitch into an almost smile. "Not hardly. But I did get lucky. I stowed away on a small cargo boat and made it to Texas."

Eli's hand almost crushes my fingers off. He leans into me and whispers, "Love you, babe."

Color starts to warm my cheeks, but the coldness in my heart overrides it. I know the worst is yet to come. I can't let myself be seduced by these little moments.

"Alright. So, this is what he usually does..." I lay out Ruben's quasi predictable schedule.

Mako slides a small tablet on the table and starts flipping through images.

"Guys and gal, I have some news to share."

A distorted image appears on the screen, it's Ruben, hand on a woman's back, guiding her into a car.

"Is that Nyx?" I ask breathlessly.

He opens another image. "From everything I can tell, it is."

Eli's teammates lean over the tablet, their faces grow grim and the thunderclouds overhead crackle with energy. "Nyx, our girl. Christ, it's good to see her alive," murmurs the big guy with the close cut beard. Beast is what Eli calls him. I see why. The man is part bear, part gladiator, and one hundred percent scary.

But Beast's not what I'm really interested in. It's the fact that the woman isn't locked up in a cell. "He's taking her out?" I puzzle.

Mako pulls up some other images. Each time it's my brother with the woman. Somewhere in the bustling, gritty streets of Hellebore.

I lean closer and study her face. She's pale, her eyes are sunken, her mouth is drawn tight with fear. It's so close to looking at myself that it makes me feel weirdly dissociated.

Worry grows even more until it's clawing at me. "I don't understand."

Eli softly says in a raw voice, "Mia, he bought her at a human auction. He's probably using her as an escort."

Gulp. "I might be sick."

"She's not his blood sister, so makes sense," Beckett comments with a sadness descending over his eyes.

My hand goes to my mouth. "Oh god."

Eli's arm wraps around my shoulder. "Sweetheart. It's okay. He's not going to touch either of you again."

Bile rises in my throat. My world tilts. Oh my god. "I... now so many things make sense. I caught him—"

I look up and see the anger flaring around the table. "I caught him watching me shower once."

“Dude’s gonna get his eyes ripped out,” remarks Beast.

Eli grunts.

“I grip the table as I draw in a few cleansing breaths. Then I say, “For once, I don’t hate the idea of violence. But what I truly want is for both of my brothers to be brought to justice. I’d rather them live the rest of their lives in prison where they know what it’s like to lose their freedom.”

Looks of surprise flash as the men look between one another.

“She’s alright.” Beckett tips his chin, “Woman’s alright. We’re gonna fix this clusterfuck, mark my words.”

For the rest of the flight, the men discuss things I don’t understand, but they all speak the same lingo and agree on a plan, a backup plan, and a backup backup plan.

I try to sit still. But it’s impossible to stop my knee from bouncing. Finally, Eli drags—not literally—but he coaxes me back to the bedroom where he tucks me in, kisses my cheek, whispers, “Love you, Mia girl.”

I grab his hand. “You know Mia’s not my real name...”

“Sweetheart, I’ll call you whatever you want. Do you like Mia?”

As I brush my palm over his scruff, I whisper, “Only when you say it.”

A new softness enters his eyes. “Get some rest. Things are going to get hectic.”

I nod. “Promise me you’ll stay safe.”

“Always.”

When he walks out the door, I turn on my side, curl up and pray. Really pray that I haven’t signed Eli’s death warrant.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Eli

It irritates me all to hell to have to leave Mia with Beast. But he's the best damned sniper I've ever met. And putting her with him means that she's as far away from the action as possible.

I have to trust we made the right call—to take her brother and rescue Nyx when they were outside the compound. That's when a target is often at the most vulnerable. Given that we don't have blueprints, we made the call for this.

As I hover in the doorway of a dilapidated building, I watch Beckett and Mako take up their assigned spots. Mako half a block down. Beckett just a few paces from me.

I angle so I can see the gray sedan weaving between the pedestrians and motorcycles that are clogging the street. It's a total shitshow circus. We plan on using that to our advantage. But it makes me nervous as fuck about Mia's exposure.

I have to isolate that and focus on the job.

The earpiece whispers to life again. "Confirming," Mako says. "Package is with the target. I have a visual."

My entire focus narrows. Nyx. She's coming home on that goddamned plane.

Marshall and Hardknox took the road coming into the central marketplace of Hellebore. Their job is to disable the car of goons that seem to always trail Ruben Siblio around.

"Target approaching. Car 2 disabled," Marshall's voice floats through the mic in my ear.

"Copy." I reply, "Moving into position."

I step out of the shadow and move into my spot behind a vendor cart of colorful clothing.

Mako's voice comes over the coms, "Counting down, three, two, one."

I shove the cart with all my strength, sending it toppling into the path of Siblio's car. Mako fires on the tires.

The car lurches, the engine roars, as it careens and crashes into a row of produce stands. The street is mayhem with shrieking, running people, fleeing in every direction.

The driver's door of the sedan flings open and a big gray-haired guard lurches out, weapon drawn. As my skin crawls, my fury hazes my vision.

That's the son of a bitch that cut Mia. I know it in my bones.

Then all hell breaks loose.

Gunfire everywhere.

I dive to the ground behind a row of parked motorcycles.

More people scream as they run past me. Low crawling, I try to get a visual on the car while keeping cover.

"Target on the run," Mako snaps.

Beast replies, "I got him, but no clear shots."

Mako and Beckett both say, "Pursuing on foot,"

Goddamnit. I roll up onto my feet and search the throngs of people for any sight of Mia's brother or for Nyx.

It's utter chaos all around me.

Holy shit, we fucked this mission all to hell.

Beast breaks his silence from his hide behind a broken stucco wall, "I got a visual on the package! Thirty paces to the rear of the car. Wearing a black headcover, moving east at a run."

I shove my way through the crowd as more gunfire echoes between the aged stucco buildings.

My heart's pounding when I bark, "Got visual on the package."

A racket in my headset makes me flinch as I run through the crowd chasing Nyx.

I hold my hand over my ear, covering the coms gear as I try to make out what I'm hearing. Then I recognize the voice and my heart arrests. Beast is yelling indistinguishable. His voice cracks, then trails off into a raspy wheeze.

I can barely get words through my constricted vocal cords, "Three, can you hear me?"

No response.

In a full panic, I shout, "Three! Report in."

Silence. Except for the roaring inside my head.

Mia's with Beast. Mia's with Beast. Fuck. Mia's with Beast!

My foot catches on the curb, sending me down to a knee. I stumble up and spin in a circle.

I lurch up, and skid to a stop as Nyx steps out of the shadows of a doorway, just two feet away from me. Her body jolts hard as she locks eyes with me, her hand flies to cover her mouth, then she crumples, falling right into my arms.

Exactly as Mako bellows in the coms. "Man down. Three is down. Beast is down. Mia's gone."

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Mia

All hell is raining down on Eli and the team and I'm helpless to do anything about it.

Beast puts a meaty hand on top my head and shoves me down to the ground. "Stay low!"

Then he tries to take aim again.

"Come on..." he mutters and adjusts his sniper rifle again as the sound of gunfire and screaming fills the street.

He's locked in on something, but suddenly jolts. He grimaces in pain. "I'm hit. Mia you need to run."

I try to catch him as he falls, but he's too heavy.

"Go. Go, run, get to Eli."

My hands shake as I try to staunch the wound on his shoulder. He pushes my hand away. He shoves a pistol into my bloody fingers. "Go. Fucking go, Mia."

I clamber up, look at him one more time, then sprint out of our hiding spot. Fear makes me forget all about my ankle.

There's so much chaos. Which way do I go?

I try to blend in with the running people. Until I skid around a corner and see my brother.

"Ruben," I rasp as fear whips through my body, dries my mouth, and sends my heart rate through the stratosphere.

His vulture eyes swing my way and a feral grin splits his ugly face. "Well, well," he drawls.

He lets his gaze dip to the gun I'm pointing at him. "You'd never do it."

"I will," I growl, sounding like a completely deranged animal. "But I'll go with you if you call off the gunfire."

It's the only way I can save Eli and his team.

Ruben doesn't even flinch when a bullet takes out a chunk of wall a few feet above his head. As dust rains down on him, he laughs. "Oh, this is too good to pass up."

He's got his phone in his hand the next second. He says something in a language I don't know. When he hangs up, he holds out his hand. "Give it to me."

"When the gunfire stops."

Right as I finish my demand, the echoing begins to slow. A bang here, another a few seconds later. The screaming continues. But finally, the space between shooting gets too long that I draw in a shaky breath.

Thank god.

He snatches the gun, wraps his sweat coated arm around my neck, and drags me toward a cluster of cars. He checks them all until he finds one with keys.

After shoving me inside, he wedges himself behind the driver's wheel and blasts through the twisted streets. Tears clog my vision as I hold on. I grit my teeth. This is ending. Either me or him. I'll see this through. I'm hollow inside now. Filled with nothing but rage and the thirst for revenge.

My heart is back there with Eli. I just pray I stopped the carnage soon enough.

Next to me, my brother's face drips sweat. His lips are drawn up in a sneer as he turns to face me, angling so he can keep one eye on the road, one on me.

“You must really love that asshole if you're willing to just hand your life over to me.”

I do. I love him so much that I have no bounds on what I'm willing to do.” I sneer, “I'll gladly trade my life for his.”

Then I go back to staring out the window. Plotting. I'm not sure how I'm going to make Ruben pay yet for destroying the one good thing I've ever had in my life.

But he will pay.

All that matters right now is that Eli is safe. He's got Nyx back by now too. She'll take care of him. As I play the scene out in my head over and over, more questions grow.

“How did you know to have snipers there?” I ask. Ruben will answer because gloating is one of his favorite past times.

A greasy, cocky smile appears on his overheated face. “I always have them in place around the city when I go to town.”

Damnit. I should have known. That's exactly the kind of thing a weapon's dealer would do.

Guilt makes me hang my head. Everything that went wrong is my fault. The team counted on me to help them prepare.

Ruben laughs darkly next to me. I jostle and sway violently, as he steers the stolen rattle-trap car over the broken pavement at breakneck speeds.

His laughter gets louder. “Still can't believe I looked over and there you were. Just like I made you appear out of thin air.”

He throws his head back and roars.

God, I want to shove something, preferably a very sharp something, into the bulging vein on the side of his neck.

He chuckles until the humor fades, then he cuts his gleaming eyes at me. “Timing couldn't have been better. When

baby brother sees your pretty face in agony, screaming to be put out of your misery, he'll hand me the keys to his castle. Then I'll have it all."

I have to squeeze my lips together to keep from throwing up all over the car.

He snorts and laughs again.

I pretend to cover my eyes with my hands, but I'm really searching the floorboard for anything I can use against him. He swerves, brakes hard, and cusses, "Goddamned goats. Why can't they keep their stupid livestock out of the road?"

When I look up again, I see a car barreling toward us.

This is my chance.

I press my hand over my heart and whisper in my mind, I love you, Eli.

Then I grab the steering wheel, close my eyes, and brace for impact.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Eli

The world takes on a cinematic feel, the way my dreams about Nyx are. Then a gunshot rings through the air and the wind off the bullet brushes over my skin.

Holy hell, this *is real*.

I scoop Nyx up against my chest. “Got you. Fucking got you. You’re safe.”

When I spin around, a green SUV skids to a stop. *Good fucking timing*. Mako’s behind the wheel. Beckett’s in the back seat on his knees, facing the rear with his weapon at the ready. I shove Nyx into the back seat with him and push her into the floorboard.

As I climb in Mako says the sweetest fucking words I’ve ever heard. “I’ve got Mia on GPS.”

He drives like the hounds of hell are on us, but it’s still not fast enough for me.

“Two clicks,” he says.

I'm blind with rage, drowning in pain, dying inside. There's no chance I could talk right now if I need to.

A small hand reaches out from the back floorboard and squeezes my arm. "I knew you'd come."

I cover Nyx's hand with mine, but my emotions block my airway.

Nyx's voice grows more confident, "I know you'll find her. I heard she could be my twin from another mother."

I nod, as water starts to pool in my eyes. A roar starts to work its way up through my gut. Leaving ash in its wake. I drag my hand off of hers and scrub my face hard with both hands. Fuck. Fuck.

She will be okay. I have to believe it.

Mako shouts, "There it is! Gotta be them, that's where the signal is pinging."

I blink and refocus.

Carnage. A two-vehicle wreck. Smoke and steam cloud the air.

No. No! A keening sound comes out of me. "No! No—"

Mako brakes hard and I leap from the door as a man stands up and swings around, moving away from the car.

He's carrying a woman, her legs are dangling over his arm, but I can't see her face.

Only, I recognize everything. The fall of her dark hair, down to the boots that I bought for her.

I stumble to a stop. Unable to make myself move.

She can't be dead. No, this has to be a nightmare.

I jolt when Beckett and Mako latch onto my arms and drag me forward. "She's okay," Beckett jostles me hard. "That's Marshall, he and Andre were in the other car. Marshall just came over the coms to tell you, but you must have lost your gear."

They propel me forward and push me down onto the grass, where I land with a thud on my knees next to the most beautiful sight in the world.

Mia tumbles toward me and lands in my arms. We roll to the ground as I wrap her in my arms and lock her to me with my legs.

God. Yes.

My voice is as shaky as my arms when I declare, “I’m never, ever, *ever* letting you out of my sight again.”

She buries her face in my neck. “That sounds just perfect to me. But you have to promise me something, Eli.”

“Anything, babe, anything in the world.”

“That you’ll give me your name. I don’t have one anymore, and I want to be Mia Fortier.”

A strange sensation hits my face as my chest fills with warmth.

Are those tears of joy leaking out of me?

I’ve never felt them before, but when I kiss my future fiancée, I suspect that’s what they are.

And when Nyx leans over and looks down at us with a big smile and a sheen of happiness in her eyes, I know that’s what they are.

Tears of joy.

Chapter Seventy

Mia

One Month Later

I lean back, looking up through the open roof of the Jeep and watch the bright white clouds playing against a crisp blue sky as Eli drives. Wind stirs my hair and washes over my skin, making me feel incredibly alive.

There's some kind of Cajun music on the radio. He's been warming me up for a while now, and I finally think I get why he loves it. Which will make this visit to his home state a lot more fun because he said he'd take me out to dance.

I grin as I let that sink into my heart.

Me going on a date to go dancing.

Miracles do happen.

He reaches for my hand and locks his calloused fingers between mine. I also let that sink in. The warm power of his touch.

“You doing okay?”

“I’m great. But I’m a little nervous,” I admit.

His smile is so deep and genuine it makes my tummy flutter. I jostle his hand. “Wow, Eli, look at me like that some more and we might not make it to this shindig.”

He growls, lifts my hand to his mouth, and brushes a kiss over my knuckles. One by one, tasting my skin, taking his time.

“Devil man, that’s not helping matters.”

His grin deepens as he drives. Drives me wild.

I tilt my head back, prop my feet on the dash, and soak in the warmth. Not just the sun shining on my skin, but the permanent warm glow that Eli has given me.

But I’m still nervous about what his grandmother, apparently a force of nature, might think of me. I mean, she did raise the boy, so she’s gonna be all momma bear. “What if she—”

“She’s gonna love you, babe.”

“I hope.”

He chuckles. “You’ll see.”

After a while, Eli flips the turn signal on the Jeep’s steering column and takes a turn onto a perpendicular road. It’s a small lane with big trees lining the sides.

“Is this her place?”

“Nah,” he says, and I notice him doing this thing he does when he’s kind of wound up. His finger’s tapping on the steering wheel. Not tapping to the beat, more like a nervous tap.

Hm. That’s interesting.

The road meanders through a few turns and the land grows more and more dense with trees.

Finally, we reach an area where the air turns cooler and the smell carries the scent of peat.

After one more turn, we end up on an even more narrow lane, really just two dirt tracks cutting through some taller grass. The scene gets more and more lush, like we're driving right into a fairytale. Tangles of moss hang from the trees. Birds dart in and out of the speckled sunlight.

I'm in awe. "What is this place?"

"You'll see."

Argh.

Two minutes later, Eli pulls to a stop in a clearing. Before us is a house. Pretty as a picture. White columns, a big wraparound porch, with a big window dormer rising toward the sky.

It could be right out of a painting.

"Whose place is this?"

He unfolds out of the Jeep and appears by my side. Without saying a word, he unbuckles me and lifts me out. Especially easy since he took the doors off his Jeep. When he drops me to my feet, he frames my face with his hands and drops his mouth to mine. Okay. All questions forgotten.

When Eli kisses me, that's the only thing in the world that matters.

"Come on," he says with a sexy smile when he pulls back and leaves me staring.

Brain wrecked. Mission accomplished. Panties wet too. The sexy beast.

He weaves his fingers between mine and walks at my pace toward the house. My pace is distinctively different from Eli's pace given that his legs are about forty-seven feet longer than mine.

He goes right up onto the porch, reaches for the knob and pushes the door open.

Alright. That's weird.

"You didn't knock."

“Don’t need to, sweetheart.”

I step into the foyer and freeze. Wow. I would love to have a home like this. Right away, the space feels so peaceful.

Dust motes dance through the air as Eli walks across the room, weaving between big pieces of furniture that are draped in sheets. As I take in all the details, he opens a set of wooden blinds and pulls open a set of French doors.

“Come on.” He crooks a finger. I float forward until I’m standing in that doorway. He loops his arms around me from behind and rests his cheek against my temple. It’s a good thing he’s holding me up because I would not be steady on my feet.

The sight before me is so beautiful it overwhelms me. “That’s incredible. I’ve never seen anything so... perfect.”

He spins me so I’m facing him. “Neither have I.”

When Eli licks his lips, it strikes me as odd. And maybe there’s a little sheen in his eyes.

“Hey, are you okay?”

His voice is sexy-little rough too. “Actually, I need you to help me...”

“Oh, really?” I grin up at my beautiful lover. So... did he bring me out here to the middle of nowhere for a quickie in some friend’s house before we go to his grandmother’s? Bad boy.

My favorite bad boy at that.

He tags my hand, tugs it toward his front pocket, “Need you to put your hand in here—”

“Oh, I see. We’ve played this game before, but I know you gave Nyx her lucky rock back. Course, I’ll be happy to play along...”

Wait. What?

My finger bumps into something metal with a smooth satiny finish.

His devilishly dark eyes spark, “Find something interesting?”

My eyes go wide, my mouth rounds, and I jolt. “Nooooo.”

He tugs my hand free, his grin deepening “That’s not the answer I’m looking for.”

Now my hands are covering my mouth as he drops down to one knee in front of me.

My mind is blown. I mean, I thought we would... I just didn’t think now.

He catches my wrist and pulls my left hand down. With warrior concentration he slides the ring on my finger. “Be my wife, Mia.”

I try to speak and manage a whisper, “It’s incredible.”

Just like him.

Light dances off the large emerald-cut diamond. It’s mounted in a wide gold band, but it’s truly unique. The diamond is set crosswise and framed by a deep bezel.

I love it. Every curve. All the perfect facets.

Everything about the ring is bold and strong, but perfectly proportioned.

Just like Eli.

Right down to his perfect balance of fierce and tender. Rough and gentle.

My tear-heavy gaze rises to his, as my heart grows so big it threatens to shatter me.

He lifts a brow and waits, and I grin.

Oh, yes.

Yes.

I whisper, “I’d marry you a thousand times, Eli.”

His forehead falls against my stomach, his arm wraps tightly around me, and he hotly whispers, “Mine.”

* * *

I roll over and press a kiss to Eli's shoulder, right on the place where the month-old tattoo of my name is. Not the shoulder with Nyx's image, but the other. The place where I now have my own beautiful design. It's roses and skulls and thorns, and so perfect that it steals my breath every time I look at it.

As I dance my fingers over the roses, I ask, "Shouldn't we get going to your grandmother's?"

"We should." But his own fingers crawl across my bare stomach and his heavy arm pins me down. "I'm not ready to get up, you annihilated me."

"Me? You were the one who was bucking underneath me like a wild bull."

He chuckles and nuzzles his chin against my nipple, tickling me with his breath. "Damn right I was."

When he rests his head on my chest, I twist my fingers into his short, thick hair and hold him to me. The diamond he gave me catches the light, shooting pink and red sparks.

A metaphor for my heart.

God. I didn't know I could love so much.

As I lay there beneath his warm, protective weight, I stare up at the bedroom ceiling fan lazily swirling above us, and daydream about our life—specifically what it will be like waking up every morning with him in my bed.

Not that this is my bed. A twinge of guilt hits me. We got seriously busy in someone else's bed. At least we were on top of the dust cover.

Still, I feel a little cringy about that.

"Sweetie?" I say as I slide my hand down and trace my fingertips over his talented lips—the ones that were just on all my erogenous zones a short time ago. "Whose house is this?"

He lifts his head and crawls up my body, settling his weight on me. Just enough. He knows he crushes the wind out of me, but now Eli understands just how much weight I love.

With a little wink, he drops a kiss on my nose, “Ours.”

“No,” I almost yell in his face.

He throws his head back and laughs. “Seeing as that’s your default answer when you’re happy-shocked, I take that as a good sign.”

I try to push him off me. “What are you talking about?”

He rolls onto his back, taking me with him. I’m straddling his waist again, looking down at his handsome, amused face.

“It’s our house,” he confirms.

My eyes go dry from all the blinking. “You bought this house for us?”

Pride fills his expression, “I did. This place was my uncle’s, but he wanted to move to some place called The Villages in Florida because of all the hot senior honeys.”

That makes me giggle. “Good for him.”

I take a second to look around the big plantation-style bedroom, complete with the poster bed, the wooden blinds, and the amazing view of the water behind the house. And I’m stunned to my very marrow. This is ours. Our house.

I want to faint from delight.

His hands flex on my thighs and he laughs. “I want to bottle up the sunshine coming off your smile.”

“I’m so happy.”

“Good,” he says solemnly.

But a second later, I’m right back in the same place I was before. Mystified. Delighted, but still not able to put the pieces together. “But I thought you had to work out of Utah?”

“Do,” he clips. “Grab my pants for me.”

Huh? “You’re really confusing me now.”

He smacks my butt cheek, “Be a good fiancée and grab my jeans.”

I’m so stunned at the word fiancée I climb off the bed and snag his jeans from the spot they fell when I ripped them off Eli’s sexy body.

He tugs a folded envelope out of his back pocket and passes it to me. “Sit on me while you read that?”

I scrunch my face at him. “So bossy.”

He tags my wrist and pulls me until I’m astride him one more time.

I must admit, it’s my favorite place to sit. All embarrassment about my scars is gone and the way Eli looks at me when I’m on top makes me feel like the prettiest woman on the planet.

“Read it,” he urges.

I cringe. I’m not big on surprise letters after the one I got from Casey. But seeing how that chapter of my life is closed as in Federal Prisons and locked doors, I think I’m okay.

He grips my hips. “Good news, I promise.”

I unfold the paper. It’s on official Agile Security & Rescue letterhead.

“‘Dear Mia Fortier’. Hey, that’s not my last name yet.”

He grumbles, “Soon will be. Just keep reading.”

I read it aloud. “‘It is my honor to extend you an offer to join the Agile Security & Rescue team as an operative for special assignments and information gathering as required by the team. With this position you and your husband will receive access to the Agile Security private jet for personal transportation when not in use by the team, so that you can return to that godforsaken swamp any time you want. Signed Marshall Lake, CEO.’”

Eli’s body starts to quake below me. “That fucking Marine.”

I wave the paper. I know my voice is way beyond the volume of inside voice. “Eli! Is this real?”

“Sure is, babe.”

It’s my turn to squeal and throw myself on my fiancé.

“I am the luckiest girl in the world. I’ve got you. I’ve got the coolest job. And this house. Oh my god. I can’t wait to cook in that kitchen. Squeeeee. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been, Eli, all because of you.”

He hugs me close. So tight I feel his heart pounding against mine.

In a whisper, right next to my ear, he says, “Now my job is to see if I can top that over and over again.”

Chapter Seventy-One

Beckett

Two Months Later

Louisiana

I choke back the weird emotions in my throat and head across the barn to the cluster of tables under the vintage party lights.

“I’ve had enough Cajun music to last a lifetime,” I grumble as I drop into a chair next to Beast. The table’s in a good spot, in the back of the barn, where we can watch the wedding madness unfold.

And madness it is. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. Louisianans don’t throw stuffy weddings. They throw something that looks a lot like a barn party, Mardi Gras, and a dance-hall concert mishmashed together.

Beast nods his head to the music and grins my way. “I kind of like it. You have to admit, they’re having a helluva good time.”

They are. It's so fucking good to see Mia and Eli dancing with the Agile team, Eli's grandmother, and a bunch of his SEAL team guys and their dates. "Didn't know Eli could smile so big."

Playing the full part of the groom, Eli twirls his bride around again—turning her into a blur of white lace and cowboy boots—before he drops a hot kiss on her mouth as she collides with his chest.

"Right," Beast chuckles and grins. "That man walked through the fire. I love how they understand each other's pain. They deserve the world."

"There's a lot to be said for knowing each other's pain," I reply as I take a drink of some kind of punch that I'm pretty sure is made with pure grain alcohol.

Gah. Damn.

It burns like a motherfucker.

After breathing flames for a while, I ask, "Did you hear that the guard that tortured Mia was caught?"

"No. Glad all that shit's wrapped up. Brothers in prison for life, all their men too. Whatever happened to that handler of hers, Casey whatever his name was?"

"Pleaded guilty to all charges. He was trying to protect his sister from a threat from Ruben Siblio, so the judge cut him some slack. He actually never did anything to hurt anyone, Casey claims. He was stealing from other criminals, so it's got all kinds of Peter Pan vibes to it."

"Damn. Poor Mia, caught up in all that shit. But look at her now. Eli's gonna give her the world. She fucking deserves it."

I throw back some more punch, covering the sting of envy with fire. Once those flames hit my gut, I wheeze out, "You're right." How's your shoulder, man?"

He shrugs. "Good as it ever was. Finished up my rehab. Going back in the field this coming week on my first assignment for Agile." He sips off a beer, but I notice his eyes linger on a certain someone across the room.

“You talked to her?”

He grunts. “Not since Hellebore.”

I lean back in the chair and chew a bite of beignet.

His eyes slide to me, “What about you?”

I stiffen and look across the room to avoid him seeing shit behind my carefully constructed mask. “What about me?”

“You talked to that chick?”

I frown and shove the rest of the pastry in my mouth. He stares at me until I cough on the powdered sugar, regain my voice, and say, “No.”

His next question comes right on the tail of my answer. “Why?”

Okay. Two can play this game. “Why haven’t you talked to Nyx?”

He snaps out a reply as his face goes mean. “Cause we both got our own shit going on.”

I tip my chin. “You get my drift now.”

“Nyx’s in mourning,” he adds. “Sad story. We all miss the fuck out of Alex.”

I don’t know much of what happened, but Eli clued me in on a few details. I ask, “So, she was into one of your Team guys and never told him?”

He shifts his big ass frame in his seat and drops his elbows onto the table making the thing quake. “She’s shy, you know? Her upbringing and all. She got grabbed, then Alex got caught in some friendly fire the night after Nyx was taken.”

“Shit, dude, I’m sorry about that.”

He shakes his head as emotion hits him. His pain slams so violently into him that it bleeds over to me.

I grip his shoulder. “War kills you or fucks you up. Sometimes both.”

“You’re right about that,” he replies tightly as he toys with a fork on the table.

We sit in silence for a bit in our own funks which do not belong at this party.

“You know,” I say, “I think I’m gonna go dance, life’s too short to sit here and pine over a woman that’s a thousand miles away, and—”

I stop myself. It’s the words I can’t find that are the real mind fuck. *What is she?* Maddening?

Above my league? That stings but hits closer to home.

Beautiful and reckless. That hits me somewhere else.

He asks, “What’s between you and Madeline Rush?”

“Who the fuck knows. I kissed her sassy fucking mouth and she slapped me before she left without a backward glance. What does that say?”

He snorts, then tries to hide his grin. With a grunt, I say, “Besides, I learned the hard way that what you get isn’t always what you think you have.”

“Now that’s a real logic puzzle.”

It pisses me off that my voice has gone bitter, especially given where we are. I say, “No puzzle to it. I thought I got a wife. I got a liar and a cheater.”

He tips back in his chair and gives me an apologetic look. “Brother, that’s fucked up.”

“It was. *Was* is the key word there. I’m past that.”

His piercing gray eyes move over my face as he strokes his beard. He flatly says, “Right.”

Enough said. I need to get my ass back into celebration mode or I need to get out of here. I scoop up my plate. “Later. Gonna go drink some more rot-gut punch and dance.”

He pushes up off his chair and stretches as his own stern, closed off mask falls back into place. “Maybe I’ll go talk to Nyx.”

We head off in opposite directions. I set my cup and plate down and veer onto the dance floor so I can catch Eli’s

grandmother's attention. "Think you can show me what to do?"

Eli swirls Mia past me and bumps my shoulder. Highly amused, he laughs when he sees what I'm up to. "Careful, she'll throw your back out."

I give him an eye roll and Mia giggles.

Fuck if all that happiness doesn't make my heart expand and contract in a flash. I'm so damned happy for them, and so damned jealous in the same breath.

I never thought I'd be nearly forty and living in a bachelor pad and avoiding any and all matchmaking efforts.

As I fight the sting, Mrs. Fortier wraps her arm in mine. Her crinkled eyes glitter, as her smile lights up her face. The woman's got those wrinkles that say she's laughed a lot in her lifetime.

Which is probably why she's outdancing most of the wedding party at eighty-nine years old.

In her cute southern accent, she says, "Lawd, yes, honey. I can show you. I'll have you dancing up a storm in no time. Ladies will be swarming ya."

I laugh but know that it doesn't matter if all the women at the wedding swarm me, it won't take my mind off of two things—the craving I have for Madeline and the fact that I was burned to ash.

That recipe means I should keep my eyes forward and skip any and all exits that lead to her.

Too bad I'm working on her case for Agile. I'll protect her with my life. I just won't let myself love her.

+++

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