

A close-up photograph of a man's face and neck, looking upwards. He has a beard and is wearing a blue suit jacket over a white shirt. The background is dark. Overlaid on the image is the title 'Love \$ Consequences' in a glowing, white, cursive font. The dollar sign is positioned between 'Love' and 'Consequences'.

Love
\$
Consequences

BJ HARVEY
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LOVE & CONSEQUENCES

BJ Harvey

Love & Consequences

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Prologue – Revenge & Redemption

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PROLOGUE

Aiden

A ringing phone fills the air, cutting through the heavy fog of sleep I was enjoying. By the time I tear my eyes open the annoying buzzing has stopped and I groan at the slashing pain cutting through my temple.

“Thank god,” I grumble, covering my face with an arm and rolling over, my leg brushing against the warm smooth one of my bed mate.

I slowly turn my head and peek through my arm to get a glimpse of the beautiful woman lying next to me. I take in her long, dark hair and the curve of her lower back, silky soft golden skin stretching down to the curve of her lower back and disappearing beneath the white sheet where there’s a small tattoo of a bumblebee she got on a dare at college sitting on her right hip.

Detective Marlee Manning. My best friend’s little sister. A former colleague. Someone who’s known me since she was ten and I moved in next door to her and her brother, Marcus. *And...* the only person who didn’t write me off after I fucked up royally two days ago.

She stirs slightly as I watch her sleep and I find myself holding my breath and praying she won't wake up. I want a little longer with her. I want to steal more time before the outside world encroaches and the realities of my actions take hold again.

This isn't the first time we've slept together over the years, but right now my memory of last night is still a little fuzzy thanks to the untold amount of liquor I ingested.

After I left the hospital and said goodbye to Alyssa, the woman I risked it all for—my career, my reputation, my life—and lost anyway, I went to Marilee's precinct and was grilled about the events leading up to the kidnapping and shooting. After giving my statement and talking to my superiors in San Francisco, I was told what my options were.

Unfortunately, in the light of day, I've realized that the door I chose was the wrong one.

The phone rings again and this time, luck is not on my side. Marlee groans and moves onto her back, stretching her arms up above her head, her bare breasts distracting me as flashes of last night come flooding back to me.

Marlee texting me.

Marlee coming to the hotel bar I was drinking my weight in alcohol at.

Marlee telling the bartender to cut me off.

Marlee walking me up to my room.

Marlee saying goodbye. Me grabbing her hand to stop her.

Me kissing her because I couldn't stop myself.

“Please shut that thing up,” she pleads against the pillow.
How does her voice sound even more sexy in the morning?

Marlee kissing me back.

Tumbling into the room.

More kissing.

More touching.

More everything...

It was comfort. An escape. The perfect way to lose myself with the perfect person at the perfect time.

The ringing stops and I stare up at the hotel room ceiling, the imaginary ice pick stabbing my brain making its presence known as debilitating pain slices through me. I embrace it though because it's self-inflicted in more ways than the obvious. Drowning your sorrows in whisky while lamenting the loss of not only your career but also having the woman you thought you loved choose a man you've always viewed as the villain in your story? Zero out of ten, do not recommend.

Turning my head, I lock eyes with Marlee, a woman I've wronged in more ways than one over the years, and one she doesn't even know about yet. “Hey,” she whispers, her gaze a mixture of wary, happy, relieved, yet nervous.

“Hey, Beautiful” I say in a rough whisper, my voice as rough as sandpaper. Despite feeling like the physical representation of death warmed up, her smile warms me up like a hot sun on a summer's day. It's always been like that

with her. No matter how bad I'm feeling, Marlee always manages to turn my day, my night, my *life* around. Knowing that this might be the last time she ever wants to look at me has a suffocating weight bearing down on me.

"I fucked up," I say, the guilt eating me alive. How can I have this moment with her when I know I've done her wrong.

"Oh." She pulls the sheet up over her chest, bunching it up and moving to the edge of the bed away from me, obviously misunderstanding.

I reach out, my hand resting on her arm as I shake my head. "Shit. Mar. No, not that. Fuck, never that."

Her whole body relaxes and she huffs out a relieved sigh, a soft smile curving her lips again and making me want to kiss her breathless. Before I can let myself do that, I must come clean.

"What is it then? You should know by now that you can tell me anything." Her lips tip up as she roams her eyes over my bare chest. "I mean, I'm *here* aren't I..."

Without even realizing I'm doing it, I lean toward her, my gaze pinned to her lips. Just as our mouths are about to touch, the phone rings...*again*. Except this time, it's Marlee's cell, not mine.

"Hold that thought." She presses her index finger to my lips, her gaze alight with heat and promise. Reaching over to the nightstand, she picks up the interrupting device and answers the call, soft eyes watching me as she does.

“Manning.... mmm hmmm...yes, sir.... OK.... sir?... I understand.” The long pause that follows has my whole body tightening like a coiled spring because I can *feel* the tension taking her over as she listens to whatever she’s being told. Then I see it, her gaze shuttering, her muscles tightening, her fingers clenching the sheet as she pulls it up to cover herself like a shield.

Yet she doesn’t look away from me and I can’t break the contact, knowing that witnessing her heart break with every word in her ear is my penance...my torture.

I can read every single emotion on her face, every single one like a stab wound full of regret, sadness, dread. All because of my epic failure, the mistakes I’ve made and *keep* on making.

I don’t deserve this or her. Marlee. The girl who trusted me to be her first. The girl who always stayed in touch despite time or distance. She followed me into law enforcement, and last night proved she’s still the woman who’ll turn up or me when no one else will.

I’m jolted back to reality when she dumps the phone on the bed and jumps to her feet, ditching the sheet and rushing to get dressed.

“Mar, I—”

She freezes at the sound of my voice. Her head snaps up and her narrowed eyes full of fire, pain, and heartbreak lock on mine. “Out of *everyone*, Aiden. You’d do that to me?”

“I wasn’t thinking straight,” I rush out, sitting up straight. “All I was worried about yesterday was keeping my job. I fucked up. I know that.”

“You’re right. You did. You weren’t thinking at all. I told you what would happen, and you didn’t listen. There was never a chance of keeping your job. You had two options—ride it out and hope to keep your pension or leave on your own and avoid the bullshit. That phone call just told me you chose door one, which would’ve been fine if you didn’t do it by using me to throw doubt into the mix.”

“Marls, I love being a cop. Being a detective is all I’ve ever wanted to do,” I say, getting up and shoving my jeans on.

“What about me? You don’t think *I* love my job?”

“What did he say?” I say, my voice low and serious.

“Just that I’ve been called in for a meeting tomorrow. My lieutenant wants to go over my report with me again. The same report he’d already signed off on. On the case that was already signed, sealed, and delivered with a nice red bow. The *case*,” she says, her voice getting louder, “that was going to prove to him *and everyone* that I’m meant to be a detective.”

“You are, Mar. I know that.”

“Do you? Or is that just more lip service because you got me back in your bed and warming your sheets. You lost the woman you were fighting another man for and I’m the next best thing?” She grabs her purse from where it hangs off an armchair and I panic. I can’t leave it like this. Can’t let *her*

leave like this. Not when she's the only bright thing in my life right now. I can't lose her too. Not if I can help it, anyway.

"Fuck, Marlee. No. It's not like that. But I'll fix it, OK. I'll redo my statement. I'll make it right. I promise."

"What. Did. You. Tell. Them?" she demands before storming across the room and stopping right in front of me. "I swear to *God*, Aiden. This is the last chance you'll ever get from me before I walk out that door and never look back. Tell me what mess you've gotten me into, or this will be the last time you ever—"

"I said it could've been you," I blurt out, the room going dead quiet as my words hang in the air between us. She goes deathly still except for her wide eyes, her brows arched sky high.

Then she snaps out of it. "You *what*?" she whispers chillingly but there's no going back now, the damage was done yesterday when I tried to save my ass by offering up hers.

"I said it could've come from you. I didn't say it *did*. I just said it—"

"Just that it *might* have? Are you fucking serious? Since when did I become collateral damage in *your* fuck up?" She punctuates her words with her finger digging into the skin of my chest.

"I'll dial it back. I'll go in this morning and amend my statement. I wasn't thinking straight. I wasn't—"

She takes a step back as if she can't stand to be near me, shaking her head and staring like she doesn't know who the

fuck I am anymore. *She's not the only one.* “You weren’t thinking period. I can’t *believe* you’d do this. And to me...*me?* Who the hell do you thi—”

I kiss her. I can’t stop myself. My tongue sweeping against hers once before she jerks away, her hands shoving me back like she can’t bear to be close to me. I know the slap is coming before her palm connects with my jaw and I stand there and take it, welcoming the pain because it’s the least I deserve for breaking her heart.

“Don’t you *ever* touch me again. Not if you don’t want a pair of cuffs and an assault charge added to your growing list of fuck ups.”

She stalks to the hotel room door, angrily pulling it open before taking a step out into the hallway, stopping to look back at me and dealing her death blow. “Forget you know me. Forget everything, Aiden. You’re nothing to me now. I’m going to forget I ever knew you, ever touched you, ever fucking lo—all of it. Everything. It’s done now. Fix it, or don’t. Leave, or don’t, Aiden. I’m done with this, and I’m definitely fucking done being disposable.”

Then she disappears, leaving me stunned, stumped, and frozen in place. The heavy hotel room door slams shut, the sound echoing around the room, leaving mussed sheets, fuzzy memories, and an empty silence in its wake.

That’s the day I vowed to leave Vegas and never return. But before I did, I went to the station and amended my statement, taking full responsibility and submitting my

resignation. Then I left the city and the events that happened in my rear view and didn't look back.

The scene with Marlee making one thing glaringly obvious. I was never the victim. I turned myself into one of the villains. That's something I never thought I'd be.

Then again, I didn't think I'd ever have Marlee Manning tell me to forget her either. That's something I cannot and will never do.

Chapter 1

AIDEN

12 months later

Regret is a petty bitch.

It screws you up, tears you down, and if you let it, it can dictate the future direction of your life.

When you destroy your life as spectacularly as I did, you get two choices—wallow in pity and stay down or try to rebuild everything from the ground up.

At first, I chose the former. After Vegas, I returned to San Francisco and didn't leave the house. I drank myself into a hole until I'd black out. It was the only way to numb the pain and block out the disappointment and self-loathing. Then I'd wake up the next day and do it all over again, just sitting on my couch and locking myself away from the world.

I lost everything in one fell swoop. I did not pass go, I did not collect two hundred dollars and I definitely did not get any semblance of a happy ever after. All I had was a ruined reputation, a broken heart twice over and an empty bed. All because of one stupid, dangerous, reckless decision that led to the kidnapping of two innocent people, one of whom was shot, and being royally screwed over by a third. The only good thing to come out of it was that the man behind it all went to

prison and will never breathe fresh air again. Then I screwed over the last person I had in my corner, one who had my back but who I hurt so badly, she cut ties forever.

Ten months ago, when I was at my lowest and considering things I had no business considering, I received a phone call. It was a lifeline, an opportunity, a chance that I grabbed hold of with two hands. I'm still plagued with guilt and regret for what I did and what could've been, but I also have a new life here in Seattle, away from all the bridges I burned in my past.

"You're in early," my friend and boss Harry says as he walks into our small, seen-better-days office in Tacoma and sits behind his desk. It was Harry who dragged me out of the deep black hole I was burying myself in and offered me a job as a private investigator.

"Couldn't sleep. Figured I might as well work on this stealing case."

Harry's brows arch. "The one with the sticky-fingered employee?"

"That's it. He's a wily one. Seems to know where all the cameras are, even the pinhole ones I put in last week. And he hasn't stolen a thing since. It makes me think he's got his own surveillance in there."

"Makes sense," he says, rubbing his chin. "But how would he do that? Or *know* to do that? He's what, twenty-two?"

"Yeah, but he's also studying computer science at Seattle University. So, he's smart with stuff like that."

Harry's gaze turns calculating, an expression I've seen him wear many times since I started working for him both here and back when we were detectives for the SFPD together. "Maybe we can use his skills," he muses, tapping his pen against the desk. "I think I've just come across a case that may need an amateur hacker. It could be right up his alley."

I lean forward, leaning my elbows against my desk. "You want to bring in the thieving employee of a client for a *job* interview?"

He shrugs. "Two birds, one stone. It would get him out of the shop and away from his computer while you go in and install some of my *new* cameras that can't be seen, and I'll distract him with a fake job interview."

"You think that'll work?"

"It'll give us a chance to close the case sooner rather than later and he won't see it coming. You know just as well as I do that sometimes the only way to outsmart people like that is to beat them at their own game. If he's watching the feed and lining his pockets on our client's dime, then let's give him the chance to become the star of his own show. Except *this* time, it'll be *us* dictating the plot *and* the outcome."

I nod, impressed with Harry's cunning plan. He's always been the kind of man who's one step ahead of the game. It's what made him a successful detective with one of the highest closing records in SFPD history—until he retired, and I picked up the reins and *beat* his standing record a year later.

It's the same tenacious approach to life that has made him an even better private investigator. "Alright, I'll set it up and

talk to him. But we need to make sure he doesn't suspect anything."

Harry nods in agreement. "Leave that to me. I'll handle the fake job interview and keep him busy while you work your magic."

"OK. Sounds good. I'll call the owner."

He gets up and walks around his desk, resting his ass on the wood. "Since you're here, be prepared to hand over this case to me because I've got another one coming in hot, and I want you to take it."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, interest piqued.

"Got a call last night from a long-standing contact of mine. Seems he's got a problem he wants us to help him out with."

My brow goes up. "And you're giving it to *me*? Anyone would think you're taking my training wheels off."

He snorts, his lips tugging up on the side. "You haven't needed those since the first day you walked in here and you damn well know that."

"I was a mess," I state matter-of-factly.

Harry pins me with a stare. "I've told you time and time again, the day you stop beating yourself up about things you cannot change will be the day you get a good night's sleep *and* stop doubting yourself."

Now I'm the one scoffing. "You make it sound easy."

"Probably because I've put criminals away for far worse than what you did who had far less punishment for it and they

sleep *fine*.”

“Wish it was that simple.”

“Aiden, you made a mistake. It won’t be the first time and it likely won’t be the last. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t fall on your ass sometimes. Tell me a man who hasn’t screwed up because of a woman and I’ll tell you you’re wrong every time.”

“OK, wise one. What do you suggest I do? I broke the law and it led to a man and a woman almost getting killed.”

“But they weren’t. The bad guy was jailed. You’ve more than suffered the consequences of your actions. If you keep focusing on the past and not the future, you’ll never sleep, you’ll never live, and one day, you’ll find yourself looking in the mirror at a has-been with nothing to show for his life.”

I shoot him a wry grin. “You sound like you’re talking from experience when I damn well know you left the force willingly, not because you wanted to save your pension.”

“I was called in and dressed down more times than you can count, all for following my heart instead of my head. If you saw my record, your head would spin,” he chuckles.

Silence falls between us as I roll his words over in my mind. “So, this case...”

“Is the opportunity to face your past and move on from it.”

My head jerks back as a sinking feeling in my gut makes its presence known. “Tell me about it then.”

“Money is being skimmed off the top by his business partner, and not a small amount either. But he can’t trace it,” he explains.

“And that’s where I come in, I assume? You’ve seen my resume, I never worked financial crimes.”

“Ah, but you covered white collar and computer crimes at the FBI academy, didn’t you? You’re many things, Aiden Lawrence, but a fraud isn’t one of them.”

I shrug because he’s not wrong. It’s still not helping the uneasy feeling in my gut. “OK, then. Give me the Cliff notes version and I’ll let you know if you’re barking up the wrong tree putting me on this case.”

“The client is not *exactly* squeaky clean, but clean enough,” Harry starts, telling me all I need to know. He may not be on the up and up, but he’s up enough. Meaning as far as we know, he’s not doing anything that’ll hurt good people. That’s something I’ve had to learn to get used to since becoming a PI. As a police detective, everything’s black and white—at least it was until I decided to create a whole new shade of grey. *Moving on...*

“This other boss, how sure is the client that it’s him doing the skimming?”

“It’s one of the two of them so I’m thinking that’s enough confirmation. He just needs proof of whatever is going on. When he has that, he can act. It’s a lucrative operation and very high profile. All you need to do is go in, tread carefully, bide your time and make sure you dot all the I’s and cross all

the T's so the client gets the information he wants. It has got to be concrete though. Open and shut."

"How am I supposed to do that and how long do I have to do it?" My mind is already racing with possibilities. Surveillance, a confidential informant on the inside, a wiretap, dummy transactions. None of it is foolproof though.

"He wants you to go in and stay in for however long it takes."

It takes a moment to realize what he's saying. "In as in undercover?"

"Yep. And you're the only one out of the two of us who can do it."

I stare at him, my eyes bugging out. "Out of the two of us, sure. Out of everyone on the West Coast, no."

"He came to me for this, Aiden. We can't turn it down." Harry lets those words hang in the air between us. "It's not like I can pass for security in a club like that."

"Club?"

"Yep." I realize that he's acting suspicious. His answers are too clipped and non-descriptive. Which means there's something he's not telling me.

I narrow my eyes. "What kind of club?"

"It's called Marquis." I frown because I've never heard of a club called that in Seattle.

"Where is it?"

Harry watches me closely, his features tight as he confirms my suspicions. “Vegas.”

I’m already shaking my head as he speaks. “Harry, I can’t —”

“Yeah, that word never used to be in your vocabulary. Not the Aiden Lawrence I knew.”

“You know that man is long gone. There are now a lot of should nots, could nots and can nots in my arsenal and anything to do with Vegas earns *all* of those.”

“Yet here I am, looking at the same man I met over a decade ago. A man who never let anything stop him.”

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Harry nods. “Yeah, I do. But I don’t agree. Look, I know it’s not ideal, but this is a case we have to take. We *should* take. And it’s the only way he can get the evidence he needs.”

“Can you assure me it’s not connected to anyone from my past in Vegas?” I let that hang there because that’s a deal breaker for me.

He stares at me, his gaze intense and unwavering. “I’ll level with you. You’ve got to do this case. I owe this guy a favor and he’s calling it in.”

“How deep in this are you?”

“Nothing like that,” he says, shaking his head. “He helped me a while ago and now he’s wanting my help in return. So, when I say you’re the only man for the job, I’m not lying.”

I'm already working out the logistics in my head. My place here in Seattle may not be great, but it's still mine. "How long do *you* think it'll take?"

"I don't know. Money's not an issue here. Well, it *is* the issue, but isn't something you need to worry about. He just wants you there."

There's a giant but on the tip of my tongue but one look at Harry's face tells me there's no point arguing anymore. This is a favor he must pay, and I'm the only one who can do it. It's pretty much a done deal no matter what I say because I owe Harry a hell of a lot and after letting down a lot of people in my life, he's not someone I could or *would* ever do that to.

"It's not like you'd have to break the law. I'd never ask that of you."

My lips curl up. "Just bend it occasionally, right?"

"Maybe a little if needed," Harry replies with a shrug. "The key thing is to get in there, snoop around, and report back if and when you find anything."

I lean back in my chair, that uncomfortable feeling deep inside me not going away. But it's not about the case. I can do jobs like this in my sleep. It's about going back to the city where I lost everything. The mecca of my downfall.

It's been almost a year since I lost everything and hit rock bottom. The memories are painful, etched into my mind like scars that will never fade. I have wrongs to right in Vegas, and this could be the opportunity to do exactly that. This case could be my chance at redemption, a chance to face my past

and move on. It won't be easy, but I've never been one to back down from a challenge. *I never used to, anyway.*

“Alright.”

His brows jump up. “You're in?”

“Not like I've got much choice but yeah. Yeah. But if it drags on for months, I'll be blowing up your phone to get me out.”

“Deal.” The tension he's holding leaks out of him as he slumps down with a relieved sigh. “I'll make the arrangements with him. He's rented a condo for you in Vegas too. Nothing that can be linked to anyone.”

My head jerks back as my brows rise. “Are there going to be people looking that deep into me?”

“Probably. But you're going in as yourself. You do remember one of the first things they tell you about going undercover?”

“Stick close to the truth.”

“Exactly. An ex-cop who fell from grace who's just trying to make a living and keep his head above water by taking whatever gig he can get. To a man like *that*, a security job at the hottest and most exclusive club in Vegas is the holy grail.”

“You sure you're not just setting me up for a new life in Vegas to get rid of me?” I say with a wry smirk.

Harry grins, relief evident in his features. “Why would I do that? You're stuck with me. If I was going to do that, I wouldn't send you *there*.”

“Good. I’m not looking to move again any time soon.”

“I guess this is where I tell you that your flight is already booked for Monday, and I’ve got all the details so you can hit the ground running when you get there,” he says.

I chuckle with a shake of my head. “Doesn’t seem like I ever had a choice in this. Am I that much of a sure thing?”

Harry shrugs before leaning toward me. From his stance alone, I know he’s about to level with me in a way I might not like. The thing with Harry is that whatever he says, it’s always what he thinks I need to hear. Most of the time, he’s not wrong.

“You’ve come a long way, Aiden, and you’d continue to get back to the man you were before Vegas with or without this case. But take it from me, a man running from his past is not running toward a future he deserves. You’ve been going in circles and it’s high time you quit running. Maybe when you do, you’ll find a new path that leads you in the right direction.”

“That’s a lot of sage advice, boss.”

“Yeah. Too much. So how about we get on to closing this theft case and then you can get yourself in the right headspace to get on that plane in a few days? Because Aiden, chances like this don’t come along very often.”

“To bring down a bad guy? Had a few of those in my time, Harry.” I smirk, but Harry doesn’t return the grin, he meets my eyes and I know he means business.

“No. A chance at redemption. Something tells me this might be yours.”

Chapter 2

AIDEN

Stepping out of the airport and into the hot Nevada air, it's like a whole other world away from the light drizzle I left in Seattle.

The sticky-fingered employee fell for our ruse hook, line, and sinker, and Harry and I were able to close the case yesterday with the help of the Seattle PD. Which means there are no loose ends back home to worry about, and no time limit in which to get this Vegas case done.

In fact, the only thing Harry said to me before kicking me out of his car at SeaTac was to take my time acclimatizing and preparing for my job interview on Thursday. Which in Harry-speak means do the research and don't rush it.

My cover is simple. I'm playing myself; a disgraced cop who needs a job to keep a roof over his head and the debt collectors at bay. If everything goes to plan, I'll be on the job come the end of the week. Until then and to pass the time, I play the role of tourist. The apartment the client rented for me is nothing special, but it's enough to back up the story that I'm trying to stay afloat and need the security job at Marquis in order to keep doing that.

I've got a new phone for the duration of the case, it's cleaner and safer. Then again, it's not like there's any risk to my cover. I'm still myself. And of the three people from my past that still live in Vegas, two are undoubtedly living their happily ever after and I'd be the absolute last person they'd ever want to see.

The other person is Marlee and she has stayed true to her last words to me, disappearing from my life completely. She said she'd do it, but part of me never truly believed she'd stay away. *More the fool me, I guess.*

It's still strange to be back here, but I can't dwell on that now because today it's D-Day—the day of my interview at Marquis.

Harry's client delivered a packet of information to my door that contained anything and everything I'd ever need to know about the most exclusive place-to-be-and-be-seen venue on the strip. The club is part of the new Globe entertainment precinct that was still being built when I left last year. The venue's flagship nightclub is touted as one of the best in Vegas and has a VIP waiting list stretching past a year. The general consensus is, if you're seen at Marquis, you've made it. I imagine working there is a coup in itself.

I arrive a little early, wanting to get a feel for the place before my interview. The building itself is modern and slick, bright lights lighting up the night sky and pulsing in time to the music pumping through the speakers outside as well as vibrating the walls from inside. Money drips from every surface and every detail, the whole venue breathing luxury,

decadence, hedonism with a promise of sin and debauchery. It teases and tantalizes and whoever is in charge of marketing deserves a raise because one look at the people desperately queuing in line tells me they'll wait all night if they have to, just for the chance to get inside.

It's clear that there's still far more to the place than what I can see. It makes sense why Harry couldn't tell me how long I'd need to be here. The only plan I have so far is to get the job, earn the trust of those in power, and bide my time until I get the chance to investigate the financials.

I've tried scouring the internet for information on the club and its ownership. All I could find was that it's owned by two shell companies, who in turn are owned by many more, but I've come up empty when I try to find *who* I might be working for and who I'm meant to be investigating. I could press Harry to tell me, but I figure being in the dark could work in my favor.

Despite questions over the money trail, there's no mistake which owner is the face of it—Decker James. From his many adoring admirers giving up their weekly wage for the door charge alone just to catch a glimpse of the man, to his very close, tight-lipped inner circle of friends, one thing is clear. If this man is dirty, he's Teflon. He's so clean and there's so little information about the guy, it's a giant red flag in itself.

On the surface, he has money—a lot of it—yet despite living in a digital age where *everything* is online, outside of news stories, there's nothing to be found about the man. It's a little suspicious. My years of investigating have me trained to

think the worst and hope for the best, and Decker James has a public mask that's likely hiding some not-so-clean things. My gut instinct is underworld, *illegal* things.

But knowing not to make assumptions, I used an old contact at the FBI to help me dive a little deeper. What he found confirmed my suspicions. There's a lot more to Decker James than just being a club owner and 'man of the people,' most of it rumor and conjecture but where there's smoke there is almost always fire.

Before Marquis opened, Decker worked as a fixer for hire for anyone with deep enough pockets to hide their dirty secrets. He was *the* one person people would pay top dollar to for his services. The agency hasn't been able to get anything concrete on him and that alone is enough to put the man in my crosshairs.

First I have to get in the door, then it's just a case of keeping my head down and my eyes and ears open.

Wanting to make a good impression, I approach one of the burly bouncers manning the purple velvet rope outside the double front doors.

"Hey, man," I say, offering my hand. "I'm here for an interview with Justin."

The man with a guarded gaze and gruff voice stares at my hand for a second before looking me up and down before switching his attention to the large tablet in his hand. "Name?"

"Aiden Lawrence." He grunts as he glances from the tablet to my face and back again, pressing something on the screen.

“He’s on his way.” He cracks a small smile and holds his hand out, shaking mine. “The name’s Hawk. Do me a favor till J turns up, stand aside, and stay clear. You may be one of us soon but believe me, you don’t want to cause problems before you start. You don’t seem the type to do me wrong like that.” His arched brow and twitching lips have me smirking back at him. I jerk my chin up, already relaxing a bit.

As asked, I step aside and watch as the bouncers expertly handle the crowd, turning away those who don’t meet the dress code—something that’s strict and formal, only the best of the best will do, it seems—as well as those who are too drunk or high to function. It may be early on a Thursday night, but it *is* still Vegas.

What I *do* like is the way Hawk and the two other bouncers work together. They’re the first line of defense and gatekeepers of the club and they operate like they live and breathe it. I can tell that they’ve seen it all before and they’re not swayed by anyone or anything. From the way they just kicked out a young actor with three strippers hanging off his arm for trying to bribe them with a few Benjamins—they’re not impressed by any of it. It’s a good start.

I switch my focus to the crowd, watching as they hustle and bustle to get inside, their eagerness to experience the lavishness of the club is palpable and hangs in the air like static electricity. Just the thought of Marquis and what’s inside has people willing to wait in line for hours.

Lost in thought, a voice behind me snaps me back to reality. “Lawrence?”

I turn around to see a sharply dressed man with a well-groomed beard and a sleek black suit. He extends his hand for me to shake, and I notice the expensive watch on his wrist, and it's not a brand you pick up from Walmart. It's money—and a lot of it. *I know this guy...*

“Justin?” I say shaking my head to make sure I'm not seeing things. Alarm bells ring but I'm here now, so I have to go with it. Justin Howell was working patrol when I made detective in San Francisco. That would've been at least six years ago though. “I had no idea you'd left the force.” My only hope right now is that he's believing the smile on my face. Never have I been more grateful for coming into this case as myself.

“Yeah, man. Had enough of the rules and regs, you know?” He laughs. “Well of course you do, that's why you're here,” he replies. “Let's get inside and we'll grab a drink and get started.”

“I don't drink on the job,” I state.

“Way to make a good impression, Lawrence. But don't worry, this interview is just a formality. I knew it was you when your CV crossed my desk. I haven't even called anyone else.”

“Had I known that I wouldn't have dressed up,” I shoot back with a chuckle. Justin looks me up and down and shoulder bumps me. “Sorry to say, but if that's you dressing up, then thank god we've got a uniform for you.”

“Uniform?”

“Gotta look the part and Decker doesn’t skimp on *anything*. So just take it and say thanks, yeah? Who knows, it might actually help you get laid around here. Call it a bonus.”

I follow him through the double doors that lead into the lobby of the club. There’s a large coat check to the left with smartly dressed attendants working the registration desk. On the other side is a sleek black counter manned by two black-suited security guards. They both have earpieces in, and I hazard a guess that they’re likely armed too, side and ankle if they’re thorough.

A quick scan of the periphery and I spot cameras covering every inch of the area, meaning I’m going to have to be smart about this. With eyes everywhere, it means there’s very little chance of going where you’re not supposed to be, to find things you’re not supposed to find. Where there’s a will, there’s a way though.

“It’s a lot to take in, am I right?” Justin asks with an easy-knowing smile. “Wait till you see behind the purple curtain.” And he’s not lying, there’s a huge purple velvet covering over the wide arch entry to the club proper.

“Definitely a lot different to the clubs *I* used to go to.”

He smacks my shoulder with a laugh and I remember why I never became friends with the guy. He was always very loose and casual—with patrol, the law, orders, all of it. I’m not surprised that the cop life wasn’t for him. I do feel at ease with him though, at least enough to get the job done. Doesn’t mean I trust him, but he could easily come in useful later. The key to acclimatizing and ingraining yourself when you’re undercover

is to make friends and collect favors because you never know when they'll come in handy.

As soon as we enter the club, I stop dead in my tracks and take in the scene in front of me, because believe me, there's a *lot* to take in. The photos online were very few and far between—probably adding to the intrigue and interest in the place. Even the promise of this place didn't do it justice. It's so much more than I could have ever imagined.

The interior is dark to go along with the ambience, an array of purple and blue lights flashing up the walls and over the crowd. There are holograms of scantily dressed men and women dancing provocatively in cages hung from the ceiling. Below them is a thick throng of clubgoers dancing shoulder to shoulder on the dance floor in front of a dimly lit DJ booth like they don't have a care in the world. The combination of lights and music are almost disorientating, especially with the polished floors reflecting everything happening above them like mirrors.

There's marble, glass, and steel everywhere else. Frosted windows with thick chrome panes. Shiny black counters front well-stocked bars on both sides of the large room, bottles of liquor that cost more than my paycheck stacked high and lit up like the Empire State Building.

Justin ushers me toward the closest bar, the chairs looking more like thrones than the dingy stools from the bars I'm used to. He waves to a bouncy blonde bartender and holds up two fingers and thirty seconds later, whisky sours are placed in front of us.

He nods down at the drink. “Said I didn’t drink on the job, Howell.”

“Thought that was just lip service,” he says, arching a brow as he takes a sip.

“Nope. Gotta stay sharp to be sharp. Learned my lesson the hard way.”

“Yeah, heard about all that,” he says as he ushers the bartender over again and orders me a sealed bottle of water. When she delivers it, I offer my thanks and turn back to the man next to me.

“Surprised you didn’t file my CV in the trash then. Are you sure *you* don’t drink on the job?” I muse.

“Nah. I’m hiring you on name alone, Lawrence. I don’t need a piece of paper to tell me what you’ve done or not done. I’m a people person. Got a good read on you back on the force and pegged you as a straight arrow. Then that shit went down with the Sovereign Hotel and the shooting last year. I tell you, no one would’ve been more shocked than me when your name was mentioned.”

“Yet you’re still giving me a job.” It’s not a question, it’s more of a statement. I make a note in my head to look into Justin later, but the fact I already have an in is definitely making this part of the care a lot easier.

“So, what do you think of the place? Pretty wow, right?” he says, looking out over the club.

“It’s something for sure. A lot bigger than I expected.”

“Let me guess. You tried doing your research and came up empty? That’ll be cause patrons aren’t allowed their phones inside.”

My head jerks back as I stare at him in surprise. “Really?” I pat my pocket out of habit, finding my cell still there. Justin catches the movement.

“You’re fine, Lawrence. I don’t see you snapping pics and posting them online,” he replies with a snicker. “The coat check is also a phone check. There are also individual lockers for every person who pays the door charge and steps through those doors. Outside, Hawk and the guys are the first line of defense, their job is to make sure the right kind of people get in. Then in the lobby we’ve also got scanners.”

“Scanners?” I think back to when we walked in and I can’t recall walking through any type of monitoring equipment. “Are we talking visual scanning or...”

Justin’s smile turns devilish. “Nope. Scanners up in the arch everyone has to walk through. Gives us a full body view which is then fed to the monitors at the front desk and the control room. I can show you all of that tomorrow night.”

I school my expression because this ‘easy’ case just got a hell of a lot harder and intriguing all at the same time. *Why would a club need such a high level of security?*

“So why didn’t they take my phone away from me?”

“Cause you’re with me. I’d already flagged you as being safe before I came and got you.”

“Guess it pays to be old cops who were lucky to escape the force.” The words pain me to say but I remind myself that this is a role, a ruse, a mask I’m wearing. And it’s true, I *am* an ex-cop. A disgraced one who was lucky to keep his pension at that.

It’s the right thing to say because Justin lifts his tumbler, taps it against my still-untouched water bottle, and downs the rest of his glass before checking his watch and looking over his shoulder and up. Following his gaze, I catch the camera he’s jerking his chin up at.

“Hate to cut this short but I’ve got another meeting I must get to. You’re welcome to stay and soak all of this in if you’re so inclined, or I can take you to the staff locker room and get you fitted for a suit and then we’ll catch up tomorrow night for your first shift.”

Why does this all seem a little too straightforward? Almost easy?

As Justin leads me through the club, I can’t help but feel a sense of unease as I see the place a little differently now. The dim lighting and thumping bass of the music make me feel like I’m walking through a different world. Everywhere I turn, people are dancing, drinking, and laughing, but I can’t ignore that there’s also a sense of purpose to the allure of the club.

It’s that thought that plagues me as I’m given a suit that looks like it costs more than the annual salary they’re paying me, and a staff app is set up on my phone. Then I’m sent on my way with promises to catch up with me before my first shift the next night.

It's not until I'm back at the apartment and sitting on the couch with a beer in hand that Harry messages me.

Harry: You all set?

Aiden: Yep. And something tells me this isn't going to be as easy as we think.

Harry: These kinds of cases never are.

That's exactly what I'm afraid of.

Chapter 3

AIDEN

After a week of working at Marquis, I've realized that this case won't be a quick one. If anything, seeing the sheer amount of money invested in security and the surveillance equipment on site makes me more sure than ever that something more could be going on—either *at* the club, or *through* the business like my client suspects. I can't think of a business that's completely on the up and up that would ever need government-level security measures. That's not to say it isn't nice working with this level of technology.

The first two shifts last weekend were spent shadowing Justin. He showed me everything I needed to know and everywhere I could go—basically anywhere except the two offices at the end of the second-floor hallway. From monitoring the scanners in the lobby to working the front door with Hawk as well as spending hours in the control room upstairs with its eagle-eye view of the entire club, I've done it all and seen almost all of the operations at the club.

It's been easy to get the lay of the land in such a short period of time because the club is always busy. From the moment the doors open at nine to when they finally close at

four a.m., it's pumping. There is always something happening in the club from what I can only assume comes from the instinctive freedom that comes just from being in Vegas. Add in free-flowing liquor, men and women crammed together in a hot, sweaty, decadent atmosphere that oozes sin and sex, and everything that happens in a town that never sleeps, and there's never a dull moment.

Harry has given me free rein to run this case however I see fit but talking it through with him before I left, he approved of my intention to lay low and work my way in slowly. The ultimate goal is to get inside the inner circle of Marquis and close to Decker because that's the only way I can see me finding whatever dirt there is to be found.

I haven't seen anything out of the ordinary so far, but that's not to say there isn't anything there. It's been two days. Even my most optimistic estimate of how long this job might take was a month, most likely longer. That's why I'm sticking to my initial plan, it's just a hell of a lot clearer now than it was before I got here.

So far, I think just knowing Justin from before has gone a long way to earn his trust and respect. The next step is meeting Decker, the legend of Marquis himself. Curiously, he's yet to make an appearance, which just seems to add to the mystery surrounding the man.

After clocking in for my third shift just five days after first walking through the doors, I've been outside with Hawk and another guard for half an hour when Justin comes out, clapping Hawks back before grabbing my hand and shaking it.

He doesn't let go though, he holds on, staring me dead in the eye. "Good news, Lawrence. I talked to Decker and Hawk. You're being promoted," he announces.

I arch a brow, a mix of intrigued, surprised, and naturally suspicious. "Promoted to what?"

He lets me go and laughs. "No offense to Hawk and his crew, but your skill set is more valuable inside than out."

My head swivels to the man standing beside him. Hawk just snorts. "Don't look at me like that. He's not wrong. You're wasted on the door. You got over a decade on the job and that was dealing with far worse than a fake ID, entitled drunk fucks who think they're doing *me* the favor, and all the other drunk, horny, and high club goers on the Strip." He jerks his chin toward the club. "Get inside and stop looking like you've just jumped the queue ahead of me. I'm the one who told J to do it."

"You *suggested* it, but you weren't wrong."

Hawk chuckles. "I'm *never* wrong, J."

Justin rolls his eyes, his lips twitching. "Anyway, I need someone I can trust to be my eyes and ears when I'm not here, and that's you." His gaze scans my expression. "Don't make me *force* you, Lawrence. Just say thank fuck and let's go. Hawk *won't* hold it against you because you're essentially the same, it's just he's my outside eyes and you're my inside ones. You're equal."

I turn to Hawk, not wanting to make an enemy of him. "Only if you're OK with this."

He bumps my shoulder with his. “Fuck, Aiden. Just get your ass inside. You’re holding up the line.”

“Yes, sir,” I say with a mock salute before arching a brow Justin’s way. “What the fuck are we still standing out here for?”

He rolls his eyes at me but does it while laughing. “My point exactly. See you, Hawk.”

“Later, J. Later, A.”

I turn and walk backward. “A?”

Hawk shrugs and holds two fingers out as he lifts his hand to his forehead. “Better than L.”

“Yeah, you win with that one,” I say, waving him off. We leave Hawk working the line while Justin and I head inside.

Once we’re in the elevator heading up to the control center, I take my chance. “You want to tell me what this is all about then?”

I’m not complaining. No longer being on the door or having to stand sentry next to the dancefloor helps give me access I didn’t have before. It’s also the perfect chance to get closer to Justin and eventually Decker. That’s not to say that it isn’t a little suspicious. Why would a club with so many cameras and such stringent security promote a new staff member after a few shifts?

Is it because they see potential or so that they can keep a close eye on me?

“Man, you really are a suspicious bastard,” he says, and for a moment I wonder if I spoke my thoughts out loud. I forge on regardless.

“I’ve been screwed over before, remember.”

His lips curl up on one side, his eyes glittering with approval. “Way I heard it, it was *you* doing the screwing.”

I rake my hands over my face and huff out a huge breath. “Screwing myself over? Yep. Doesn’t mean I can’t be bitter about it.”

“I’d be worse than bitter, man. But that’s all in the past now. Working here is your chance to start over and get your life back on track. It worked for me, I wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t for Decker.” I make another mental note to follow up on that lead at another time. “The only thing stopping you is you. All you’ve got to do is man up, take it by the balls, and wring them out for all you can get, yeah?”

I screw up my face at the analogy and make a show of covering my junk with my hands. “Not too keen on wringing balls that aren’t my own.”

Justin grins like a loon. “*That* right there is why you’re the right man for the job.”

“Cause the only nuts I like are my own?” I say with a disbelieving snort.

“Look, I don’t care whose junk you’re touching—or not touching. Whatever floats your boat. But you’re a good fit because you’re real. You’ve done wrong and been wronged,

but you're still standing and pushing ahead. *That* is the kind of man Decker and I want working with us."

We step out into the corridor, one side is taken up by the control room, the other is lined with art works, photographs, all edgy designer shit that doesn't take my fancy. Right at the end are Justin and Decker's offices.

"See, you keep mentioning the man but I'm really starting to think the elusive Decker James is a mirage," I tease. "How would he even know who I am?"

Justin's lips curl up. "Don't worry about that. Deck knows everything that goes on. If he's not here to see it himself, he makes sure to hear about it, ask about it, or watch the cameras to find out about it for himself. Believe me, he knows *all* about you."

That makes my hair stand on end. "Since I'm still here and now being promoted, I'll take that as the mystery boss man's approval."

Justin lifts a brow. "You sound surprised? You're not being promoted because I like you, Aiden. It's because you're good, you've got an eye for detail, and an instinct you can't train. You've either got it or you don't. I'd be an idiot not to utilize you here. That's what Deck has seen too."

I lift my chin. "There's not much else I can say about that. If he likes what he sees and thinks I'm good at my job, I'm not about to argue. Stranger to me or not. That would kind of go against everything I'm trying to achieve here.

“Good. Now can we *finally* get on with actually *working*?” he muses.

“Yeah. Just hear me when I say thanks, J.”

“All good. For the record, tonight must be your lucky night because Decker’s coming in soon for a meeting he wants us to sit in on.”

I nod, feeling the anticipation build in my chest. It’s the next step I was waiting for, even if it *is* happening a hell of a lot faster than I had anticipated. But the best way to find out everything I need to know about him is to meet him and get close to him. If I’m to have any chance of getting the evidence my client needs, then a face to face with the boss is a great place to start. At least then I can get a read on him and work out whether he’s the prime target I suspect he is.

“You going to tell me what this new job of mine is all about then?” I ask as we stop outside the control room door.

“You’re going to be another me,” he states matter-of-factly. Justin has either just made my life a hell of a lot easier, or it’s a ‘keep your friends close and your enemies closer’ situation. “I’m busy already and that’s just going to get worse when I take on all the things Decker wants me to do. That means I need someone to be me when I can’t be—that’s you.

“I appreciate that, I do. You can understand why I’m a bit shocked though. We only met up again a week ago.”

“You forget. I know you, Aiden. I know the man you are and the kind of cop you were. You’ll handle shit the same way

I would. That's what I need. It's a no-brainer. Why do you think I hired you on the spot?"

"Ah, so you were looking for a workhorse all along so you can sit back in the VIP lounge drinking whisky and smoking cigars?" I say with a laugh.

"Fuck, I wish," he says. "But you didn't realize that your first two shifts when you were working your way around the club and being hands on, that was me testing you. And you passed with flying colors. This is your reward. The next step, Aiden. Just need you to tell me I can trust you."

Getting my head back in the game, I plaster the most earnest grin I've got in my arsenal and hold out my hand to shake his. "You know you can, Justin. I'm honored."

"Good. Now let's check on the crew in here and do the rounds before Deck gets here.

"Understood," I say simply. Justin claps me on the back before we step into the security perched high over the whole club. Camera feeds play continuously on the wall full of screens that fill half the room. It's overkill but from a security and business standpoint, it's smart. Everything that happens inside the four walls of Marquis is our responsibility and in this room, almost all of it is visible and recorded. So whatever happens, it'll either be seen as it happens or can be looked up after the fact.

"Everything OK tonight?" Justin asks the two guards on duty.

“Yeah, boss. All quiet. No funny business so far,” Ben says without looking away from the screens.

My head drops with a groan and I don’t miss the guy’s wide eyes as he realizes he’s committed the one faux pas we all know you shouldn’t make. Never say it’s quiet.

Justin chuckles. “Guess who just bought himself a week of check-out duty.” Something I discovered during my first shift is that the job nobody wants is working at the coat check/locker check out post.

“Yes, boss.”

“And Chris,” he says, turning to the other guy. “That means you get another week up here.”

“Not complaining about that, sir,” Chris replies. “It’s entertaining as hell watching all the guys get shot down by women that are out of their league.”

“Good man. Aiden here is going to be taking over most of my duties once I bring him up to speed. So, if I’m not here, he’s me.” Both of the men turn toward me and nod, instantly giving me their respect. It’s a heady feeling, something I haven’t felt since I was back on the force. It’s empowering to know that they trust me implicitly. Let’s just hope that when all is said and done, they don’t feel like they’ve been screwed over and betrayed.

For the next few hours, Justin and I do the rounds, checking in on the rest of the security team. Covering for breaks and dealing with a few reports of disturbances, one of which is a dealer trying to drum up business in the restrooms.

As the night wears on and Decker still hasn't shown up, I start to think he's not going to turn up after all. Justin and I sit at the bar and I watch as the vibe in the club slowly switches from the witching hour for mating to the slow, seductive roll of 'any companion will do,' something I've noticed always seems to happen around two a.m.

"You liking being back in Vegas?" Justin asks as the bartender whose name I now know as Brandi slides me a club soda and Justin a whisky sour.

I take a sip of the soda, feeling the fizz dance on my tongue before answering. "Yeah, it's been...interesting so far."

"I can imagine," Justin chuckles. "You always did have a way of finding yourself in the middle of things."

"It's a gift," I reply dryly, taking another sip of my drink. "But in all seriousness, I'm grateful for this opportunity. It's not often you get a second chance."

"I hear that. Been there, lived the tale, written the book," Justin agrees with a wry smile as he swirls the liquor in his glass. "I'm glad I can help you out and pay it forward, as they say. Having someone I can trust by my side and at my back is a bonus."

I hold up my glass between us. "Happy to be trusted," I reply, meeting Justin's gaze.

"That mean you're here for the long haul?"

Tilting my head, I arch a brow. "You mean will I marry you? Nope. But if you're asking whether I'm looking to put down roots and not blow my life up again? For sure. I have a

feeling this job is just what I need to get me back on my feet, something I haven't had a reason to do since I left the force."

"Ah. Now *that*'s something I can help with. If you want security and prospects, stick with me. Deck likes to look after his people. If he likes you, if he trusts you, you're in with him for life."

"Yet he's still a stranger to me, so as good as that sounds, you've got to let me be the judge of that." This isn't Aiden the security guard talking, this is the real me. Not that there's much difference between the two right now. Even still, I can tell Justin is impressed.

He grins before reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out his phone. "The man of the hour finally arrives. C'mon, Lawrence. Looks like you'll get your chance to judge the boss now."

My lips quirk up. "Thought *you* were the boss?"

Justin snorts and slides off his stool. "Yeah, not when Deck's in the building. Let's go. He wants to meet you."

I don't miss the spike of adrenalin coursing through me as we move across the club toward the VIP stairs. I realize that it's the feeling I've been missing, the one you can't replicate unless it's in the moment. It's akin to the thrill of the chase, or the anticipation of trapping someone in a game of chess. This time, the target, the prey, the person I'm looking to outsmart is the man behind Marquis.

I look around, my brows bunching. "How did I miss him come in?" I ask.

Justin chuckles. “Deck’s not the kind of man to walk through the front door if he doesn’t want to. If he wants to make a scene, he’ll do it. But he’ll do it on his terms.”

As we climb the stairs, I can feel Justin’s gaze on me. Taking a discreet deep breath when we reach the VIP floor, I fall in step behind him.

But as we approach the huge purple velvet booth with two people sitting in it waiting for us, I realize that this case has just gone sideways.

Because sitting next to Decker is the very last person I’d ever expect to see, and going by the death stare in her eyes, she’s just as thrown as I am.

Chapter 4

AIDEN

“J, my man,” Decker booms standing up and pulling him in for a bear hug. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too, Deck,” Justin replies, grinning from ear to ear.

Marlee and I stare at each other, but I can’t get a read on her. Her previously long chestnut hair has been dyed to a dusty blonde with platinum highlights. Those deep brown eyes of hers with the flecks of bronze in them shimmer in the flashing lights of the club and are as gorgeous as they’ve ever been, even if they’re brimming with shock and anger. I tear my gaze from hers to fix on Decker just as his attention moves to me. He stands and holds out his hand.

I meet his grip, shaking firmly. “The famous Aiden Lawrence. J here can’t stop talking about you.”

Turning toward Justin, I shoot him a questioning look. “Got a crush on me or something, J?”

“Fuck off,” he scoffs, shoulder bumping me with a smirk.

Deck snickers. “Don’t worry, your virtue is safe with this one. All he’s been going on about is how good it is to have you here.”

“I’ve been here five days so it’s not like I’ve had a chance to solve world hunger or anything yet.”

Decker sits again and looks me up and down. “Don’t need more than a few seconds to tell me whether I can trust a man or not. It’s all about a vibe.” He looks down at my hand before meeting my eyes. “And the handshake. Since you’ve passed both checks, how about you sit and join me, J, and the lovely Quinn here for a drink.” He waves over to a server who has been standing sentry against a wall as if dutifully waiting to be summoned while Justin and I take our seats opposite Decker and Quinn.

“Sir?” the server says, her voice shaky.

“Lucy, right?” he says, with a charming smile. *This guy knows how to work people. Then again, most criminal masterminds usually do.*

“Ye—Yes sir.”

“We’ll have a round of drinks, Lucy. J here will have his usual whisky sour, and Quinn and I will have some of my Macallan double cask 18-year-old single malt.”

Marlee—*Quinn*—clears her throat and shakes her head. “Not tonight, Decker. I’ll stick to my wine thanks.”

He wings a brow, his lips curving up into a calculating smirk. “You can’t drink *wine* in my club, baby. You’re turning down my top whisky for *wine*? You wound me.”

She shrugs, looking like she doesn’t have a care in the world and won’t be rattled. “First, I’m no one’s *baby*. I’ve told

you, Decker, this is business and business only. You know I'm not interested in being another blonde bimbo on your arm."

Decker doesn't look like a man who shies away from a challenge, and the flash in his gaze and his growing grin confirms it. Marlee knows what she's doing though—whatever it is she's doing. I can see the play from here. Reeling the man in by being hard to get, the total opposite of the simpering easy conquest a man like him can get without trying. Coming across as unobtainable is like Viagra to Decker. He could click his fingers and anyone he wants warming his bed. Wanting someone who isn't a pushover—*that* will always get his attention.

I can tell she's got a read on him already and knows that if you wave a red flag in front of this bull—or a beautiful woman who doesn't fall to her knees at the sight of him—he can't resist the challenge. It's smart. It's exactly the approach I'd suggest for an undercover op. I just wish I could find out why she's here, what her angle is, and whether or not it's going to have an effect on my own case.

"Business," he scoffs. "I'll wear you down one day."

"A wasted effort." Her mouth is just as seductive as the rest of her and like many a man before him—myself included—Decker James is the moth to Marlee's bright and irresistible flame.

"How about you, Lawrence? You going to join me for a drink," Decker asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Justin snorts. "Lawrence here doesn't drink." I chance a look at Marlee whose lips part slightly but otherwise, she

schools her reaction perfectly.

Decker tilts his head as he stares at me intensely. “You in recovery? Because I can dig that.”

“Nah. Just like to keep my head clear when I’m on the clock. Made many a mistake when I have outside influences impairing my judgment. So I drink, just not when I’m working.”

“Good man. That doesn’t mean you can’t drink club soda or something. *Sit, Lawrence.*” When I sit next to him, he reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. “And fucking relax, why don’t you. I may be the boss but surely I’m not *that* scary. What do you think, baby?” he asks Marlee—*Quinn*.

Marlee’s features tighten and her eyes narrow on the man next to me. “I’m not your baby, Decker. It’s *business*, remember?” She punctuates her statement with a barely-there quirk of her ruby-painted lips and fuck if it doesn’t have me thinking of all the times I had that exact teasing look pointed at me in the past. *And how it ended up with us tangled in the sheets until morning most of the time.*

He waves his hand in the air and snorts. “Yeah, you keep saying that, and yet you always turn up looking like sex personified. You know a man like me can’t deny a beautiful woman. You’re going to get me all distracted if I’m not careful.”

Decker is not dumb. But I can bet that’s exactly what Marlee was planning on. She knows *exactly* what she’s doing with him *and* with her outfit. She knows she’s not trying to get into Decker’s bed, he doesn’t though. Within just a few

minutes of knowing the man, I can already tell that his ego is one of his biggest weaknesses. He's charming, sure. Smart, I have no doubt. I just don't know what's beneath the surface. I guess that's my next challenge.

What I *do* know, whatever Marlee's angle is, I need to figure it out regardless.

With an ear to Decker and Justin's conversation, I take a deep breath and rest my hand against my drink, looking out over the club from the glass balcony next to us. It's one-way glass, ensuring the privacy of the VIPs but not shutting them out from the activities and entertainment below. It also means that there are a lot of things that go on up in this part of the club that would not fly on the ground level. Then again, there has to be perks given the simply eye-watering amount of money these people spend here.

"Everything going smoothly tonight?" Decker asks Justin.

"So far. It's been easygoing. No big disasters."

"And the deliveries? No issues with inventory again? I know we had some missing items from the order the other day," he continues.

Justin shakes his head. "Nah. Everything was as it should be."

"Payments made?"

"Yes, D. Everything's running like clockwork. The distributors are happy. We're a well-oiled machine. Don't you think, Aiden?"

Turning toward the men, my gaze sweeps over Marlee to find her head down, eyes on her phone as she mindlessly scrolls through her messages, but I can tell she's listening. "I haven't seen any major hiccups since I've been here."

Decker sends J a skeptical, some might say scathing look before he smooths his features and nods my way. "Did you accept J's offer to be his number two?"

"I'd be an idiot not to, Sir. I'm not about to turn down a chance like that."

Decker grins. "I agree. But from all accounts, we're lucky to have you here too. And, please, call me Deck or D." I jerk my chin up in agreement.

"Does that mean you're going to call me A like Hawk does?"

He laughs. "It's up to you what I call you 'cause you're the one who has to answer to it. A, Aiden, Lawrence, asshole. Whatever floats your boat. Just stick to the same name so at least everyone knows who the fuck we're talking about."

"I figure we'll stick with Lawrence. It's what I'd was called back on the force and..." I wince, selling the web I'm weaving.

Deck dips his chin, understanding and an edge of *something* filling his gaze. "Lawrence it is."

"Although Justin hasn't really told me what I'll be doing," I add, looking the man's way.

Justin holds his hands up. "Don't look at me like that and don't go throwing me under the bus with the boss. I only asked

you a few hours ago. Just you wait, you'll have more work than you can handle soon. Then I can just sit back and live it up.”

Decker growls under his breath and I see Justin's confidence falter. “There isn't any room for complacency at Marquis. Front of house *or* behind the scenes, it's all important. Every single part of the business is important. Right, J?” Decker's sharp tone cuts through the light mood in the booth.

It has me thinking that Decker is either emotionally attached to the club—financially too—or there's more to what he's talking about. Whatever it is, I need to know more. I guess that's where the new responsibilities I've been given should come in useful. For increased access if not anything else.

“Business is *good*, Deck. *Very* good. No issues. We've all got our eye on the ball. No worries. OK?” Justin says, very clearly and definitively.

My interactions with the man have got me a little off kilter because there's nothing I've seen about Decker so far that screams evil criminal mastermind. If I'd just met him on the street, I'm not sure he would've even pinged my radar. But I've met my fair share of wolves in sheep's clothing so I'm not about to let this *façade* fool me.

The intel I got from the FBI contact is burned on my brain so I know he's capable of horrific things. Marlee's appearance *has* thrown an unexpected spanner in the works though. That's a side bar I need to look into later.

Decker and Justin stare at each other for longer than necessary before obviously remembering they have company. “Ah,” Decker says, leaning back in the booth and spreading his arms wide, his fingers brushing against Marlee’s bare shoulder. “Sorry, baby. I’m ignoring you.”

Marlee’s head jerks up, her eyes narrowing as she moves out of his reach and gives the conversation her full attention. She was always one to take mental notes about anything and everything. It’s what makes her an amazing cop and I bet an even better detective. She’s thorough, attentive, and always thinking out of the box, something she’s done ever since she was a kid. I can’t imagine she’s any different in whatever she’s investigating here at Marquis.

“Decker. You wanted to meet here at this ungodly hour so we could talk about the business. Now that we’re here, all you’ve tried to do is charm and distract me. If you’re going to waste my time, I should’ve just stayed home and gone to *sleep*.”

Everyone stills at her tone and I well with pride because it’s a brave move, but it’s the right one. That’s evident when Decker’s chuckle confirms he’s playing right into her hands.

“Quinn. You’re busting my balls again...” he muses. “I *did* want to talk about your proposal and what you can do for Marquis. I just needed to check in with J and meet Lawrence here. Now that we’ve done that, you’ve got my full attention.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, drawing all of our eyes to the dip in her dress. *She’s good... almost too good.* “Then how about you stop trying to win me over by showing

me your toolbox when all I'm interested in promoting is your *playroom*, so to speak. Something I *told* you when I reached out to your office this week." *Keep going, Marlee.*

Justin whistles through his teeth. "Damn, Decker, she's got your number."

Decker studies Marlee, his eyes roaming over her face and I can see his brain working overtime. "Hmm, I'm thinking she just might. You can't blame me for trying—and try I will, Quinn. Trust me on that." His gaze sweeps over her form before his eyes drift over the table to me as he slowly lifts his whisky to his mouth. "What do *you* think, Lawrence? Is Quinn here right?"

I don't even blink. "About the toolbox or the playroom? That I wouldn't know." I shoot him a wink. "But something tells me that you're not a man to shy away from a challenge—business or otherwise." My twitching lips earn me a grin in return.

"I like you already, Lawrence. Now drink up that pansy ass soda of yours so that we can all hear what Quinn's proposing—*business* or otherwise."

"All business, Decker. I can assure you," Marlee replies before she launches into her 'proposal.'

Her presentation is so well executed, I'd almost be convinced that it was the real deal if I didn't know better. A quick look at Decker and Justin who both can't tear their eyes away from her has me thinking they're completely sold on her too. Decker in particular seems enamored and hanging off her every word.

One thing is for sure. Whatever the case she's working on, I need to know about it. At least then I can be sure I won't screw up again like last year.

Hurting Marlee is still and always will be one of my biggest regrets and it's a mistake I don't ever plan on making again. Not if I can help it.

Chapter 5

MARLEE

It just takes a few phone calls to find out where Aiden's condo is. Even though it's almost dawn, I need to know what his angle is, why he is working with Decker, and why he's back in Vegas. The last I heard, he was living in Seattle. *Not that I'd asked or anything...*

"Quinn," he says as he steps off the elevator and walks toward me.

"Get inside, Aiden. We've got a lot to talk about and it's not safe out here."

Without another word he closes the distance between us, opening the door and pushing it wide before holding his arm out and ushering me past him. I storm in, taking into the surroundings before whirling around on him as soon as we're shut inside.

"What the hell are you playing at? Who are you working for?" I demand, my voice rising in frustration.

Aiden remains calm under my verbal onslaught, his face betraying nothing except his eyes, they slay me with the regret and sadness I find in them. "You look good."

“Aiden...” I growl.

He arches a brow and I see him slip his mask on, the unreadable, flat, passive one. “How about this then, I’m not showing you mine till you show me yours. For all I know, you’re on the wrong side of this.”

I narrow my eyes. “The wrong side of *what?* You’re the one who has shown up on my turf and just happen to be working at the same club owned by the man I’m investigating. It’s all a bit too coincidental, don’t you think?”

He doesn’t respond to that, instead he walks into the kitchen and pulls down a bottle of Jack from the cabinet, bringing out two tumblers and getting ice from the freezer before pouring himself a drink. He offers me one, but I shake my head, my mind too wired to even think about alcohol. *There’s also the fact that last time there was alcohol involved, we ended up horizontal and naked before he shattered me and almost cost me everything.*

“C’mon, Marls. First time seeing each other after all this time and you won’t even have a drink with me?” he says, taking a sip of his drink.

I throw my hands up in the air. “You expect me to just forget our past and move *on?*”

“For this case, yes.”

“Ugh,” I grind out, stalking over to the kitchen and pouring a drink for myself, downing it one go before slamming the glass back down. I brace my hands on the

counter and pin him with a stare that he hopefully reads as me telling him to cut the shit.

His eyes warm as he looks me over, but there is still wariness in his gaze. “You look good.”

“I always look good. That’s the point of dressing like *this*.” I wave my hand up and down in front of me. “Make myself irresistible to the mark.”

He chuckles, taking another sip of his drink. “Still as confident as ever, Marls. Never change.”

I can feel the tension between us slowly melting away, but I can’t let it. I need the mental and emotional distance to stay between us to keep me on track. “Who are you working for?”

He leans back against the counter, studying me with a calculating gaze. “Can’t tell you. It’s confidential.”

I roll my eyes. “At least tell me if you’re working against me. I can’t have anyone jeopardizing this investigation. I’ve put too much time and effort into getting this case.”

We stare at each other in a silent standoff, neither one of us willing to fold. Thankfully, he looks away first with a resigned sigh. “Right now, I can’t say I’m *not* working against you, because there’s a lot of smoke and mirrors around my client. I don’t even know *who* my client is, but my focus is on the books and money, nothing else.”

I nod, not fully convinced. I pour myself another drink and take it with me into the living area. Slumping down on the couch, I cross my legs and look over at him. “What *do* you

know then?" I ask, watching as he sits down in the armchair opposite me.

Aiden leans forward and rests his elbows on his spread legs, his eyes darkening with intensity. "I know that the club isn't what it seems."

"Well duh."

He chuckles. "There's too much *high-tech* security, and I've been accepted into the fold a little *too* quickly."

"By Decker?" I don't even try to hide the disbelief in my tone. Decker James is nothing but calculated.

"Nope, by Justin. I know him from my SFPD days. He left before me but there seems to be a little idolization there. Fuck knows why."

I snort, earning a quirked brow. But I don't need to say anything else. The fall of his expression tells me he doesn't need a reminder of his past...*our* past. The golden boy who fell on his sword to protect his pension and *part* of his reputation, the rest of it was already destroyed when he broke his oath to uphold the law. Outside of whatever disaster happened between us, he'd screwed up before then.

"Are you going to tell me what the deal with Decker is?" he asks. I open my mouth to answer but stop and slam it shut again as I'm hit smack in the face with the one undeniable truth. I *can't* trust him... not right now... maybe not ever.

"I can't discuss an active case."

His eyes widen infinitesimally before he schools his expression and shuts himself down. "Guess there's not much

else to say then, is there?”

“Guess not,” I sigh. “That doesn’t change the fact that I need you to pull out of the club.”

“Not happening. Not even for you.”

My eyes widen. “Aiden, I—”

“No, Marls. I have a job to do just like you do.”

I dump my glass on the side table and surge to my feet. “This is important.”

He stands up and matches my stance, his eyes hardening as they lock with mine. “I know it is. You wouldn’t be undercover if it wasn’t. But I have a responsibility to Harry and to my client.”

“Who is the client then?”

Aiden shakes his head. “I can’t tell you that.”

“More like you won’t,” I shoot back.

“No. I literally *can’t*. I don’t know who he is.”

“Then who does?” I ask.

“Harry. But he wouldn’t tell me.”

“So call him. Ask. Find out. I need to know.”

“Don’t we all. But if Harry wouldn’t tell me before I left, he’s not going to change his mind and tell me now. It’s not going to happen, Marls.”

I throw my hands in the air. “Why?”

“Because the one thing Harry respects more than anything is confidentiality. He prides himself on it.”

“But you’re *working* for him—him *and* the client.”

He rakes his fingers through his hair, mussing the strands up and giving me a glimpse of the old Aiden I once thought I knew better than anyone. The boy I crushed on, the teenager I gave my virginity to. The man who I thought was the love of my life.

He huffs out a huge sigh. “Harry gave me a lifeline. He gave me a chance. He looked past what I’d done and the mistakes I’d made and gave me the opportunity to *be* someone again.” *He didn’t walk away*, he doesn’t say. “I’m not going to screw him over. Not now. Not ever. Not even for—” He cuts himself off but we both know what he was going to say. *Not even for you.*

I need to change tacks here because this conversation is getting us nowhere.

“I need you to talk to Harry then. He doesn’t have to tell you who the client is, but we need to know who it *isn’t*.” I take a deep breath and make a decision that I hope doesn’t blow up in my face, or worse. “*I need to know that we’re not being double-crossed and that my cover is safe.*”

He grits his teeth, the muscle in his jaw twitching as he nods, not looking happy about it. “I’ll do it tomorrow. Until then, you need to stay away from Marquis and Decker James.”

I roll my eyes. “Well that isn’t going to happen. I was lucky enough to get that meeting with him tonight and I’m still

not *in*.”

“Probably because he wants in your pants,” he retorts snidely.

“That’s true. But that’s *his* problem. All *I* need to do is get close and for you not to get in my way. I’m not your responsibility, Aiden.”

“Fuck that,” he spits out, his eyes blazing now. “You know you are.”

“Not anymore,” I deadpan, and the wide-eyed realization written all over his face proves my aim has hit true. The room falls silent, the only sound in the room is the distant hum of traffic outside and the buzz of the air conditioning.

Aiden looks like he’s struggling to find the right words as he studies me, his eyes flicking over my body. It’s a familiar gaze, one that used to make me feel powerful and safe, beautiful and seen. But now, all it does is make me feel exposed. Vulnerable.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he finally says, his voice soft.

“Regardless, it’s the truth. We both need to focus on the job at hand. So how about we agree to stay out of each other’s way.”

He nods, his expression resigned. “You’re right.” He pauses for a moment before adding, “I still don’t like it. I don’t know what’s going on in that place or with Justin and Decker, but there’s *something*. With that much money, that much security, whatever it is, it’s not safe.”

“I can take care of myself,” I say firmly, crossing my arms over my chest. “And I have backup. You’re not the only one with connections, Aiden.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Who else do you have on your team?”

I shake my head, not prepared to go there right now. *Especially with him.* “It doesn’t matter. But this isn’t some fly by the seat of my pants investigation. This is high level, and it’s got to be thorough.”

“So it’s slow?”

“As slow as it has to be to get the job done. That could change at any time though.”

Aiden nods, a flicker of admiration crossing his face. “Alright then. Just...be careful, OK? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I smile but it’s half-hearted because inside, my heart is tearing at the edges of the barely healed wound Aiden Lawrence left me with last time.

Knowing I need to get out of this apartment and away from him—for self-preservation if nothing else—I place my empty glass on the counter and move to the door.

“Marls...” he says soft and rough, the sheer torture in his tone giving me pause as my fingers grip the door handle. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry...for *everything*.”

A pang of nostalgia twists in my chest, the memories of our past overwhelming me as they all come flooding back.

Closing my eyes, I take a huge fortifying breath and huff it out again. “I know,” I reply. “But that doesn’t change a thing, Aiden. You destroyed what we had, what we could’ve had. I’m not sure we can ever get back to that.”

“Not sure is enough for me.”

“Aiden...”

“Goodnight, Beautiful. Get home safe,” he whispers, and the cadence of his voice has my heart aching in a way it hasn’t done for months now. *Damn him...*

Without another word I open the door and step outside, holding my head up high as I walk toward the elevator and press the call button. When the doors close and I’m alone, I feel like I can finally breathe freely again, and I do it with a single tear trailing down my face.

So much for being over it... and over him.

Chapter 6

MARLEE

Twenty years ago I met a boy who became my first crush. He had dirty blond hair that fell over his eyes when he shook his head and a crooked smile that I swear shot a lightning bolt straight through my chest and melted my little girl heart. He was tall and gangly and two years older than me, but in my mind, I was his at first sight.

He had moved in next door to us and became fast friends with my brother Marcus. And despite me being the ‘annoying little sister’ I couldn’t stay away. It was like there was a magnet pulling me to him and I never wanted that to change.

As we got older, things changed. My crush deepened into full-blown, unrequited love, and I was resigned to living my life with Aiden Lawrence never seeing me like *that*. Then one Summer after my senior year, Aiden came home from college and things... *changed*.

It was the start of our twelve-year dance of off and on, should we or shouldn’t we. It was wonderful and torturous. It was pain and love and heartache and joy all wrapped up in a big co-dependent bow.

I joined the police force and Aiden went to the FBI Academy, and something happened there to change him. Instead of talking about the future, he shut himself off from anything other than work, including me. Then we were off in a way that it would stay off. That doesn't mean I ever gave up hope.

We were cordial, we were friendly. We sent Christmas cards and 'how are you doing?' emails. We saw each other when we were all back home for the holidays and milestone events like Marcus's wedding to my sister-in-law, Vicky, and Aiden's dad's funeral when he succumbed to cancer five years ago.

We drifted apart after that, the contact becoming more and more infrequent. The only updates I would get about him came from Marcus, my parents, and Aiden's mom, who still lives in the same house next door to my parents to this day.

That's until last year when he reached out about a case I was working on. Little did any of us know, it was the start of a chain of events that would lead to not only the demise of Aiden's illustrious career as a police detective and almost mine, but the obliteration of whatever final tether there was tying us together. No past feelings or shared memories could survive him disregarding me and offering me up as a scapegoat to save his own ass. A man with any conscience at all would never do that to a woman he cared about... to me...

Thankfully, I cleared my name and was free to try and move on with my life. Career wise—I'm soaring. Personally—I'm stuck in the same spot I was a year ago. But seeing him

again has completely shaken the foundations of my carefully constructed wall I've built around myself.

Standing in his apartment, I couldn't control the range of emotions coursing through me—anger, betrayal, hurt, confusion... fear. It was like all the feelings I'd ever had for him came rushing back. I was torn between wanting to scream at him, or maybe shake some sense into him, then fighting against the aching need to touch him or kiss him or at least try and see if there is anything left of the man I thought I knew. The man he used to be. The man I loved.

He looks different now. Older, more rugged, his dirty blond hair shorter and more styled. He has a slight beard that makes him look even more aggravatingly handsome. He's not the same man though. He's transformed into someone—something—I don't know. He's like a stranger to me when I used to know him better than anyone. I have to believe that underneath that exterior is the same Aiden I've known for most of my life. The one who had broken my heart irrevocably twelve months ago. The one I desperately wish hadn't done it so that things could be different between us.

When I get to my car, I pull up my phone and send a text message.

Marlee - I need to see you

And despite the time, I get the reply I'm waiting for immediately.

With instructions of where to meet, I start the engine and hit the road.

* * *

I walk into the seen-better-days twenty-four-hour diner thirty minutes later, the morning light now slowly sweeping over the city. It's somewhere that's far enough out that we don't have to worry about being seen, but despite outward appearances, the food is damn good.

"Hey," I say as I slide into the booth opposite my handler for this case, grabbing the cup of coffee waiting for me. He's the only reason I agreed to work undercover. The fact he disrupted his life to join the case is something I'll be forever grateful.

"What's up?" Barrett asks, taking a gulp of his own dishwater-colored drink.

I fiddle with the sugar packets and stirrer before finally meeting his gaze when he pointedly clears his throat. "We've got a big problem."

Barrett nods, unsurprised. "I figured. It would have to be a good reason to pull me out of bed this early. Is it Decker? Did something happen?"

I shake my head. "No. That was fine, and you were right, I did have to throw some sass and put my foot down—so to speak."

"Told you," he replies, puffing his chest out.

"It definitely worked. I'm meeting him for dinner on Thursday at the Phoenix, it's in the same place as Marquis."

He levels me with glare. “I *know* about the Phoenix, Marlee. My wife and I *own* a hotel, remember?”

“Oh yeah. OK. So—” I ramble.

Barrett frowns. “Spit it out, Marlee. Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it.”

“Aiden’s in town.”

The man’s face falls, his expression going from stoney to ice cold. He has his reasons for reacting this way. Goddamn good ones. “Did he contact you?” he growls.

“Nope. He’s working a case at Marquis. I was in a booth with Decker when he walked up side by side with Justin Howell. Apparently he’s working at the club as Justin’s right hand man now.”

The air between us turns glacial. “What the fuck?” he growls, a little louder than either one of us expected, earning a few looks from diners around us. “So you’re tanked?”

I roll my eyes. “Obviously not if Decker’s taking me out for dinner. Aiden told me his angle is only on the financial stuff. It was just a shock, you know.”

Barrett leans back in his seat, studying me for a moment. “So Aiden made you but he didn’t blow your cover?”

“Considering Decker called me *Quinn*, of course he made me. And no, he didn’t do anything to put the case in jeopardy.”

His brows furrow. “What’s his deal then? Last I heard he was in Seattle and *not* working in law enforcement. Thank fuck.”

“He’s working for Harrison Jones.”

Barrett’s eyes widen before he jerks his chin up. “Makes sense. Doesn’t explain why he’s in Vegas though. Harry’s small time at best and last time I checked, that’s exactly how he likes it.”

“I don’t know what’s going on. Aiden says he hasn’t been told who the client is.” The more I think about it, the more perplexed I am. Why would you accept a case and not know who you’re looking into.

“*That* rings a huge fucking alarm bell for me, Marlee. Say his client is the person before all those offshore shell companies we can’t trace back to anybody? That could be a *big* lead for us. We’re not looking at the money, we’re looking for the *source* and a trail to connect Decker to the sins of his past, present, and future.”

I nod. “I *know* that. All Aiden said was that he’d try and find out what he can.”

Barrett’s eyes turn stormy. “You *talked* to him? How Marlee? You said your cover wasn’t blown. Fuck!” he says, raking his fingers through his hair. “He’s already got you taking risks again.”

I move past *that* particular comment. “First of all, fuck you. Second of all, my cover *wasn’t* and *isn’t* blown. I tracked him down after his shift.”

One look at Barrett and I swear the top of his head is about to blow. “What the actual fuck! Are you *trying* to screw this case up already? You’ve been doing so well.”

That gets my anger surging to the surface. “No and I’d love it if you stop treating me with kid gloves while sitting back and waiting for me to fuck this all up. You *know* this case is important to me. But after seeing him again and our combined pasts—I couldn’t let it go. I needed to know what was going on and I wasn’t going to be able to sleep until then.”

“You followed him?”

I snort. “God, no. I asked an analyst to track down his address and waited at his door for him to come home. What do you take me for, an idiot?”

“It’s still risky. Anyone could’ve seen you,” he huffs out harshly. Silence stretches between us, and when I glance up at Barrett, I see worry and concern written all over his face. “You can’t get reeled in again. You know that. It’s taken all of us the good part of a year to get over everything that went down. The man that did what he did is *not* the same one you grew up with.”

I sigh. “I know.” It’s what I don’t say that I know Barrett hears the loudest though. The lack of denial. The silent defense of the man who turned all of our lives upside down that’s resting on the tip of my tongue. *Guess I need to call my therapist for another appointment.*

“Must’ve been hard to see him again,” he says quietly after a spell.

Suring up my shoulders, I look up. “It had to be done. You told me to have my eyes and ears open at all times and to mitigate any conflicts as they arise. Aiden turning up at the

same club I'm working undercover at is one of the biggest damn conflicts there could be."

"Your cover is solid. There aren't any cracks or ties—nothing at all to connect you to Quinn Johnson. She's an up-and-comer, tenacious, ambitious. A go-getter who hopefully turns the eye of Decker James because she's unattainable. *Your* job is to earn his confidence and get the proof we need to get him. Anything that compromises that needs to be eliminated."

"I know that, Barrett. But you *know* the connection that's always been there between me and Aiden. That hasn't changed, as hard as I tried to put it behind me and forget him." *How does the man still have this hold over me despite everything he's done?*

"He has that connection and history with *Marlee*. You cannot forget he's also the man that almost destroyed not only your career in the police force, but who would've also stopped you from being where you are right now, working a case that will *make* you. And that's all on *top* of him breaking his oath and almost getting me and Alyssa killed."

I flinch at the mention of Barrett's shooting, remembering the day we nearly lost him and how that came about. Barrett left the FBI as a result and was happily moving on with his life with Alyssa, his now wife. That's until Decker seemingly appeared out of nowhere as the public face of the biggest and most sought-after nightlife venue in Vegas, waving huge invisible red flags in his wake.

Three months later I'm working undercover, Barrett came back to be my handler, as part of a cross agency operation with

one goal, ending the reign of the 'Fixer.'

"You know I'm not ever going to defend his actions, especially not when it almost killed you, but we can't ignore the fact that he's back. Like it or not, he's involved."

Barrett rubs a hand over his face, looking tired. "I get it. Just don't let your emotions cloud your judgement. If he's working for Harry, then I don't believe he's dirty. But—"

"It doesn't mean it's not dirty and they just don't know it?" I say with a sigh.

"It if smells like a pig, and looks like a pig..."

"Then it's probably covered in mud?" I say with a wry grin.

He scrubs his face and chuckles. "Or shit. Pretty much the same thing."

"So, what do we do?"

Barrett looks me straight in the eye and what I see there reminds me why he's so good at what he does. He's the only man I trust to have my six while I'm on the job playing Quinn. He would never let anything happen to me and will do everything in his power to ensure I'm safe—even if it means dealing with the man who almost took away the love of his life.

"I'll make a few calls and if need be, go see Harry myself. You're not seeing Decker again until Thursday, correct?"

I nod. "Dinner at The Phoenix, eight p.m."

“OK. If need be I’ll do an overnight trip to Seattle. Until you hear from me, you don’t have anything to do with Aiden. You go to the office, you work your leads, you go home. Do *not* see him again. Don’t talk to him unless it’s absolutely necessary for the case. We need to play this close to our chest until we get confirmation that he’s not working against us. OK?”

“Yes, Dad,” I say with a cheeky smirk before Barrett’s growl tells me it’s *not* the time for jokes. “I get it. I’ll stay away until I hear from you.”

“Just got to hope you can actually do it,” he mutters, downing the rest of his coffee and getting to his feet. He pulls out his wallet and peels a few bills out before placing them on the table.

My brows jump high. “You don’t think I can, do you?”

“You don’t want to know what I’m thinking right now. Not about him, not about you and him, and not about him being back in Vegas. Please just do this, if not for me, for yourself.”

Then he’s gone, succeeding in doing the exact thing he was aiming for—giving me a whole bunch of crap to think about. Aiden taking the number one spot.

Chapter 7

AIDEN

Harry hasn't been answering my calls, but strangely *has* been replying to text messages. It's not at all like the man I know but I've also never been sent out of state to work a case for an anonymous client and told to "focus and work the case" either. Maybe it was Harry-speak for "you're on your own, kid."

Sitting at my desk, I stare blankly at the screen of my laptop as my thoughts turn to my after-work visit the other night. With her long, wavy hair and those full, pouty lips of hers that just beg to be kissed, and her piercing brown eyes that have always been able to bore straight into my soul. Just like every other time I've been near her, she has me spinning in circles without even trying. Her presence, her smell, everything about her short circuits my brain.

I shake my head. I have a job to do, and I can't let my feelings and history with Marlee cloud my judgment or distract me. I need to focus on the case and not on Marlee's reappearance in my life or the fact she's working undercover on something she cannot and *will* not loop me in on. I lost all

credibility and trustfulness when I screwed her and everyone else over.

I have two options—let it go and stay out of her way, or I can try and figure it all out myself. Maybe it's possible to wrap up my case and help her solve hers at the same time. Not that she'd ever work with me again. Working together is *not* something she'd ever consider doing. Not now, not again, definitely not after last time.

That doesn't mean I can ignore the burning need inside of me to make things right with her, to somehow redeem myself in her eyes and have her look at me the way she always used to. Like I was everything she could ever want and need. Because before everything went wrong, there was always the chance that they could've gone so very right with us. Now, I think I'll just be satisfied knowing she doesn't see me as the piece of shit who tried to save his own ass by offering up hers.

I get back to work, using all the databases and contacts and software available to me to look into anything and everything related to Decker, Justin and the staff members I've met. The more I read and compare, the more I realize that it's all *too* clean. *Too* seamless. *Too* picture-perfect. *Which can only mean a lot is missing. That* is what I need to uncover.

I've worked three more shifts since first meeting Decker, and the man hasn't come into the club again. Justin's been scarce too, something that's even more evident by the work he's piled on me. Knowing it's likely a test—whether that be from Decker himself or Justin—my focus has been on keeping my nose clean and going above and beyond what's been asked

of me. Other than the normal drunken idiots needing to be evicted from the club, handsy patrons forgetting their manners with bar staff, and the usual illegal drug taking—both behind the bathroom doors and sometimes, in plain sight—Marquis continues to run like a well-oiled machine. This hasn't gone unnoticed either, Justin texting at the end of each shift to congratulate me on being a good “other him.”

The absence of Decker and Justin has also been a blessing in disguise because it's given me the chance to get a better read on the rest of the staff. Everyone from the bouncers at the door to those manning the control room, to the servers and bar staff, they're all hard-working, honest, and good people. Not once have I got a bad feeling from anyone.

None of them have a bad word to say about either Decker or Justin, and no one knows of a silent partner either. There's a lot of conjecture about the club's ownership though. Some say he's a Dubai billionaire who just wants a piece of Vegas real estate, or a mafia boss happy to stay in the shadows while Decker fronts the club. The other rumor that spiked my interest was that it was Decker's father who bankrolled the club. When I investigated that one, I found that there was no father listed on Decker's birth certificate, only his mother, Grace Marie James, who is still on a big plot of land outside Dubois, Wyoming.

I've already confirmed that Decker has money—and a lot of it. That wealth had to have come from somewhere, especially as he's listed as an owner of half the nightclub legally. What I *need* to do is work out where that wealth came from apart from his illegal dealings. And if it's not all his

money, then who is the secret silent partner and how are they connected to him? It doesn't matter where I look or who I look at, one plus one always equals five. It doesn't add up.

That's why I've decided to change direction and dig deeper into Decker's past and build a timeline from birth to now, focusing specifically on his rumored work as a fixer for hire. The hope being that anything I find might help satisfy this gnawing gut feeling I have that I'm missing something.

Another half hour later and while I'm accessing old case files I definitely shouldn't be looking at, my cell vibrates on the couch and I'm surprised to see Harry's name on the screen.

"Hey boss. You're a hard man to get hold of, it seems," I answer.

"Hey. Yeah... been busy," he replies. "What's up?"

"You tell me. I tell you I ran into Marlee on her own undercover op and you go radio silent."

"I said I've been busy," he bristles.

"OK, I get that. But I'm not an island. I'm not supposed to be working this by myself."

"You are, actually. I told you that right from the start. It's supposed to be an open-and-shut case. You get in, you find evidence, then we pull you out."

"Except now we know that something else is going on at Marquis and around Decker and since Marlee refused to tell me what the deal is, I've had to up my game and keep my eyes open for everything."

“No,” he says a little too quickly. “You stay locked in on *our* case. I don’t have to remind you that you’re not a cop anymore, Aiden.”

That grinds my gears. “I *know*, Harry.”

“So keep your damn nose clean and focus on the money. Nothing else.”

I scoff. “You want me to ignore the fact that LVPD is involved in this? That could get Marlee made.”

“Did she *tell* you she was working for the PD?”

I open my mouth but stop, processing his words before realizing what he’s *not* saying. “It’s not PD? Fuck!”

“I can’t tell you anything else. All I know is that you’ve got to stay out of it.”

Again, I discover more from what he’s not saying than what he actually *is*. “It’s the FBI, isn’t it.”

“A cross-agency task force, yes. Don’t ask me anything else because I don’t know any more than you do. What I *do* know is that you don’t want to get caught up in it, and not just because of Marlee.”

“You telling me that just makes me want to weigh in even more.”

“Yep. And I’m telling you right now to stand down. Whatever you’re thinking of doing, or might think of doing, don’t.”

“Understood,” I mutter.

“I’m not convinced. You have to let it happen. We can’t get involved and I’ve been warned—implicitly—that *you* are a liability. We’re damn lucky they’re not trying to pull you out now. I had to promise them you’d stay in your lane. Don’t make me into a liar, Aiden.”

I fall silent while I run the entire situation through my head. My past is proof that I’m not the type of man to let something go. Both before I screwed up and on the cases I’ve worked for Harry since, I’m like a dog with a bone. Harry’s warning rings loud and clear in my head, even if my conscience is telling me I won’t be able to just stand back and do nothing if things go bad. Especially knowing Marlee is involved.

“Just lay low for a few days and if I hear anything else, I’ll let you know anything pertinent.”

There’s still one thing bugging me. “Who’s the client, Harry?”

“You don’t need to know,” he replies without any hesitation. He also doesn’t hide the growing aggravation from me. “And that answer will not change.”

“You don’t think I *should* know? There’s so much smoke and so many mirrors around Decker. How can I be sure it’s not *him* pulling your strings.”

“Listen. It boils down to this... do you trust me, Aiden? Because if you don’t, we’ve got far bigger issues than just this case.”

“I owe you. You know that,” I reply.

“Yeah. And *that* right there should tell you everything you need to know.”

Something prickles at my subconscious. “How’d you find out about the other case?”

“Doesn’t matter. I just need you to do your damn job and trace the money. Get the dirt and get out. Then you can leave Vegas and everyone that’s there behind. Isn’t that what you want to do?”

Damn the man for hitting a bullseye.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. But if shit goes south, I—”

“It won’t. You’ve got your job, I’ve got mine, and Marlee has hers. Stay out of her way and she’ll stay out of yours,” he says, cutting me off.

“And what do I tell her when she asks me who our client is again? If you think *I* don’t let things go—”

“Aiden, it’s covered. It’s fine. Move the fuck on.”

I’m the one bristling now. Not once since I’ve been working for him has Harry been so closed off. “Yes, *Harrison*.”

Finally, I see a crack in his gruff demeanor. “Fuck off with that shit. We’ll talk soon.”

“Yeah. OK.”

The line goes dead and I’m left staring at my phone, wondering what the hell just happened.

Whatever it is, it doesn’t bode well.

Chapter 8

MARLEE

“Fuck you’re stunning,” Decker says by way of a welcome when I arrive at the private table he’s sitting at. It’s a glass skybox above the main floor of the Phoenix restaurant which is within the same entertainment precinct as Marquis. He stands to greet me, kissing my cheek with a press of his lips to my skin that lasts a second past appropriate before stepping back to rake his eyes over my body.

It is hard not to preen under his hungry, appreciative gaze even though he’s the *last* man I’d ever want to impress. I know I look good, that was the aim of wearing this far-too-expensive-for-my-tastes ruby-red dress that clings to my curves like a second skin. Tonight I’m channeling Quinn, I’m playing a role, wearing a mask. *That’s* the only thing I’m focusing on.

“Thank you,” I reply, taking the seat opposite him when it’s offered to me. “Have you been waiting long?”

He returns to his spot with his back to the wall. “I think any man who knows your worth would wait forever just to have the vision of you in that dress walking toward him.”

The blush that pinks my cheeks at his praise is genuine, the knowing grin that curves my lips is not. “When you’re in the business I’m in, you have to make an entrance.”

“Believe me, you have succeeded in doing *that*.”

The waiter appears, saving me from having to respond. After asking Decker what he’d like to order, and notably *not* asking for any input from me, we’re left alone again.

I take the opportunity to take in the scene around me. The Phoenix is the newest fine-dining restaurant on the Strip. It’s focus is farm-to-plate and sustainable eating. Everything is organic and every single part of the business is environmentally friendly. The whole establishment is solar-powered, the furnishings are recycled and reused, and the cuisine is out of this world from all accounts. It’s all very ‘new age’ and ‘feel good’ despite the price tags on dining here going into the thousands.

The glass skybox we’re currently sitting in is glass on three sides and solid on the other, with a frosted glass floor and a huge skylight as a ceiling giving the feeling of being outside rather than in the middle of a bustling restaurant on the Strip.

“So, what was it you wanted to meet about? I thought we’d discussed everything about my plan for Marquis at the club the other night and then all the fine details over email. That’s what you requested.”

Decker tilts his head, his hand rubbing over the stubble on his jaw as he studies me. “Are you always ‘on?’” he asks curiously, catching me off guard.

“What do you mean?”

Decker leans back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. “You’ve just arrived and you’re already all business. Why can’t we just relax and chat? Get to know each other a little better?”

After meeting with Barrett earlier today, I know that we’re no closer to finding out about Aiden’s case than we were before. Harry wouldn’t tell Barrett anything and even the threat of pulling Aiden out ourselves didn’t get the man to waver. Apparently the man clammed up as soon as he realized we were involved. This has left us with a bit of a predicament, but since the stakes are so high, especially with Decker involved, the decision was made to forge ahead and deal with any complications as and when they happen.

“The most important thing,” Barrett said, “is that you’re safe, your cover is safe, and you get close and stay close to Decker.”

I take a deep breath, allowing my shoulders to relax, trying to channel a more casual demeanor. “You’re right,” I say, smiling at him. “I’m sorry. It’s just been a busy day. You know how it is.”

He chuckles, the sound deep and warm. “I do. Running a business can be exhausting. That’s why you’ve got to make sure you have fun while doing it.” He winks as he leans back in his seat. “That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I have a proposition for you.”

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow, intrigued but cautious.

“I’ll preface this by saying that you’re very tenacious when you want something, and that hasn’t gone unnoticed. I know you wanted to focus on the club and raising its profile to the stratosphere, but I think there’s something even better in your future.”

“Really?” I say, resting my forearms on the table. I don’t miss the way Decker’s eyes dart down to my now very-much-on-display assets. *Use whatever you’ve got to get what you need...*

“It’s more of a sideways move. I’d rather have you as a manager, an elite-level concierge whose sole focus is on the VIPs and influential clients—of both the club and my other... interests. I think you’re just the right person to help me.” His eyes never leave mine as he speaks.

“You think so?” I ask. My heart is pounding. This is exactly what we want, an invite into Decker’s inner circle. It would be the biggest development in the case so far—and it seems to be happening ahead of schedule too. It’s not an opportunity I’m about to let pass me by.

“Of course, Quinn. You’re smart, driven, and not afraid to take risks. Behind that stunningly beautiful exterior that has every red-blooded male in this place hard, I can tell you’re willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Am I right?”

I feel a shiver run down my spine at his words, and I know that his assessment of not only ‘Quinn’ but the real me as well, is bang on the money. I *am* willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Decker doesn’t know it yet but bringing him

and whoever else is behind his criminal network down is my top priority.

“You are,” I say slowly but surely.

Decker leans back in his chair with a pleased smile. “Good. Knew I had a good feeling about you.” The intense look he sends me does not match the surety of his words, but I don’t falter under his gaze. I’ve come too far to fall down on the job now.

He goes on to outline his plan for me, detailing how I’ll be working closely with him to facilitate VIP visits, including private meetings and events at Marquis. It will all fall inside a brand new exorbitantly overpaid membership scheme which will be by invite only. My *job* would be to make sure the VIP visits are seamless and easy, and that any whim is catered for. “Whatever the request, whatever it takes.”

I’m far too invested to be able to school my reactions completely, so I decide to go for scandalized and intrigued to play it off. “Should I be worried about the type of requests?” I ask.

Decker’s grin turns devilish as his eyes alight with heat and amusement all at once. “Come on now, Quinn. Don’t play the innocent card. That dress, those juicy red lips of yours promising a world of pleasure, and everything you’ve done to get my attention so far, all of it tells me you’re *far* from a good little girl. In fact—” he says, stretching out his leg under the table and slowly running his expensive black loafers up and down my bare calf. “I bet you’re the very *definition* of queen on the streets, freak in the sheets.”

I feel disgusting and dirty, but I have to maintain my cover which means I have to play along. I'm the best chance the task force has of getting inside Decker's inner circle to bring him down and keep him down.

"This doesn't sound very professional now, Decker," I say, a sly grin tugging at the corner of my mouth. "We agreed that this was purely business."

"You agreed, I never did. But I hear you, Quinn." He tips his glass my way before lifting it for a drink. "For now, anyway." His gaze is full of mischief and mirth. "But let's not kid ourselves. I know what kind of woman you are, and I know what kind of woman I need."

"For the job."

He chuckles. "Yes, for the job. The question is, can you handle whatever's thrown at you—the good, the bad... the *scandalous*?"

I nod slowly and try to keep my composure. "Yes."

Decker's slow, predatory grin makes my skin crawl. "Good," he says as the waiter arrives with our meal. "Let's enjoy the rest of our date and we can talk business when you come to the club with me Saturday night."

I quirk a brow. "This wasn't a *date*, Decker."

"Tomahto. Tomayto."

"And I'm not anybody's arm candy. I thought I'd made myself clear on that. This is business. Strictly business. Now and in the future. *Especially* at the club."

If anything, Decker's smile widens and I know what he sees in me—a challenge he wants to best. One he won't give up on until he succeeds.

“Mmm hmm,” he hums uncommittedly before nodding at the full wine glass and the plate of Beef Wellington with chestnut mushrooms and steamed spinach morsels sitting on the table in front of me. “Eat, Quinn. You don't always have to be ‘on’ with me. Let that guard of yours down. Even if it's just long enough for you to have a meal with me. You never know,” he says with a wink. “You might just enjoy it.”

“Or choke on a mushroom and die,” I mutter, earning a surprised laugh from the man himself.

I smile, playing along with this charade. It sounds like this new job opportunity could be our best chance yet. Even if it means working closely with Aiden again. Something I'm locking up in a little box to deal with later... *much* later. *I can't believe he still gets to me despite everything. It's like he's under my skin in a way he's never ever going to get out.*

Getting my head back in the game—and on my dinner companion—I pick up my cutlery and cut into the Beef Wellington delivered to our table. As I take a bite, I can't help but moan in delight at the explosion of flavor in my mouth. Decker chuckles at my reaction, clearly pleased with himself for choosing such an exquisite dish.

“So, tell me, Quinn,” he says, taking a sip of his wine. “What got you into the club scene?”

I take a moment to savor the flavors in my mouth before answering. “I've always been drawn to just the primal energy

of the nightlife. The music, the lights, the excitement. It's all so intoxicating. There's just something about letting go of the day and losing yourself to a different world."

Decker nods, seeming to understand. "I know exactly what you mean, but that's the whole point, isn't it? Making people want what they can't afford but must have anyway. It's about keeping up with the Joneses. Sex, sin, depravity, losing any and all inhibitions and just *living*. It's the Las Vegas way."

"The Marquis way," I say. "But as for the club scene, I moved to Vegas and needed a job. So, I took whatever I could get."

"Like every single other person," he muses after swallowing his mouthful.

I nod. "Pretty much. I started as a bartender at an off-strip dive bar which gave me some experience, then moved on to a seen-better-days three-star resort. From there, I went for every promotion I could—shift supervisor, bar manager, front of house, hotel manager, then events and guest liaison." This is my cover's back story verbatim. Barrett made me repeat it over and over again until I could say it without missing a beat, something I'm grateful for now.

"Where does the nightclub side of things fit in?"

I bite my lip, not missing the way his gaze drops to my mouth. Decker James is hot, he's handsome, and he knows it. But since I know—or strong suspect—he's guilty of numerous horrible acts, the idea of him in any other way but a criminal I'm going to capture has bile rising in my throat.

“I’ve always been drawn to the energy of nightlife. The music, the lights, the excitement. It’s all so intoxicating. More so when there are unlimited budgets and even more hype around a club like yours.”

“What made you want to venture out on your own?”

I shrug and shoot him a smirk. “I don’t do well being told what to do.” *That’s not far from the truth at all...*

He throws his head back and bursts out laughing before arching a brow my way. “You *do* know you’ve already got the job, right? No need to butter me up with what you *think* I want to hear.”

“It’s the truth. What you see is what you get with me, Decker.”

That earns me a long piercing stare as if he’s looking for any sign of deception. He won’t see anything though, my cover is solid, my skills flawless. Wanting to see this case through and the burning need to look Decker in the eye at the end of this so he *knows* who brought him down is all the motivation I need.

“Good to know. Just be upfront and honest and you and me, we won’t have any problems at all.”

“Sounds good.” I beam across the table at him when I really wish I could stab him with the fork in my hand just to see his façade falter.

“I know what you mean about the thrill of clubs and the nightlife. It’s a bit like a drug. One hit and you just want more.”

I nod, taking another bite of the delicious meal in front of me. “Exactly. It’s addictive.”

We make small talk throughout the rest of the meal, and I feel Decker’s eyes on me the entire time. It’s unnerving, but I also know that he’s sharp as a tack and he may say he trusts me, but I know he’ll have me watched closely. There’s always a probationary period when someone new is brought into the inner circle, but as long as I play my part and don’t put a step wrong, I’ll be right where I need to be to get everything I need to get.

As we finish up our meals, Decker leans in close. “You’ll come with me on Saturday to the club?” he asks, his voice low and seductive.

My eyes widen before I plaster a slow-growing smile on my face. “Of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’m eager to get started.”

“Not as much as I am. I think you’re going to be a vital part of the operation.” His eyes flash with something unreadable that has me feeling uneasy for the first time tonight. Vital part of *what* operation?

“Good,” he says, a hint of triumph in his voice. “And believe me, no one will mistake you for arm candy because you’re worth so much more than that. Think of yourself as a partner.”

My brows arch sky high. “*Business* partner, Decker.”

“That too,” he says with a wink.

I eye him suspiciously, giving him the reaction he's aiming for. *And I'd hate to leave him disappointed.* "Is this your way of trying to bed me again, Decker? Because I've told you, I'm not—"

"Oh no." He shakes his head, lips twitching. "I'm talking about the rich man's playground we're going to build together, Quinn. Marquis is going to be the most exclusive, expensive, *decadent*, no-holds-barred space in the country and you're going to help me do it. You and me, we're going to be the new power couple of Vegas, Quinn."

"Decker..." I groan.

His smirk is so self-assured it catches me off guard. "Stick with me, Quinn. It's going to be one hell of a ride. *That* is a promise."

Chapter 9

AIDEN

I ‘m kicking back in the control room to cover one of the guys on his break when I spot a commotion on the screens in front of me.

Glancing up, I do a double take and bite back a groan as I watch Marlee walk in on Decker’s arm. She’s dressed like every man’s dirty fantasy and their arrival has all the hallmarks of a staged event. I’m not the only one who’s noticed, the entire lobby stopping still to watch the King as his assumed new queen enter the club.

A low whistle escapes me as I take her in. I’m equally impressed and proud, and even from a floor and a camera feed away, turned the fuck on. This is the girl who had buck teeth and the most adorable goofy grin when I first met her. The woman who *still* never fails to take my breath away without even trying. The same one who can barely stand the sight of me. Regardless, she still is—and will forever be—the most beautiful woman inside and out I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing, having, and once calling mine.

Her highlighted blonde hair cascades down her back in soft waves, her little black dress a beacon screaming ‘look at me’

as it hugs her curves in all the right places and even some wrong ones. Decker stands tall by her side, his body language proud, cocky, *knowing*. Like a man who has everything he could ever want in the palm of his hand.

They make their way into the club and I don't need sound to know exactly what's happening. Heads turn, conversations all but forgotten, and there's a buzz in the air that I can almost *feel* through the camera feed. Whether it was Decker's idea or Marlee's, whoever came up with the plan to make a grand entrance, it's working. The only focus in the whole club is the power couple that have entered the building.

It's probably why I'm gritting my teeth so tight my jaw aches and digging my nails into the palm of my hand. Yet I can't tear myself away, watching as they ascend the stairs to the VIP lounge, like they're ascending the throne of a new kingdom. I roll my thumb over the trackball on desk panel, switching camera views so that I don't miss a single second of this charade.

Even knowing it's not real, I still hate it. Just the thought of him being anywhere near her makes me see red. But I can't do anything about it, I have to sit on my hands and watch it all happen, all the while trusting that Marlee knows what she's doing and who she's dealing with.

That doesn't mean I can turn off the protective instinct I have toward her, even if I lost that right. It's not something a man like me can just switch off.

Chris walks back into the control room and I turn in time to see him jerk his chin up as he returns to his desk. "Anything

I need to look out for?”

Shaking my head, I turn back to the VIP cameras and the corner booth where Marlee and Decker are now sitting close, the former throwing her head back with laughter as the latter smirks like a snake in a hen house.

“Boss man’s here? Usually we get a head’s up,” Chris says, leaning back in his chair.

I grunt noncommittally, still watching the camera feeds. Chris is a good colleague and a hard worker, but I can’t talk about Decker and Marlee/Quinn. Not with him or anyone else here. That’s not to say I can’t use the working relationship to my advantage.

Watching Marlee and Decker, I can’t help but wonder what kind of game they’re playing with each other. The woman *I* knew wouldn’t even play the seductress or let it get *too* physical just to get dirt. I know that she’s determined and passionate enough to do whatever it takes to get the job done but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. And with Decker, well, I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him. Especially since it’s been days and I still haven’t heard back from my contacts about his early years.

I’m about to switch feeds again when something catches my eye. Decker’s hand is on Marlee’s thigh, and she doesn’t seem to be objecting. Instead, she leans into it, bringing her mouth to Decker’s ear and saying something that makes the man smile.

My blood boils as he turns his head and captures her lips in a deep, open-mouthed, *claiming* kiss that has me forgetting

everything I'm supposed to be doing—keeping my nose clean, flying under the radar, all of it. My sole purpose taking a massive U-turn as I pick up the phone and dial the front desk.

“Hey, Ben. Can you come up and cover me in the control room? I want to roam the floor for a while.”

“Sure thing boss. I'll be up in a few minutes,” he replies in my ear.

“Good. Good. Chris will be here in the meantime.”

“Copy that, A.”

I hang up and find Chris frowning at me as he switches his attention between the panel of screens in front of him and back to me. “Did I miss something?” he asks.

Jumping to my feet, I shake my head and try to come up with a believable story on the fly. “Nah. I'm just going to walk around and stretch my legs, see if I find anything or anyone. Maybe check that our guests aren't partaking in a little more than we offer.”

I waggle my brows and his eyes crinkle with understanding. “Oh yeah. Stone countertops are just as good as a mirror so I'm told,” he says with a wink before he blocks a nostril and sniffs loudly.

Grinning, I give him one last wave and move to the door. “I'll be back in a half an hour or so. You OK till Ben gets here?”

“Sure thing, A.”

After leaving the control room, I head down the hall and straight for the private-access elevator that only Justin, Decker, and now I have access to. Stepping inside, I press the button for the first floor and log into the camera feeds on my phone, checking that Marlee and Decker are still in the booth.

Unfortunately for me, they're still sitting close and I'm *still* raging. Dirt like that has no place even being *near* Marlee, let alone *touching* her, *tasting* her mouth... It makes me want to rip his limbs off and steal her away, I want to kiss her myself and erase any and all memory of him.

A moment later, the steel doors open up to another corridor, one that's darker and more intimate than the offices upstairs, exactly what you'd expect in the hottest, most exclusive nightclub in Vegas.

As luck would have it, Marlee excuses herself and leaves Decker's booth, heading my way, probably going to the bathroom. Which is just down the hall from where I am now. *Fucking perfect.*

My pulse picks up and I spot a door opposite the ladies' room. Hiding just inside the small room, the door slightly askew, I wait for her to get close. When she does, I jump out, wrap my arm around her waist, and pull her backward, covering her mouth with my hand to muffle her scream as I drag her into the closet with me.

I spin around and close the door, pushing my back against the wood to brace myself as she thrashes against me. "Let me go," she says, her words muffled against my palm.

It takes everything in me to hold on and dodge the elbows to my ribs and the attempted slam against me to get me to release her. But before I can drop my hand from her mouth, she bites my fingers, making me curse under my breath. “Fuck, Marls. It’s *me*. Quit fucking fighting,” I whisper harshly, releasing her.

She pushes away and spins around, her eyes spitting fire and her expression more murderous than I’ve ever seen. And fuck if it doesn’t still do it for me in a *big way*. *Focus, Aiden*.

Just as she opens her mouth to let loose on me with her sharp furious tongue, I press my index finger against her lips “Shh.” I hold my phone up between us and swipe the screen, checking the camera feeds to make sure Decker is still where “Quinn” left him and that everyone else is where they should be. “OK. Coast is still clear.”

“The coast is still? *Ugh*. What the *fuck*, Aiden? Are you *insane*?” she growls. “You fucking *kidnapped* me and now you’re holding me hostage? I’m *undercover*. Do you *want* me to get made? You trying to out someone, *again*?” Her voice rises with every word.

Out of the corner of my eye I see two patrons come down the hallway and stop right outside the door, glancing toward the sound of Marlee’s voice. So when she opens her mouth to go again, I do the only thing I can think of to shut her up. I reach forward, jerk her forward with my hand hooked around her neck and slam my mouth down onto hers.

She freezes and pushes away, her wide eyes staring dumbfounded at me. Then she parts her lips and this time, we

meet in the middle. This time she moans into my mouth and the rightness of the kiss rushes through me. *It's like coming home.*

I touch the tip of my tongue to hers then dive deep, my arm snaking around her waist and holding her tight as I lick and nip, taste and plunder. Dragging my lips from hers, I pepper kisses between heavy breaths, making my way down to the silky skin of her neck.

“Had to shut you up,” I say. “Then I touched you and now I can’t stop. Felt you and can’t *not* feel you.” I punctuate every word with a thrust of my hips, my hard length pressing into her.

Before I can kiss her again, her body jerks and the hands that were gripping my shoulders shove me back, as if she’s come to her senses when it’s the very last thing I want her to do.

In the dim light of the closet, I can see her swollen lips and hear her ragged breathing. “Aiden, we can’t—”

“Fuck yes we can,” I spit out before I’m reaching for her again. “He touched you,” I say between hard, deep kisses. Marlee bites my bottom lip, the coppery tang of blood cutting through the lust as we both pull back this time.

I swipe a finger against the bruised skin, a tinge of red coming away with it. “What was *that* for?” I say.

“For kissing me,” she whispers, her voice as rough as mine. Not with anger this time. No, this is something different... better.

My gaze narrows. “Yet you’ll kiss *him*?”

“That’s what this is? You’re jealous?”

“Fuck yes, I’m jealous. He’s touching what’s mine!” I shoot back, not caring where we are.

She steps into my space, jabbing my chest with her finger. “I’m not yours, Aiden Lawrence. You ruined that.”

I dip my head so that we’re barely a whisper’s breath away, my eyes locked on hers. “You’ll always be mine, Beautiful.”

Her big eyes widen as a soft gasp escapes her and I brace for her to spit fire. It doesn’t happen though, instead she detonates. Launching herself at me, she grips my head in her hands, her body slamming into mine, her mouth attacking my lips like I’m the very thing she needs to breathe. I lift her up, her legs wrap around my back, our mouths not parting once while I walk forward until her back meets the nearest wall.

Then it’s *on*.

Our kiss is hungry, desperate, needy. My hips pin her in place as she grabs at my hair, her grip tightening to the point of pain, but I welcome it. It drives me higher, making me want her more than ever. I’m devoid of rational thought at this point, we both are. All I can think about is feeling her skin against mine, consuming her until any memory of Decker James touching her is gone.

I slide my hand along her thigh, dragging her tight dress up while she whimpers against my lips. Grinding my cock against her core, I wish the layers between us would just melt away.

With her earlobe between my lips, I rake my teeth against the skin, as her hands scramble over my shoulders, her nails biting into my skin through the shirt and driving me crazy.

I want her naked but that'll have to wait, now is not the place and not the time for me to worship every inch of her smooth skin until we both explode. Now is about showing her she's mine and proving I'm hers.

Burying my face in her neck again, I pull the fabric away from her torso with her help, not stopping until her sexy-as-sin black bra is revealed.

I dip my head and wrap my lips around her nipple over the lace, drawing deep and craving more of the harshly panting breaths escaping her.

Her arms drop down so she can tug my shirt out of my slacks, her fingers dragging against my abs before diving lower. She palms my cock through my pants and it's then I know I'm a lost cause and restraint is no longer in my vocabulary. *I need her and I need her now.*

"Down," I rush out, my voice as rough as gravel. I catch the flash of heat and understanding in her gaze before I lower her onto to her feet.

She opens her mouth to say something, but I stop her with another kiss, not wanting to hear her say we shouldn't do this... that we *can't* do this. Instead, I'm hell bent on wanting to prove to her we can... more than that, we *have* to.

I'm too blinded by lust and overcome with the need to bury myself so deep inside her that she'll never forget she's

mine and always has been. I want to prove to her that I'm here, I'm real, and—if I have my way—no one else will ever touch her again but me.

Marlee whimpers and moans into my mouth, just as lost in lust as I am. She grabs hold of my belt and rips it free from my pants, making quick work of the button and zipper before diving in and wrapping her fist around me.

“Fuck,” I groan.

She tightens her grip. “Need you, Aiden.”

In the blink of an eye, I spin her around and crowd my body against hers, pressing her into the wall as my hands roam everywhere.

She tugs up her dress at the same time my hand dives between her legs, pushing her thong aside and feeling just how into this she is.

“Christ, you're soaked,” I growl. “Is that for me?” My fingers circle her entrance, my thumb rubbing over her clit as I do it. Turning my head toward hers, I touch our lips together, resting them there as her ragged breaths wash over my skin.

“Yes. *Please, Aiden. Need you.*”

I thrust two fingers inside of her, rolling my hips against her ass as her body pulls me in deeper, her moans and my groans getting louder as we lose control and forget the world around us.

She presses her forehead against the drywall, and I bring my mouth to her ear, telling her exactly what I'm about to do.

“I’ll take you so hard and deep that you won’t see anyone else, won’t *feel* anything other than my cock inside you. You won’t think of *anyone* but me, Marls. You want that, don’t you? You want to remember how good we are together.”

“Aiden,” she begs and it takes everything in me not to come right then and there.

I pull my fingers free, reaching into my back pocket and grabbing my wallet, pulling out the lone foil packet stored in there.

Rolling it down my length, I give myself a few tugs to relieve the ache before pressing my body against hers again, my heart pounding in anticipation.

With one hand cupping her breast and my other palming her clit, I notch the head of my cock at her entrance.

“Say it, Marlee. Tell me your mine.”

She tries to turn her head away, the intensity too much, and I know I’m pushing too hard, but I want to hear her say it. *Need* to hear it from her lips. I bring my hand up, pressing her cheek to the wall so she can’t look away. “Say. it.”

“You’re mine, Aiden.” With those three words crossing her lips, I thrust forward and bury myself to the hilt.

“Oh God,” she cries as I bottom out again and again. Her head drops forward, her forehead hitting the wall as she moans with every hammering thrust.

She pushes back against me, fucking herself on my cock, urging me to go harder, faster, deeper.

If I thought I wasn't thinking rationally before, there's no way my brain is functioning now. My sole focus has narrowed to taking her... claiming her... everything is about her.

I roll my hips and circle my thumb over her clit, my free hand threading through her hair. "So fucking perfect," I say against her neck as I kiss and lick her skin. "Mine. Always mine."

"Yes," she moans as I feel her start to unravel around me, her release so close.

Tilting her head to the side, I grip her jaw and kiss her deeper, swallowing her cries. Her whole body convulses, and she tightens around me as she screams into my mouth.

"Marlee," I groan and with one last thrust, my body is no longer my own and I succumb to my own climax, holding on tight, as I ride out wave after wave of pleasure and wish we could just stay like this forever.

Chapter 10

AIDEN

Before my body and my brain can get back on the same page, Marlee wriggles out of my hold. Her eyes are wide and frantic, her breathing ragged, and her expression morphs from shock to fury. “Who the hell do you think you are? We’re not... we don’t... just *no*, Aiden. *No*.”

I jerk my thumb toward the door and arch my brow. “You were loud and about to give us up. I did what I had to do,” I shoot back.

“You didn’t have to do *that*.”

“You weren’t fighting it, Marls. That was fucking hot, fucking beautiful, and fucking overdue.”

“It wasn’t—” She stops herself from lying, not just to me but to herself. “Fuck. Just... *fuck*.”

My lips quirk up and I look her up and down, unable to help myself. “We did do that, yes.”

If looks could kill, I’d be dropping dead right now, her gaze narrowed into fine slits. “Why. Are. You. Here?” she grinds out.

Because I'm an asshole, I can't resist baiting her. "I work here."

She rights her clothes and I wince at the state of her hair and makeup. Not because she doesn't look as breathtakingly beautiful as she always is, but because it's going to take a *lot* to fix and make herself look respectable for Decker again.

"I saw him kiss you," I growl.

Her brows jump up. "Are you kidding me? So *this*," she waves her hand between us, "was all because you saw another man playing with your toy? Is that why you're down here throwing a tantrum?"

"If you call *that* a tantrum, then I'm obviously not doing it right. Maybe I need a redo."

Her glare darkens and before I realize it's happening, she slaps me. "Don't be crass. You're many things, Aiden Lawrence, but disrespectful is *not* one of them. Not to me."

I nod and rub my cheek, feeling adequately chastised as only Marlee has ever been able to do. "I saw a chance to talk to you and took it. I need to know what your play is here because you're back at the club and definitely not dressed for a business meeting, and you're being a hell of a lot more friendly with Decker than the last time you were here. That tells me something has changed and you've got a new angle. Or maybe I don't have a damn clue what's going on." I huff out a frustrated breath. "I can't cover you if I don't know what's going on, Marls."

She scoffs, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m working the case on Decker. Whatever I do, it’s to keep my cover. That’s all you need to know.”

“Bullshit,” I spit out, the sight of him kissing her burned in my brain.

Her body jolts as she slowly arches a brow. “Funny, since *I’m* the one working the case that you know *nothing* about.”

“I know it’s not a PD case.” She blinks, her lips parting before she quickly schools her expression, I know what I saw though.

“Harry told you then,” she says, trying to recover.

“Harry wouldn’t tell me shit. Which means this is bigger and deeper than I first thought. You going to loop me in?”

“Nope.” She pops the P but I can tell I’ve put her off her game a bit.

“OK. The FBI is involved which means it’s cross jurisdictions as well as state lines. I guess this isn’t just money laundering now. It’s more.” When she doesn’t react or give me *anything* to work with, I keep going. Just to be safe, I pull out my phone again and bring up the camera feed showing the VIP floor and Decker sitting back in the booth waiting for Quinn’s return. “That means it’s smuggling—people, drugs, people *and* drugs... weapons? What?”

“I can’t tell you, Aiden.”

I shake my head. “You really don’t trust me, do you? Like there’s just nothing there now, right? One mistake and everything’s gone?”

She jerks back like *she's* the one who has been slapped. "You think you can give me a good fuck in a supply closet and all is forgiven?" Her responding laugh is dry and disbelieving. "Sorry, Aiden. It's always been good between us, that hasn't changed, but you're right, I don't trust you. Not a surprise considering the last time you were in my life, and in my bed, you screwed me over."

Smoothing her hands over her hair, she looks to the door. "Now, do you have a way of checking whether the coast is clear, or is it going to be a crapshoot when I walk out there?"

Checking the feed again, I switch views to bring up the corridor camera. "You're clear."

"Good. I need to go," she says shoving past me toward the door.

"Marlee, wait," I say, cuffing her bicep with my hand to stop her from leaving. "Come see me after work." I'm not ready to let this go... or *her*.

"Leave it alone, Aiden. This shouldn't have happened. It *can't* happen." I sigh, knowing that now is not the time or the place to hash everything out. There's a whole lot of shit to unpack and we can't do that in a closet in Marquis when we're *both* undercover working different cases.

"At least let me help. You forget I've done this before, more times than you in fact. I'm not saying that to put you down, just stating facts. If you want to close this case, I can do that for you. And I don't want any credit or recognition. Call it my redemption, call it whatever the fuck you like. Just *let* me help."

“Bullshit,” she spits out, one eye still watching the camera feed. “This is more than you could imagine. It’s dangerous. It’s high stakes and I’m not risking it. Not for you. Not again.”

Despite everything inside of me screaming to protect her, we’re not in that place right now. “Your call, Marls. But you know the real me, and you know I’m not the man who fucked up last year.”

She locks eyes with mine and in those two seconds, I realize two things. First, things are *not* over between us—the last ten minutes in this closet have just proven that. And second, I’ve got my work cut out for me to get Marlee to trust me again.

That’s all I need to see to know that I’ll fight to the death to get her back. “I don’t know *who* you are anymore, Aiden. But now is *not* the time to find out. I’ve got to go.”

“You know where I am when you’re ready.”

I check Decker’s location one more time before pulling the door open and pushing her out, watching as she crosses the hallway and disappears into the ladies’ room.

Only time will tell where the two of us go from here. But whatever happens, I’ll be waiting.

Chapter II

MARLEE

“**Y**ou OK,” Decker asks when I make it back to his booth. His eyes rake over me and I hold my breath, hoping that he doesn’t recognize the faint stubble rash on the left side of my neck that I couldn’t cover completely, or the way my tingling lips are swollen from Aiden’s bruising kisses.

I force a smile and nod my head. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just needed a breather. You know, splash some water on my face and take a moment.” I plaster on a smile. “Sometimes a woman needs to freshen up, Decker. Don’t you know that?” I curl my lips into a coy smile.

Decker arches a brow. Not sure that he’s completely convinced, I tip my chin up toward him. As anticipated, the move captures his attention immediately. Before I can say anything or stop it from happening, he dips his head and brushes his lips against mine, a smile appearing as he shifts back slightly. His hooded gaze roams my face before his hands move to grip my hips and he kisses me again, groaning into my mouth as he does.

While he’s doing it, I focus on how Aiden’s lips felt on mine in the closet, how his body felt against mine, inside me...

That's the only reason I let myself get lost in the moment.

When the kiss finally ends, Decker looks me over, licking his lips as if savoring the taste.

"What was that for?" I ask, raising a brow.

"I saw a chance and took my shot. What can I say, you're irresistible, Quinn. Every man in here wants what I have and after *that*, now they know they can't have it."

It takes everything in me not to shudder. This man has caused so much heartache and violence and is suspected to be behind the order of *so* many deaths, that touching him and especially him touching me makes me feel so dirty I know it's going to take a *lot* of showers to feel clean again.

The sooner we can take him down, the better. *Maybe we should take Aiden up on his offer?*

Channeling my inner 'Quinn', I playfully push him away and shake my head, making a tut-tut sound as I do it. "Hey now. Isn't this supposed to be *business?*"

His smirk deepens and his expression is anything but apologetic as he slowly moves away, his arms in the air in a 'hands-off' gesture.

There's no missing the way his eyes linger on my body, or that tell-tale look in his eye that I've seen from the start. He may *say* this is business, but there's nothing professional about his plans for me.

I may have initiated the first kiss, but there's no way Decker will be satisfied with just that. Which means I need to find another way to keep him distracted and away from Aiden

until we can take him down for good. One that doesn't include me *touching* the man—not if I can help it, anyway.

A little while later, just as new drinks are delivered to our table, I look up to spot Justin walking toward us. His gaze darts from Decker to me then back to his boss.

“Hey,” he says, his voice low and cautious. “We’ve got a problem.”

“Deal with it,” Decker says dismissively, turning back to me.

Justin winces. “Can’t. It’s the type that needs your attention, not mine.”

Decker curses under his breath. “I’m sorry, Quinn. Duty calls.” He lifts his hand to cup my jaw, brushing the pad of his thumb over the corner of my mouth. “We’re going to finish this another time though.”

I tilt my head and arch a brow. “Professional, Decker. Remember?”

“Hmm. If that was you being professional, then damn, I can’t wait till you’re *not*.” Before I can react, he leans in and kisses me square on the lips again before moving to his feet.

“I’ll get someone to call a car for you, Quinn.”

I’m already shaking my head before he finishes. “I’m OK. I can find my own way—”

“I insist.” He stares at me in a way that I know I can’t get out of this. Not this time. I nod, and after one last lingering look, both men jerk their chins up before walking away.

Justin animatedly updates Decker as they move toward the hallway where Aiden found me, confirming what I suspected, that there's behind-the-scenes access around this whole building. It's probably a rabbit warren of corridors and stairs and secret elevators. It's the only explanation for how Decker gets away with everything we suspect he does through the club.

My mind races with possibilities as to what could warrant Decker's personal attention. Justin is his right-hand man, which must mean the issue is a big one. Hopefully big enough that we can use it to our advantage in future.

First things first, I have to take the car service to Quinn's apartment. Then cover my tracks to get back to mine. Or go to the office.

Whatever is going on tonight, I'm going to try and find out.

* * *

Quinn's apartment is dark and quiet when I arrive, but something feels off. The hair on the back of my neck prickles and a chill runs down my spine, more so given the fact that I'm not armed right now and my service weapon is in a safe at the top of the bedroom closet.

I slowly make my way through the living room and into the kitchen, flicking on lights as I go. My heart almost stops when I find Barrett sitting on my couch.

“Fuck, you almost gave me a heart attack,” I say, releasing a huge sigh of relief.

“Care to tell me what the fuck you’re playing at?”

“What do you mean?” My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I wonder if he knows what happened in the supply closet.

“You accepted a car service provided by Decker James, which means he now knows where you’re staying.”

“He knows where *Quinn* lives,” I add with a silent sigh of relief.

Barrett stares at me and I feel the intensity of his gaze. “Him knowing where Quinn lives means that this is the only place you can be from now until whenever we close the case and that monster is behind bars.”

My throat thickens but thankfully, all I have to do is nod. It was always a possibility that my cover would deepen if Decker got too close. Just my luck after tonight considering my head is all over the place thanks to Aiden.

“Then there’s the fact you let Aiden *fucking* Lawrence pull you into a supply closet and almost blow your cover *and* his? Am I forgetting anything?” he says angrily.

I shake my head. “Aiden wants to help us. Which makes me think he’s onto something or *thinks* he can help us with this case.”

“Like I’m going to accept the help of the man who almost got me and my wife killed, all because he was pissed off that she chose me instead of him.”

Now that my heart rate has slowed to semi-normal levels, I kick off my shoes and move toward the kitchen, grabbing a beer out of the fridge and holding it up in the air toward my handler. When he takes it from me, I get myself one before opening it. Moments later, I'm folding my knees underneath my ass and sitting on the opposite end of the couch.

The first swig of beer hits the spot just like I knew it would, the cold liquid sliding down my throat and calming my nerves as I return to the subject that has Barrett wound tighter than a spring. "He's a way to get in quicker than I ever could, without me having to compromise myself any further," I explain.

Barrett takes a long drink from his bottle before leaning forward, resting his arms on his legs, his head dropped low. "Fuck."

Silence falls between us, and I can tell Barrett's mind is working a mile a minute. Knowing him, he's trying to think of any other way to advance the case without involving the man he might just hate more than Decker James.

He's right to be worried, but I also know that we need all the help we can get as quickly as possible if we're going to take down Decker and his criminal organization once and for all. And if that means working with Aiden, then so be it.

"It's a risk," I say, breaking the silence. "But I've known Aiden for over twenty years. He regrets what he did. He's said as much, more than once. This could be his way of redeeming himself. You know he—"

Barrett's narrowed gaze snaps to me. "Did you expect him to throw you under the bus like he did after your history? Did you think he'd break the law?"

I swallow down, my throat tightening. "No. But he made it right again. He amended his statement and took full accountability, saving my career in the process. The fact he managed to leave with his pension intact and without a record is a miracle." A muscle in his jaw twitches as he reluctantly nods so I forge on. "He did it straight away *and* he honored my wish to leave me alone. He didn't reach out at all. And when I saw him last week, that was *me* initiating it, remember?"

Barrett's gaze softens and I don't want to see it, but I don't miss the pity there too. I hate it. "You're right. That doesn't mean I have to like it. He has and always will be a thorn in my side. You know that, Marlee."

"Yeah, but you have something he doesn't," I say, nudging his leg with mine as his lips quirk up to one side.

"Fuck yeah, I do. My family are everything to me."

"I know that. Just remember, the quicker we bring Decker down, the quicker you can go back to your non-feebee life again and never look back."

He jerks his chin up and that's all I need to see to know that he's accepting this fate. "Let's not let my involvement in the case be known until it's absolutely necessary. You want Lawrence to help you, then he does it for *you*. As soon as he knows I'm your handler, all bets are off. OK?"

I nod. The thing is, I didn't anticipate that Aiden would put his own case and cover at risk with the stunt he pulled tonight. Especially not because he was jealous.

Barrett looks at me, determination etched on his face, and I know he's about to lay down the law. "This is how it's going to be. He acts as our eyes and ears only. He doesn't call the shots and at no stage will I—or you for that matter—trust him completely. Because if it comes down to you or him, I'll have your back 100 percent and he'll be left to the wolves. And just to be clear, if at *any* stage I suspect he's working against us, he's out."

I nod, relieved that Barrett is willing to back me. "Agreed."

"Lastly, and this is important. You and him, that's not going to happen again." My mouth drops open as I stare not only at my handler but my friend too. "I'm serious, Marlee. Lys and I saw how shattered you were last year, and we don't want to see you like that again. You can't fall for his shit again. Any man who can do what he did will never be worthy. That's not just because he's Aiden and his history, it's because —"

"I deserve better," I say, finishing his sentence. I *do*, he's not wrong. It's just that I know the real Aiden and the man he is truly is deep down. I don't think that will ever change.

"I'm just looking out for you, Marls."

"Yeah, I know. I'm a big girl though. Some might say I'm a grown woman even," I reply, wryly.

“Nah, you’re still a baby in my eyes.” I flip him off, earning a low chuckle in reply.

Then it’s back to business. “Something happened tonight. Decker had to leave because there was a problem. That’s why he insisted on ordering a car to take me home.”

Barrett’s back straightens as he gives me his full attention. “Tell me everything and we’ll find out exactly what went on. You never know, this might be just the lead we need.”

Chapter 12

AIDEN

Another week passes without anything happening. As far as things at the club is concerned, it's situation normal. Justin has been around more than usual but spends his time locked away in his office down the hall from the control room. That's *not* his normal M.O.

Marlee hasn't been back to the club which is a blessing in disguise because if I ever have to see Decker put his dirty mouth on my girl again, cover or no cover, FBI case or small PI case, I'm not sure I'll be able to control myself. Just that once was enough for me to want to burn the world to the ground just to get Marlee away from him, especially when I had to see her go back to his table and watch him kiss her *again*.

It's because things at the club have been uneventful that I accepted Hawk's invitation for beers and pool at an off-strip dive bar on a night off, deciding it was high time I did some digging of my own and see what I could find out from the guys who work there.

Gathered around a few tall tables next to the pool table, we all take turns challenging each other to games. I do it with my

ears open, hoping to hear something useful, but the guys stick to small talk, chatting about sports and women. Nothing has piqued my interest case-wise so far, but at least the guys are all good value and I'm grateful that, at this stage, they don't appear to be involved in anything illegal or suspicious.

"How are things going for you upstairs?" Hawk asks, taking a sip of his beer as we take a break from the pool table.

"Good."

He arches a sceptical brow my way. "Good? You're sitting in a box watching a wall of cameras. How can that be good?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. "It's straightforward. There's no shit, no politics, no higher-ups breathing down your neck all the fucking time like when I was in the force. All I have to worry about is watch the cameras, walk the floor and be seen, and stop people from snorting their lives away in the bathrooms. Then rinse and repeat."

Hawk nods, taking another long sip. "I hear you. Why do you think I work the door? I like knowing what to expect every night. There's no surprises. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just the same old wannabes doing anything and everything they can to get inside. They'll spend their life savings just for the door charge, for one *night* at Marquis. It's wild, man."

I grin because it's exactly what I thought my first night at the club too. "It's the *hottest* place to be and be seen, don't you know?"

"Thank God for that. We wouldn't get paid as well as we do otherwise," Hawk says with a smirk.

Lifting my beer bottle, I hold it up between us, clinking the glass against his. “Amen!”

“I’m still surprised you don’t get more trouble at the door,” I say casually, hoping to get him talking.

“Oh, we get trouble. We just don’t let it get any further than it has to. Like the other night, there was a guy asking questions they shouldn’t be in the line. Somehow, he got past us and into the lobby, and suddenly he’s making a scene. Luckily Justin just happened to be there at the time and was able to deal with it. Then *poof*, the guy was gone.”

With my curiosity officially piqued, I press further. “What happened?”

Hawk shrugs. “Don’t know exactly, but it was something about his missing sister. He was ranting and raving about Decker to anyone who’d listen. Making claims he had no business making.”

“Yeah? What was he saying?”

“You know what the crazies are like. It was crap. He kept saying his sister had been taken and Decker knew where she was. He was ranting that Decker was responsible. Then he started in on Justin when he knew he was about to be kicked out. It’s all just tweaker bullshit. That’s what Justin said anyway.”

“When was this? I’m surprised I missed it,” I say, keeping my voice light but inside, I’m feeling anything but relaxed.

“Saturday.” Hawk’s brows bunch. “Did you not see it on the cameras? Thought you spent most of your time in the

control room these days?”

I shrug nonchalantly, hoping that my voice doesn't betray my unease. Saturday night was when Decker and Marlee were in the VIP lounge. The same night Justin made an unexpected appearance and left with Decker not long after I'd returned to the control room. The night I disappeared into the supply closet with Marlee. “It must've been when I was walking the floor. Had to make a few trips down there to stop people from partaking in the nose candy.”

Hawk's eyes alight with humor. “Don't miss having to deal with that. Why do you think I like manning the door so much?” he replies with a laugh. “People aren't dumb enough to snort that shit in my line.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Just means they wait till they're under *my* watch to do it. Yay for me.”

Hawk grins before taking another drink. “It was a weird one though. Doesn't matter how many times he was told to shut up, he just kept talking.”

“His sister, did you know her?”

“Let her in a few times, but that's as far as it went,” he replies. “Mary, I think her name was. Anyway, she worked at the club up until a month ago too. Sweet girl. Innocent as a church mouse though and definitely *not* the usual type you'd expect to see working at Marquis.”

“You said she used to work there. What happened?”

“Yeah she did. Only for a week though. It was real strange too. Like one night she was working behind the bar and the

next, she was gone.” He shrugs. “It happens more often than you think.”

Every single spider sense inside of my body is pinging right now. This isn't going to help *my* case, but it might have everything to do with whatever Marlee and the FBI are looking into. Missing women, money laundering, and a high-profile club where no one would usually look closely at. Then you've got security systems akin to that you'd find at the damn White House...Yeah, a picture is forming in my head and it's making me uneasy.

Something Hawk says sticks with me. “What happens more often than you think? Women going missing?” *Surely not...*

“You know, people coming to Vegas with dollar signs in their eyes and a big bright future in their heads. Then reality slaps them in the face when they realize it's not quite what they expect.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway. Justin was called to take care of it. He and Decker left soon after, so I guess it can't have been too big of a deal because there's been no sign of the guy again.”

* * *

After staying for a few more games of pool and another drink, I make my excuses and leave the bar, walking toward my apartment a few blocks away.

That was my intention anyway, but I don't get that far. Half a block from home and right where there's an abandoned building and very little light, a black van pulls up next to me. Before I know it a hood is thrown over my head and I'm shoved into the back of the vehicle, my attacker getting in after me and forcing me down onto the floor with a knee to the middle of my back. My hands are bound with plastic zip ties far too quickly, my ankles getting the same treatment soon after. Then all I hear is a slap of a hand on metal and the van is back on the move.

I don't talk, my training kicking in as I try to calm myself down, part of me hoping this is a case of mistaken identity and not my cover being blown.

My heart pounds as I try to assess the situation and my surroundings even though there's not much I can do until I know who's behind this and what the deal is. That's when I can decide what my next move will be.

Twenty minutes later, the van comes to a sudden stop, jolting me forward. I hear the sound of the doors opening and muffled voices, listening closely for any clues as to what the hell is going on.

"Did you have to go the whole hog?" a man asks.

"What did you expect us to do? We had to make it look as real as possible. He was with Hawk and the rest of the bouncers." *Shit*. So it *is* somehow related to Marquis.

"OK. OK. Let's just get him inside," the man's voice says, urgency in his tone.

“Relax, we made sure nobody followed us,” another voice responds, this one more calm and collected. They almost sound bored. *Isn't that ironic?* A boring kidnapping, who'd have thought?

A second later hands wrap around my ankles and out of instinct, I kick out, my heel digging into soft flesh and earning a grunt.

“Fuck!” The man curses and his grip loosens for a second before tightening again. Suddenly two sets of arms are jerking me forward and lifting me out of the van, holding me firm despite my attempts to buck and twist and get out of their grip. But I stay quiet, knowing that they'd likely expect me to shout and yell and make a scene. Instead, I listen for any sound to get an idea of where I am.

That's until I'm dropped down onto what feels like a couch or mattress and I grunt from the shock of it.

“Hold fucking still and we'll let you go,” someone growls as my feet are freed first followed by my hands.

I just the hood off my face, my eyes burning as they adjust to the bright halogen lights trying to blind me. When my vision clears, I see that I'm in the same type of grey and beige, non-descript room I've been in many times before.

I glare at the two men dressed in black suits that stand in front of me, their expressions stoic and unreadable. The older one has a receding hairline and a crooked nose. The younger one of the two has blonde hair and bright blue eyes, obviously a newbie agent who's not yet jaded or tortured by the horrors

he'll undoubtedly see the more years on the job he gets under his belt.

I rub my wrists as I quirk a brow at the senior agent. "Bit dramatic, don't you think?"

His lips twitch. "Had to make it seem real."

"Did you really need to keep playing along once you had me off the street," I grind out.

"Where's the fun in that," the younger man says with a smirk.

I roll my eyes. "You two done playing good cop, bad cop? Can we get on with whatever you hauled me in here for?"

"We're waiting for Detective Manning," the senior agent says. I roll my eyes because of *course* Marls would be behind this. Let's scare the shit out of Aiden just to show who's in charge.

"Well, can you at least get me some of that dirty dishwasher you call coffee while we do that?"

The older man clears his throat and turns to his younger partner, a curt nod giving the order before we're left alone.

I quirk a brow. "You going to tell me why I'm here?"

"Manning asked that we get you here without being detected. We simply did what we had to do."

Five minutes later, blondie returns with my coffee. I eye it suspiciously as he hands it over, earning a snort. The door opens again and Marlee walks in, looking all business with a travel mug of her own.

She quickly looks me over before turning back to the other two agents and shaking their hands. “Thanks, guys. Much appreciated. I can take it from here.”

Then it’s just the two of us, sitting in a room with a couch on one side, a small table on the other, and two chairs surrounding it.

“So, *Detective* Manning. Now that you’ve got me here. What are you going to do with me?” Yes it’s an asshole comment, but I’m still getting over the whole fake kidnapping fiasco.

“I want what you offered.”

I arch a brow because there’s no way I can’t with such an open suggestion.

“And what was that? Finishing what happened in the closet or helping you with Decker? Because either option is fine by me. Maybe just not in a government building.” I look her over and don’t even try to fight the smirk curling my lips. “Although it would be a first for me. How about you, Marls?”

She stares wide-eyed at me like I’ve grown another head or something. “Are you drunk?”

I take a sip of the concoction they try to pass off as coffee. “Nah. Exhausted, relieved I’m no longer heading toward injury or maybe death.” I shrug. “Who knows. Did you really have to *kidnap* me, though?”

“And you call *us* dramatic,” she says with a roll of her eyes. She turns one of the chairs around and sits down, crossing her legs in what would usually be a move to distract a

suspect she was interrogating. That doesn't mean I still don't fall for it. Marlee shrugs. "Besides, it got you here and you were far enough from the bar that if anyone was following you, then they'll think it's a robbery or you being roughed up a bit. Your cover is fine, Aiden." She's not wrong, so I don't reply.

"Do you still want to help us? Help me?"

I don't look away and there's no way she can miss that familiar buzz arcing between us. "Sure. But I need to know what you're working on, who you're working with, and what you need me to look for. I'm not going into this unless I know everything. That's a deal breaker."

She worries her lip between her teeth and I see indecision warring in her gaze. She slowly closes her eyes before muttering something to herself and taking a deep breath before opening them again and staring straight at me.

"OK. You've got a deal."

"Good. Because I've already got a lead for you."

Chapter 13

AIDEN

“Her name is Mary Whittaker,” Marlee says, pinning me a stare across the table between us.

Thankfully, I now have a *decent* cup of coffee in my hand as well as a burger and fries in front of me. Apparently aiding a cross-agency federal investigation comes with perks like getting fed after a fake kidnapping you thought was real.

“So, you already know about her? Guess it’s not much of a lead then” I say around a mouthful of cheeseburger goodness.

“It’s a connection we needed, Aiden. Now we have a link between Mary’s brother, Jason, and Justin, therefore Decker. The only link we had to Marquis was her working there. Obviously, I haven’t been able to ask Decker about it since he doesn’t know he’s a) under surveillance or b) that I’m undercover. This means any information we *can* get is helpful.”

“What happened to Mary then?”

“Nobody knows, that’s the problem. She worked a week behind the bar before she quit, or so the story goes. From there, we have her rent paid for two months—first and last—but nobody at her apartment building has seen or heard from

her. Jason reported her missing two weeks ago after not being able to get in contact with her but *we* didn't learn about it till he reported it in Vegas ten days ago."

"It's out of character for her then?"

"Very much so," she replies. "Jason turned up at my precinct and demanded to speak to my LVPD boss because wouldn't you know it, Marquis just happens to be within our jurisdiction. And although he reported her missing in Cody, Wyoming, they're so behind on paperwork that they didn't pass it on. He then drove 800 miles to come find her himself."

"LVPD couldn't locate her?"

"Not yet. The report was taken by a colleague of mine and since the taskforce I'm working with—"

"That *I'm* now working with too," I add, earning rolled eyes.

"You're my informant, Aiden. That's the only capacity in which you can be involved. You realize that, right?"

I sigh. "Yes, Marls. I know. I was just fucking with you."

"OK. Well as you know, I was already looking into Decker so the missing persons report was given to me. But we haven't been able to find her, or work out what happened as yet."

I frown, wondering how someone can just seemingly disappear. "What about her cell phone?"

"She hadn't gotten around to getting one yet," she replies. "She was a small-town girl in the big city and according to her brother, money was tight."

“OK. Let’s pin that for a moment. I have a question I’ve been dying to ask you and since you’re now being so forthcoming with me, I should get a freebie.”

“You feel like I owe you that?” she says, arching a brow as a small smirk tilts her mouth.

“I want to know how you became involved in a cross-agency task force focused on Decker James.”

She frowns, tilting her head as she does it. All I need to see now is her nose to scrunch up and I’ll be out for the count. There’s something about the way she expresses herself so openly with her features that has always done it for me. Whatever the mood, whatever the situation, Marlee Manning has always been an open book. That is, until a year ago...

“Long story for another day,” she replies.

“That sounds like a brush off.”

She leans back in her chair and crosses her arms over her chest. “What is this, show and tell?” Her lips twitch. “Sorry to say, Aiden, but you’ve already seen everything I have to show, and I’m not in the mood to tell you anything more than I have to right now. How about *that?*” *There’s that fire I love.*

“And here was I thinking we were making some headway. Damn, I must be losing my touch,” I say melodramatically.

“How about this then? It all depends on how badly you piss me off in the foreseeable future,” she retorts. I can’t help the slow-growing grin that takes over my face because *that* my Marlee. “Can we get back to Mary Whittaker now though?”

Because It's 2 a.m. and I'd rather be sleeping than sitting here eating enough calories to see me through for the week."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her she could eat a million burgers and still be hot as hell but it's not the time and Marlee is not anywhere near ready to hear anything like that from me.

"OK, Beautiful. We can do that," I reply softly. Her eyes warm ever so slightly before she catches herself and it transforms into a glare. I hold my hands up in surrender. "Sorry, sorry. Force of habit."

"Then make sure you break yourself out of that. Let's get back to Mary. Did you hear anything else about her?"

"Nope. The first time was tonight at the bar. I was with Hawk and the bouncers from the club. just shooting shit and playing pool. It's the one night most of us have off together, so when Hawk invited me to tag along, I wasn't going to say no."

"Because you're still working your case?" she asks.

"Yes, but also because I meant it when I said I wanted to help you. Having an ear to the ground with the men who work the door will always be useful because they see and hear almost everything."

Marlee nods, taking a sip of her coffee. "Was anything else said that we might be interested in? Anything at all, no matter how inconsequential it might seem."

"The brother—Jason, you said—he came to the club on Saturday night, about the same time we were in the closet. Or

maybe afterward when you were sucking face with Decker in the booth.”

She freezes, her eyes widening and her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. “It wasn’t—”

I hold my hand up. “It doesn’t matter, Marls. When you’re undercover, you do what you’ve got to do. I get it.”

“Don’t think you do,” she murmurs. It’s *definitely* not the time to get into this. “Anyway. The brother. What happened with him?”

I take a sip of my drink before putting it down and pushing it away. “I’ll never sleep if I keep mainlining that stuff.” She snorts and I continue, ignoring how cute I used to find her little idiosyncrasies. “All Hawk said was that she was sweet and innocent. Even went so far as to call her a church mouse. She doesn’t sound like the type that would fit in well there. Regardless, apparently her brother was telling anyone who’d listen that Decker had something to do with Mary’s disappearance and that he knew where she was. Then he got inside the lobby and Hawk said that Justin ‘took care of it’ after that.”

Her eyes flash. “That would’ve been just before Justin came to get Decker and he had to leave me.”

She turns her attention to the file on the table, flicking it open between us. One quick look shows it is the LVPD missing person’s report for Mary. Reading upside down, I see she’s twenty-two and had only lived in Las Vegas for a week before she started at Marquis—same as me.

“You said she’d paid first and last months’ rent, correct?”

Marlee nods as she lifts her gaze to mine.

I press on, thinking aloud. “So one week in Vegas then she works at the club for a week, then she’s gone? That doesn’t just seem out of character, Marls. That seems suspicious as hell. You don’t uproot your life from your hometown, move to the big city lights and then disappear. Not like that.”

“Yep. It also doesn’t help that we didn’t *know* she was missing until ten days ago.”

“You were investigating Decker before all of this happened? I figured it was some cross-state crime that landed on your lap.”

She opens her mouth then shuts it again, looking unsure and it’s that indecision that feels like a knife to the gut. “I need to check how much I can tell you. You turning up and getting involved in this case wasn’t exactly on our radar,” she says, sounding almost apologetic. *Our radar?*

“Look, I get there are things you can’t tell me. But you know me, Marls. You know how I work.”

“By talking it out,” she replies, sounding resigned. I’m starting to believe she hates the fact she has to work with me again. “I know.”

“And while I appreciate that there will be things pertinent to the case that you can’t share with me, I need more to go on so that I know *what* to look for and *who* to look at when I’m at working at the club.”

She nods, slumping in her chair. “You turning up and investigating the money side of things at the request of a silent partner that none of us can identify has thrown us for a loop. We’re not sure if it’s part of a bigger picture or just a huge coincidence.”

“*Or* it’s a distraction to divert attention,” I suggest, thinking out loud.

“Pretty much.”

Something I haven’t thought about hits me. “Does the fact that it’s *me* that was sent here play into this?”

Her lips twist. “I have considered that. But we can’t know whether you’re here on purpose or not until we can identify your client.”

I run back over what Harry said when he told me about the case. “Harry said he’d worked with the client last year and owed him a favor. This case was the client calling in that marker.”

Marlee jerks back, frowning. I don’t miss the way she looks toward the large mirror on the side wall. I noticed it when I was checking out the room but didn’t think much more about it until now.

“You going to tell me who’s joining us, Marls?” I jerk my head toward the glass.

“No one,” she answers a little too quickly. “It’s the middle of the night, Aiden.”

“I’m not an idiot.” I turn to the glass and wave. “Hi there, whoever you are. I don’t care who hears what I’m saying

because I've got nothing to hide. So feel free to reveal yourself any time..."

I stare back at Marlee knowing *why* she can't trust me but wondering if there could or *will* ever be a time when she does. *Or maybe I'm an idiot for still holding out hope.*

Her phone on the table vibrates, grabbing her attention. Turning it up, she reads whatever is on the screen before putting it back face down again.

"Can we get back to Decker and why he's being investigated by your task force?" I ask, getting frustrated at myself more than anything. I'm missing something—something big—but I can't seem to put my finger on it.

"We know he's got millions in offshore accounts."

"That's not necessarily a crime, or illegal," I counter. "Suspicious, yes. But it could easily be a tax thing."

"Agree. But *how* Decker got all his money *is* of interest." She reaches over and steals a fry from my plate, her lips starting to curve into a cheeky grin before she catches herself and schools her expression. "Decker has been on our radar for about six months, and the FBI's for longer than that." She puts the stolen food into her mouth and I fight not to be distracted by it. I fail.

"Let me guess," I say, tapping my chin and getting my thoughts back on track. "Drugs, sex trafficking, money laundering... which one?"

"Maybe all of the above, maybe none. But we know it started with him becoming the Vegas underworld's go-to guy

to get things done.”

“A fixer.”

“Yes, but *the* fixer. Even with everything he’s suspected of doing, there’s no record. It’s all rumor and conjecture. He’s so good that there’s nothing to pin on him. He’s hired by people who want to stay clean and have nothing to connect it back to them. And by guaranteeing he can do that, he charges a premium for the privilege. You’ve met him. Would you expect him to be a criminal mastermind?” she asks.

“Would I pick him as a man who can get anything and anyone he wants with the click of his fingers and the flash of his black card? Definitely. A cold, heartless man who can organize someone’s death and destruction for a price? I’m starting to think so. He’s not dumb, Marls. He’s pretty fucking smart, actually. You said he worked his way up to the top. You’ve got to be motivated and focused to do that.” She nods. “And if that club is the center of everything for him, then I need to get in deeper and take a few more risks to find out exactly what’s going on.”

“You have to be careful, Aiden. There are cameras everywhere and probably some that you don’t even know about. I can’t even wear a wire inside the club because everyone is scanned, remember?”

“And yet I *still* managed to get you into a closet unnoticed, didn’t I?” I say with a smirk, unable to resist. A thud from behind the mirror has Marlee turning pale. I arch a brow when she turns back to me with a guilty expression.

“He was suspicious that night. I thought we were made,” she says quietly. “That’s why I let him kiss me.”

A tight ring strangling my chest eases now that I know why she did it. That doesn’t mean I still don’t want to make sure it never happens again.

I shake my head, trying to get back on track as a huge yawn takes hold of me. “What caused you to go undercover and get close to Decker?”

“A lot of things, but mainly it was the new DA wanting a clean slate and a big case to close to start his tenure.”

“All this for politics? You know Decker will have big men in high places in his pocket, don’t you?”

“Of course we know that,” she snaps. “But we can’t have a man like him get a stronger stranglehold on this city. The plan is to cut the snake off at the head—”

“And hope that the rest of them fall or go away quietly? Don’t you get it? There’s always someone waiting in the wings to take over. Besides, if Decker’s just another middleman, then—”

She shakes her head. “That’s what you don’t get, Aiden. Decker isn’t a middleman. He’s the new boss.”

“Boss of what?”

“Of everything illegal in Vegas.”

“What? No. He can’t be. He’s far too public, too flashy, too—”

“Obvious? Yeah, that’s the whole point. He just doesn’t care. He’s the power maker and breaker. He brokers deals, covers asses, and takes care of the business that others don’t want to. He was biding his time, working his way up, gaining people’s trust, and doing what he had to in order to get dirt on those who stood in his way. Then suddenly he’s front and center, the face of the hottest club on the Strip, the man with a different woman on his arm, who people want to be or be seen with. The man with *all* the money and all the power.”

“On the surface, he’s a clean, upstanding citizen just living the American dream,” I say, finishing the picture that she’s painted. “But he’s still ‘The Fixer’ while also running the Vegas underworld and doing it with his smiling face being on the side of Marquis.”

She nods. “You’ve got it.”

“So where does the FBI come in?”

“Money. And now bodies. At least ten of them. Missing persons with some sort of connection to the club, or Decker’s past.”

“Wait... You said Mary was from Cody, Wyoming?”

She looks down at the file. “Yep. Population less than a thousand. Why’s that?”

“Decker’s mother lives in Dubois.”

“Where’s that?” she says, brows pinched.

“Wyoming.”

“It’ll be a coincidence,” she says, dismissively. “That’s too sloppy for Decker. He’s meticulous, remember. He *never* slips up, never leaves a trail.”

“Maybe. But it could be *something*,” I say, but the connection sticks with me.

She nods. “Going back to your question about why we’re moving faster now and why I’m taking you on your offer is the discover that Decker’s so-called ‘business partner’ is suddenly calling in a favor and sending in a PI—*you*—into the club undercover to look at the books? An ex-cop with a checkered past and who might be seen as being an easy mark to look the other way. Or even better, cross over to the dark side himself.”

All the reasons why my cover is solid. “Shit. Why do I feel like I’ve walked into a trap.”

Her eyes soften. “We don’t know that you have yet.”

“But you can’t rule it out, can you?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“I need to call Harry,” I say, patting my pocket for my phone and coming up empty. I sigh, rolling my eyes as I look over the table. “You think I can get my phone back?”

“Soon,” she says. “It’s being checked over right now.”

“Of course it is. I’ll call Harry in the morning. He probably wouldn’t appreciate an early morning wake-up call anyway.”

Marlee leans forward, resting her arms on the table and pinning me in place with an intense stare that has the hairs on

my arms standing on end. “You can’t do that, Aiden,” she warns. “You can’t tell anyone what I’ve told you tonight. *Especially Harry*”

I jerk back, my chair scraping against the floor from it. “Why not?”

She swallows hard but she doesn’t look away, which means I see the war being waged in her gaze. *What is she hiding?*

She looks away first, just as footsteps get closer outside the room. “You’ve got to understand, Aiden. I couldn’t... I just... —” That reaction confirms my suspicion.

“Just say it, Marls. Rip off the Band-Aid.”

Then the door opens and I’m the one frozen, one of the reasons she’s being cagey becoming *very* clear.

“Because,” Barrett Lucas says, coming to a stop next to Marlee and crossing his arms over his chest, the flash of his gold wedding band on his ring finger twisting that invisible but ever-present knife inside me all that much deeper. “We think Harry’s involved.”

Chapter 14

MARLEE

The look on Aiden's face when Barrett walks into the room affects me more than it should. I can see the pain, the surprise, the thinly veiled anger... and betrayal. That cuts through me like a hot knife.

But just as quick as it's there, it's gone. He shuts it down and a mask slips into place, turning him into a man I don't recognize. It takes me back to that horrible morning in the hotel room a year ago. That time it was *me* feeling deceived. *Is this what it feels like to know you've hurt someone you love?*

Knowing the history between these two men, it's understandable that they still despise each other—each with their own completely different reasons.

Aiden and Barrett were in the FBI Academy together. Best friends who were going to take on the world... together. That was until they let a woman play them against one another and destroy the bond they had. Fast forward several years and their careers took them in different, yet surprising-similar directions—Aiden joining the San Francisco Police Department and Barrett moving up in the FBI—and their paths crossed again.

Once more, it was a woman that came between them. Except Alyssa Jacobs was an innocent party being used by her stepfather as a pawn, and Barrett was the man undercover to stop him. Another love triangle ensued and it was Barrett who got the girl—his now wife. The whole situation was what led to Aiden destroying his career and almost derailing mine, losing me in the process, all because of his hatred of Barrett and his determination to win Alyssa over.

And now, the same two men are face to face for the first time since everything went down last year.

Aiden stands, meeting Barrett's angry gaze. "Should've known you'd be behind this."

"I'm not behind shit, Lawrence. If I had anything to do with it, you wouldn't be here, let alone breathing the same air as me. *Marlee* is the one who asked to loop you in. I voted against it but since you're already in so deep you don't even realize it, it was a foregone conclusion."

"I'm not that man anymore," Aiden growls and my breath catches when I find it's *me* he's looking at when he says it. Like it's *me* he wants to hear it. His eyes snap back to Barrett. "I paid my penance and lost everything. Isn't that enough for you?" He spits out and I can feel the pain in every word. "And for the record, I don't believe Harry could be dirty. Even if he is, he wouldn't bring me into it."

Barrett lifts his fingers to run through his hair as he huffs out a frustrated breath. "I know the man too, remember? I wouldn't have believed it either unless I was looking him in the eye when I questioned him. I could *see* it written all over

his face, Lawrence. He's compromised. I just don't know why or how."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means one plus one does *not* equal two. Harry was too polished, too sure of himself and his *client*. The moment I left his office after meeting with him, I came back and started digging."

Aiden's gaze sparks with anger. "When was this?"

"Last week. As soon as Marlee told me you were back in town and working a case at Marquis, I caught a flight to Seattle."

Aiden doesn't seem surprised by any of that. "I've *tried* to get the client's name out of him but he wouldn't tell me. And fuck you for going behind my back instead of asking *me* what the hell was going on."

Barrett's sardonic laugh fills the room. "She *did* ask you, you said you'd try and find out. She told me, and *I* made the call to go see Harry." He's talking like I'm not even in the room, but I know this isn't my fight. This is between them. "You can't expect any of us to *trust* you? You're lucky you got away with what you did with your pension intact."

Aiden takes a step forward and the already tense air turns electric. "You think I don't *know* that? That I haven't fucking tortured myself over what I did? And just as I think I have a chance to move on and get on with my sorry excuse for a life, here I am, thrust back into shit I don't want anything to do with."

“Except you still accepted the case from Harry and came back here,” Barrett shoots back, his voice full of disbelief.

“What was I supposed to do? I tried to say no but he assured me it was a favor he had to repay and that I was the only one who could do it.”

“What else did he tell you?” I ask, hoping to diffuse the situation and get this interview of sorts back on track.

“That no one from my past would be involved. Fucking bullshit of a lie *that* was,” Aiden says with a shake of his head.

“We’re trying to work out what his angle is,” I say gently. “It might help us work out why it was *you* that had to be here and why.”

Aiden’s gaze jerks to mine. “He’s fucking clean. I’ve known him for years. He may muddy the waters but he’s straight as an arrow. He wouldn’t—”

“He did. The sooner you accept it, the better we’ll all be because then we can finally focus on bringing Decker down,” Barrett announces, his deep voice cutting through the air.

“For all I fucking know, *you’re* behind all of this,” Aiden stupidly says, and I move between the two men who are now pressing into my shoulders, both spitting tacks and glaring at one another.

I turn to Barrett and shove him back with both hands. “This isn’t helping anybody. Barrett, back off.” Giving him my back, I spin around and wait for Aiden to meet my eyes. He’s shattered, it’s written all over his face. I hate it because I’m seeing the same defeated man that was at the hospital facing

down Alyssa while we all waited for word on Barrett's surgery. It's a man who's sick of being used and manipulated and not being the master of his own story.

"Fuck this. I'm out." Then he steps past me and storms toward the door.

"We'll have to get you a burner so I can contact you," I say just before he leaves.

"Whatever. You know where to find me." He spears a look through Barrett before locking eyes with me. "But only you, Marls. You want my help, you've got it. But I'm only dealing with you."

Barrett scoffs. "Why? Because you're trying to get back in her bed. That's your M.O. right?"

"No," he says, sounding calmer than I've heard tonight. "Because she's the only damn person I can trust right now." Then he's gone.

I fight the urge to go after him. Not that it would achieve anything right now.

My exhaustion doesn't stop me from turning on Barrett and laying into him as soon as we're alone again.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I hiss, crossing my arms over my chest. "You can't just drop that bomb on him like that."

Barrett raises an eyebrow at me, his expression cool and collected. "Seemed like the perfect time to me."

“That not only are *you* involved in this case, but the man who pulled him out of the deep dark hole he’d buried himself in might be dirty too? Yeah, sure. *Great!* Kick the man while he’s down and put a boot on his head while you’re at it!”

Barrett leans against the wall, eyes pinned to mine. “Listening to you two talk *was* productive though,” he says and suddenly I feel like a bug under a microscope because Barrett has always been able to see through the bullshit. “And how’s that?” I ask, not realizing I’ve started pacing.

“For all his faults,”—my step falters and I come to a stop, my eyes widening as I stand there staring at Barrett. “—and believe me, I’m just as shocked as you are that I’m defending the asshole. Aiden Lawrence has found himself in the middle of something he had no damn clue about and he’s being used as a pawn in some other fucker’s game. I happen to know *exactly* what that feels like.” My breath catches at the realization of the duplicity of the situation. He’s involved now just as much as we are, maybe even more so because, if our suspicions are right, he’s not here by chance. “There’s a reason Harry sent him into that club.”

“I know that,” I snap back at him. “We have to find out why. Doesn’t mean you had to blindside him like that. You could have eased him into it or waited until we had more information. Aiden’s going to think that I’ve been lying to him this whole time.”

Barrett sighs heavily, running a hand through his hair. “That’s another thing. You need to watch yourself around him.”

My whole body jerks like he's just slapped me. "Excuse me?" I say low and sharp.

As Barrett does, he ignores my tone. "You have a long history with him, and that can be both a good *and* a bad thing. But even you can admit that you see things in a different way when it comes to Aiden. I get that, I do. I'm just saying you need to be careful."

"You don't know anything."

He sighs. "I do, because I've been where you are. I've been the one involved with a target on the case. It's the reason I met you, remember?"

"Yet you still think ambushing the man in the middle of the night like you just did and—"

His brow jumps sky high. "You're the one who had him kidnapped off the street, Marls."

I open my mouth and shut it again before huffing out a harsh sigh. "OK, I'll take that one."

"Good. It was a nice touch though, just saying. But it's now more important than ever that you keep your head about you when you're undercover, *especially* when he's around. We're getting so close to working this out, I can feel it. There are just a few more puzzle pieces we need to see the whole picture. Until then—"

"Keep my feelings in check, my history with Aiden under wraps, and be a robot who works and doesn't feel? Yes, boss."

Barrett's lips twitch. "Maybe not a *robot*. Not sure AI is at the level of solving crimes just yet. This isn't the Minority

Report movie.”

“God,” I say, fighting back a smile and failing. “That’s such a geek thing to say.”

“Shut up. I love that movie.”

I shake my head. “I feel sorry for your wife. She has to put up with you and your geeky self.”

“My wife happens to love me,” he says, looking down at his watch. “Fuck. This took too fucking long.”

“Yeah,” I say, letting loose a yawn I’ve been holding onto for hours it seems.

Barrett rakes his hand through his hair. “OK. Now go home—well, to Quinn’s apartment—and get some sleep. You look like shit.”

I snort. “Thanks.”

Then he looks at me. “Seriously Marls. Go home. There’s nothing more we can do tonight. We’ll reconvene tomorrow and decide what our next move is.”

“With Aiden?”

He nods. “And with you. You’re both undercover and you’re going to need to work together to break this case.”

“To break Decker, you mean?”

“The sooner we work out what that asshole is up to and hopefully find Mary too, then the better off everyone will be when we bring him down.”

I nod, moving toward the door. “Marls?” I turn back to look at him, both loving and hating the soft and understanding look on his face. “I’ve been where you are, stuck between what you want, what you know you shouldn’t have, your job and your duty. It’s an impossible situation and it can tear you apart if you let it. It can cloud your brain and make you do things you wouldn’t usually do. I’m never going to defend what Aiden did and the choices he made when he was in the same position, but time and distance have made me realize that I get it.”

I go still, frozen in shock. “You get it?”

“Yeah,” he replies, his voice gentle now. “I’ve got everything I could ever want in life and he did what he did. He made the *mistake* he did because he wanted what I have now. I can’t imagine a life without Lys so I know that seeing me tonight, clocking her ring on my finger, knowing she’s mine in a way she won’t belong to anyone else, that’s had to burn because it would fucking rip me apart if I was him.”

I tilt my head, wondering when my friend, my FBI hand-holder, had a frontal lobotomy. It’s the only explanation. “I think *you’re* the one who needs sleep. You’re talking like a logical man with his head screwed on straight. That’s not like you, Barrett.”

“Fuck you, Marlee. In the nicest possible way,” he adds with a smirk.

“Fuck you too, Barrett. See you tomorrow. Late. I need sleep.”

“I think we all do. And Marls?”

“Yeah?” I say through another yawn.

“Be careful. You’re now Quinn for the foreseeable future. Remember that.”

I sigh and with a final chin lift and a wave, I walk out of the interrogation room and down the hall.

But all I can think about is the look on Aiden’s face when he realized he’d been played.

That’s something I don’t think I’ll forget in a long time.

Chapter 15

AIDEN

A knock at the door a week later followed by someone calling out “delivery” stirs me from a fitful sleep. Ever since I found out Barrett is working the case with Marlee and that I may or not be back in Vegas for reasons unknown to me has had me overthinking and second-guessing, none of which is exactly conducive to sleep. Since I refuse to drink myself into a stupor just to black out and get rest, shitty nights seem to be it for me right now.

Seeing Barrett again along with that damn wedding band on his finger hit me harder than I thought it would. Not because of Lys, those feelings were dealt with a long time ago. It’s regret and pain, for what I’ve done and what I lost. The ring serving as a visual reminder of the consequences of my actions.

I lost Alyssa a lot earlier than I realized—if she was ever mine to begin with. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t sting to know they got their happy ever after and I screwed mine up. It never would’ve been with her though, and the main reason for that is sitting in an apartment of her own somewhere in Vegas right now.

When I left Vegas after fixing my screw-up and resigning, avoiding a scandal and disciplinary action by the skin of my teeth, I didn't look back. That's not to say I didn't wallow and chew myself out, but I blocked everyone else out of my mind because there was nothing I could do to make up for what I'd done.

"Enough beating yourself up already," I mutter to myself as I swing my legs off my mattress and pull on some sweatpants. Moving out of the bedroom, I make my way to the front of my apartment, checking the peephole and finding the hallway outside empty.

I open the door to find a brown, non-descript box on the floor outside with "Lawrence" on it.

A quick check of the corridor and a firm shake of the box to satisfy me that it's nothing nefarious, I carry it inside and dump it on the kitchen counter. I leave it there while I turn on a pot of coffee since that's the only way I'll be making it through the day before my shift tonight.

I haven't heard from anyone about the taskforce's case, and my job at the club has been uneventful. Justin was locked in his office again, Decker was nowhere to be seen, and nothing out of the ordinary happened. It was almost boring, which is *not* how I'd ever describe a night at Marquis.

I also haven't received anything other than a check-in email from Harry. No phone call. No text message. Just a simple two-line note telling me that everything's fine and he'll touch base with me next week.

The box vibrating on the counter jerks me from my pre-caffeinated thoughts, and I frown at the package, wondering if I cleared it too early.

Taking my mug of coffee with me, I stand in front of the box, taking a sip as I study it. When it shakes again, I sigh and put my cup down, grabbing a knife from the drawer and cutting through the tape around it. Opening it up, I find it full of shredded paper. When I delve deeper, there's a nondescript black flip phone sitting at the bottom and there's a post-it note attached saying "Use me."

I roll my eyes and bring up the contacts, seeing just one number saved.

The sound of my pulse is deafening in my ears as I press the phone to my ear and dial the number. It rings once, twice, three times before it's answered.

"Aiden?" Marlee asks.

"Who else would it be? You're the one behind all this cloak-and-dagger bullshit. You could've just knocked on the door."

"I can't be seen near your building. *Quinn* has no reason to be visiting you, does she?"

I lean a hip against the kitchen cabinets and grab my coffee for another hearty sip. "Guess not. So we're both stuck undercover now?"

"Yeah. Rookie mistake, I let Decker order me a car home the other night."

"Marls..." I say, part sigh, part growl.

“Hey, I said it was a rookie mistake. But it won’t be for long. I’ve just got to live the life of Quinn until we get Decker in cuffs.”

“Then you’ll be looking over your shoulder for a while. You know that too, right?”

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Aiden.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Good. Please remember that.”

“Like you remembered to tell me that Barrett Lucas was working the case with you?” I shoot back.

“He’s my handler and is only back with the agency because of me. He asked me not to tell you.” I groan as my head drops down and I study my feet. “But I’m sorry you had to find out that way—about him *and* Harry, I mean. Barrett didn’t want you to know he was involved.”

“For obvious reasons,” I say because I have no right to be angry about that.

“Well, yes and no. I was just as surprised as you were that he outed himself like that. I just wanted you to know that I never meant for you to be blindsided like that.”

“Like I was supposed to know the kidnapping was fake too, right?” My words are more bitter than my voice.

“I apologized for that.” Her tone is softer and warmer than I ever thought I’d hear again. “You don’t need to keep bringing it up. That would be like me reminding you of your... failings...”

“I know, Marls,” I say, knowing that this *thing* will always be between us, will always *stand* between us. “This case is just getting to me. It was supposed to be an easy money-skimming case. Cut and dried. Then there’s the fact I’m operating like a lone wolf.”

“Aiden...” Her voice has always been able to reach deep inside me and that hasn’t changed. “Whenever I’ve been undercover, I’ve always had someone at my back. Harry may have been more hands-off than normal, but now you’ve put it in my head that he could be compromised, it’s almost like I’m a sitting duck.”

“It’s Barrett’s gut feeling and I’ve learned to trust his hunches. Please believe me when I say that we’re trying to look into it as quickly and as discreetly as possible.”

“Despite my issues with Barrett, his instincts are never wrong. You know that, Marls. You wouldn’t have him at your back otherwise.” Maybe that’s what’s got me so out of sorts. *I* used to be the one she could trust above all others, bar none. Now she wouldn’t trust me to collect her damn mail and feed her cat.

“Has Harry been in contact at all?” she asks.

“Yeah. Just a quick email telling me that everything was fine back home. He hasn’t killed my plants yet, and he’d touch base with me after the weekend.”

She pauses, speaking to someone off the phone before returning. “Is that normal behavior for him?”

I chuckle. “Killing my plants? No, but he’s watching my place while I’m here.”

“Which makes me think he expected you to be gone for a while at least,” she says, thinking out loud.

“We didn’t give it a timeline. I think the general thought was that it would take as long as it would take,” I add.

“So nothing in that message or the way he’s been acting has raised flags for you?”

“Not really. It’s just...” I hesitate for some reason.

“Just what, Aiden? You know just as well as I do that something seemingly innocuous can be a lead to investigate.”

There’s no wiping the slow-growing grin off my face. “Damn, Marls. Look at you going all detective on me.”

Her snorting laughter in my ear has my heart skipping, reminding me just how much I’ve missed having her in my life. “I’m not just Marcus’s baby sister anymore.”

“Fuck no you’re not. You haven’t been that since I was your fir—”

She starts coughing, cutting me off, which in turn just makes *me* laugh. “Enough of that.”

“You started it,” I shoot back.

“I think *you* started it, if my memory serves right. A tent at a music festival and a shared bottle of bourbon?” That brings damn good memories rushing back to me.

“Anyway, let me just check something,” she says, the sound of fingers tapping away on a keyboard catching my

attention. “OK.”

“OK?”

“I wanted to check that Harry wasn’t going anywhere. I checked all airlines out of Seattle and as of right now, it doesn’t appear that he’s leaving any time soon. Wait, does Harry have the kind of money to go private?” she asks curiously. “Don’t answer that. Wait there a sec...” I hear more tapping and then a huff of breath and a groaned sigh. “Yes, yes he does.”

“*What?*” I splutter. “Harry’s not loaded. Far from it. He said before I left that he wasn’t going to get rid of me because he doesn’t have to worry about paying the bills now that I’m working with him. *Dammit!*” I thump my fist onto the counter, ignoring the pain radiating up my arm.

“You couldn’t know, Aiden,” she says quietly. “It’s not like you look at *his* financials. He’s the boss, right?”

“I should’ve known, though. All this time he had me working bullshit cases that I could solve in my sleep and despite it all, I figured it was a learning thing, earning my chops. Now you’re saying it’s all just part of some elaborate plan? But why? And for what? I’m nothing. I’m no one.” I pace my apartment, talking to myself more than anything.

“He’s your friend and you’ve known him for years. He has never let you down so why would you suspect him? But now that we know *something* isn’t right, we can find out exactly what’s going on.”

“Damn well hope so,” I spit out. If I wasn’t working tonight, I might just consider drowning myself in liquor.

“And for the record, you’re not alone, Aiden. You’ve got me,” she replies, like it’s really that simple.

“That’s sweet of you to say, but we both know that’s a lie,” I say, my anger vanishing and a resigned sadness taking its place. “Not anymore.”

“Aiden...”

“No. It’s OK, Beautiful. You’re just top of the now long list of people I’ve fucked over in my life that I’ll regret until the day I die.” She goes quiet, long enough that I pull the phone away from my ear to check that the call is still connected. “Marls?”

“It’s not like that Aiden. Have I ever been someone to say something I don’t mean?”

“No, but—”

“But nothing. It’s just that now is not the time to talk about *anything* but the case. We will though, we’ll get our chance once all of this is over. OK?”

I open my mouth to respond but grit my teeth instead. Story of my life—the timing is *never* right. *At least she is open to talking about it at least.*

“The main focus now is keeping our cover intact and gathering all the evidence so can close this case,” she says, changing the subject.

“What does that look like? I can’t do shit when I’m mainly in the control room during my shifts.”

“I’m not sure yet. That’s a logistical issue we’ll need to be flexible on and maybe take it as it comes,” she says with a rush of breath. “Decker has invited me to meet him at the club this weekend so that could give us an opportunity.”

“If Justin is in, he’ll be locked in his office, which means I’ll be in charge of security anyway.”

“OK...” she says, as if waiting for me to elaborate further.

“It gives me a little more leeway in terms of delegating the control room watch to others and monitoring the club floor.”

“Anyone else would think you’re planning another supply closet kidnapping?” she says with a smile.

I chuckle. “Not sure it would work a second time since I’ve lost the element of surprise now.” She laughs and I close my eyes, committing the sound to memory. “What I *mean* is that it’s likely we might run into each other on Saturday.”

“Hmm.” And as hard as I try, I can’t work out what her ‘hmm’ might mean. Before I can try, she moves on. “Does Justin spend a lot of time in his office?”

“Never used to, well not since I’ve been there. Something changed a week or so ago.”

“Would that be about the same time Jason turned up at the club?” she asks, and just like that, another connection is made.

“Come to think about it, yeah...”

“Interesting,” she says, tapping her fingers against the keyboard in the background.

“That reminds me, I looked up the footage from the night Jason turned up and there’s no recording of it. It’s just *gone*.”

“Really?” she says. “Why would they be so obvious? Decker would know that destroying evidence is the first sign of guilty. It almost seems a little sloppy. Overwriting or deleting video footage is always a dead giveaway.”

“Who knows,” I reply. “But just to be safe, I checked the tapes for an hour either side of when it supposedly happened and there was no disturbance, no scene. It was all smooth sailing from what I could see.”

“Dammit. I really hope that’s not why I can’t get hold of Jason either.”

I groan, hating how this case keeps going from bad to worse. “He’s missing now too?”

“It’s too soon to be jumping to conclusions but I sent a patrol car to go find him where he said he was staying and they haven’t seen him.”

“Since when?” A sense of dread settles inside me.

“Saturday.”

I perch my ass on the arm of the couch. “Fuck.”

“We can’t make assumptions,” she reminds me.

“C’mon, Marls. If it walks like a duck and looks like a duck...”

“Then it’s probably quacking too, yeah I know,” she replies, sounding as frustrated as I feel. “For all you know, he’s driven back to wherever the hell he’s from, Wyoming?”

“If it was your sister missing and you were so gung-ho about tracking her down that you publicly call out the most powerful man in the city *and* travel hundreds of miles to find her, would you just go back home?”

“Not so much,” I admit.

“Exactly. Now we most likely have *two* missing people, both connected to Marquis and/or Decker, and the man is acting like nothing has happened, inviting me to the club for a drink and an anticipated proposition, dressed up as a ‘business meeting.’ He’s either cold as ice or innocent.”

“If he’s innocent, then so am I,” I deadpan, and the call goes dead silent between us. “At least only one of us is a psychopath.” Thankfully, she leaves that topic alone and I breathe a silent sigh of relief. “We need to step things up. But we need to do it right.”

“Not we, Marls. *Me*. I’m the only one with access and opportunity at the club. While I’m getting close professionally, the only thing *you* need to do is keep him distracted.” There’s no way I’m letting her put herself at risk any more than she already has. Not now, not ever. Not if I have anything to do with it, anyway.

“Aiden, I’m not a rookie anymore. You *do* know that, right? I’ve even got my own badge and gun and *everything*,” she snaps back condescendingly, giving me a glimpse of that backbone I admire so much.

“I know. But I’ve always hated you putting yourself in harm’s way. Especially anywhere near *that* piece of shit.”

“Oh, is this you pulling the overprotective big brother card?” she sasses back.

“Fuck no. Your brother would kill me if anything happened to you. But all the reasons why I want you safe have nothing to do with me thinking you can’t look after yourself, and everything to do with reasons you aren’t ready to hear. Maybe *some* day, when we talk, I’ll tell you.”

“Good,” she say and I can hear the smile in her voice. “I was jerking you around but now I feel like I... yeah... some day.”

“You’re just lucky I’m behaving.”

“Since when do *you* behave? Because I remember many a time when I had to cover for you and Marcus with Mom and Dad.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Detective Manning. Or is it Special Agent now?”

She chuckles. “This is just a task force. So I’m still just detective. For now, anyway.”

“I bet,” I say, feeling lighter all of a sudden and knowing it’s all because of her.

“So this Saturday, you up for the job of making sure Decker and maybe Justin are kept distracted by the delectable Quinn while I search the office for anything we can use?”

“I think so. I know he wants to talk about an event of some kind but that’s all he’d tell me. Originally, he wanted me to facilitate VIP and member events for Marquis. Then at the dinner I had with him, he said he wanted me to be more of a liaison with the VIPs. But whatever it takes, Aiden, we need evidence to push this case forward. Even if we find something to link Decker or Justin to Harry, that would be something. Right?”

“Whatever it takes is a pretty fucking big scope there, Marls,” I near on growl.

“You know what I mean.” I can almost hear her rolling her eyes. “But the sooner we fix The Fixer, the better off we’ll all be.”

“You’re fixing to fix The Fixer?” I can barely finish the sentence without a snort escaping my lips.

“Yep.” Marlee doesn’t hide her giggle. “OK, I’ve got to head into the office soon, but let’s talk about the cameras. What can you do with them?” she asks.

“They can always be diverted. Malfunctions do happen.” I stand and move back to the kitchen to refill my coffee cup. “When you think about it, if Decker and Justin can erase Jason ever being at the club, then I can do the same.”

“As long as I keep Decker and Justin busy and none of us raise suspicion, that’ll give you enough time to search the office?”

I ignore the growl that’s rumbling deep inside me at the memory of how Marlee kept Decker busy when she was last at

the club. “As long as you don’t keep Decker *busy* like you did last time, then sure,” I say sharply, sounding like a jealous judgemental asshole but when it comes to this woman, I cannot help it.

“Message received, Aiden. Thanks for reminding me that there *is* still an asshole hidden under that old Aiden Lawrence charm.” There’s no missing the snark in her tone. *Oh look, I just keep fucking this up with her.* “I’ve got to go. Keep this phone with you. Be careful. Don’t take any unnecessary risks on Saturday and I’ll be in touch Sunday morning after your shift.”

“Marlee, I didn’t mean—”

She cuts me off, all business now. “If you need me, send me an SOS that only I will know.”

I arch a brow even though she can’t see me. “Only you’ll know?”

“That’s what I said, Aiden.” Damn. Still cold and annoyed with me.

“OK.”

“Decide on a phrase and send it through after this call so I know what it is.”

“Sure thing. Marls?”

“Yeah...?” she says, the phone being jostled in my ear.

“I didn’t mean it. I know you’re only doing what you have to with Decker and I’m being a jealous dickhead who still thinks you’re mine and mine alone. Or maybe that’s more

wishful thinking anyway. And for what it's worth, I know you didn't mean for things to play out the way they did with Barrett the other night. Despite everything that's happened, you've never once done anything against me. I just need to know that you'll be straight with me from here on in. I need to have someone I can trust because going in blind is not something I'm prepared to do again."

"Our past doesn't factor in this, Aiden. Whatever has happened or will happen, we've got your back," she replies quickly.

"I don't care about anyone else. I care about *you*." I take a deep breath. "Do *you* have my back, Marls?"

She hesitates for a moment before giving me the only word I need to hear. "Always."

"Saturday then."

"Yeah. Be careful, please. I don't want to have to save your ass again."

"Again?" I scoff. "The only danger I've been in lately was when *you* orchestrated a fake kidnapping."

"You know what I mean. Bye." Then she ends the call and I'm left standing there in my rented, non-descript kitchen. Staring out the window and up toward the bright sky, thinking that fate has a funny way of leading you to places and situations you are meant to be in.

Even if it does mean I have no fucking idea what the hell I've been caught up in, and who's pulling the strings. But I'm

determined to find out. Especially if it means I get 'some day'
with Marlee.

Chapter 16

AIDEN

“Boss in the building,” Hawk announces over comms, and all of the heads in the control room lift to watch the bank of monitors covering one wall of the control room. “Hallway, north side,” he confirms and looking up, I spot Decker on the camera feed.

“The boss turning up is probably going to be the highlight of our night,” Chris jokes, his crinkled eyes and grin sweeping over the room. “The dance floor may be pumping, but *nothing* has happened. It’s like everyone’s on their best behavior or something. Is it *too* much to ask for a fist fight, or some drug dealing or *something*, jeez.”

Ben chuckles. “It has been unusually q—”

“Don’t say it, man,” I remind him. The man at least has the decency to look apologetic.

A flash of red on the VIP lounge stairs catches my attention, and like the last time she made an entrance at the club, I can’t tear my eyes away from Marlee as she saunters across the floor, making a beeline toward the bar.

“Damn. Decker sure does know how to choose them,” Chris notes, also enjoying the view.

“Excuse me?” My voice is a little too sharp and the surprised quirk of Chris’s brow as he turns my way lets me know that.

“The woman in red in VIP. She’s Decker’s new lady, right? She’s never here unless he is, and they’re always together in a booth, so I figured he must be doing her. Or at least *trying* to get in there, anyway.”

I’m saved by two loud knocks on the control room door. Moments later, both Justin and Decker walk in, the boss greeting us all with a warm smile before he shifts his attention to the monitors. If I didn’t know what the wolf beneath his sheep’s clothing was capable of, he’d likely command my respect. Unfortunately, I know his hands are so dirty that it’s a miracle he can sleep at night.

Then again, they say that psychopaths sleep restfully. All of the ones I’ve met have the ability to assimilate and act neurotypical, just going on with their lives until they trip up... or get caught.

Decker’s been able to fly under the radar without being hit with anything that could stick, but his luck is about to end—if I have anything to say about it, anyway. I’m even more motivated than ever knowing that I may or may not have been brought to Vegas on a bonus case at Decker’s request. My other reason is to get Marlee the fuck away from the air he breathes.

“Evening, gentleman. Anything happening tonight?” he asks, his voice sure and confident.

“Not really,” I reply, trying to keep my tone neutral. “It’s been pretty steady so far.”

Decker nods, his gaze lingering on the monitor where Marlee stands at the bar. “Hmm. And look there, it seems I’ve arrived just in time. My honored guest is already here.”

“She just arrived, boss. Couldn’t miss her on the cameras,” Chris replies, somewhat unwisely if Decker’s cutting glare is anything to go by.

“Getting distracted by the camera feeds, Chris? Because that’s something that can be easily rectified,” Justin says, shooting him a questioning look.

“Um... ah....” As the man stammers, Justin and I lock eyes and I have to bite back a laugh when he winks at me.

To save his workmate’s ass, Ben speaks up. “No distractions sir. It’s been smooth sailing.”

That gets an approving nod from Decker. “Good to hear.”

Justin clears his throat, drawing our attention to him. “Yeah. Keep up the good work. I’m not sure we’ve run this smoothly since we opened. It’s something you should all be proud of.”

Decker chuckles and looks back to his right-hand man. “You *do* realize you’ve just said it’s better now that you’re not working the floor, right?”

“Shit,” he says, scrubbing his mouth with his hands as an awkward laugh escapes him.

Decker locks eyes with me and doesn't look away. "Or, are you saying that it's *still* working like a well-oiled machine because you found a worthy replacement in Lawrence?"

"Yeah. Yeah...that's it," Justin stammers.

"Must be," Decker muses but the intensity of his stare doesn't match his words and a chill goes down my spine, like someone's just walked over my grave.

As much as I hate to do it, I'm the first to look away, breaking the deadlock when I turn toward Justin. "You good, J?"

He jerks. "Yeah, man. All good. Will be even better when the night's over and there's nothing to do but sit back and chill." His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, but I can't quite get a read on him tonight.

"Right," Decker says, clapping his hands. "Sorry guys, I have a beautiful woman waiting for me and she's a hell of a lot better to look at than all of you."

I play my role, chuckling and shaking my head as Ben grins and Chris snickers. "Don't let us keep you, Decker. We'll hold the fort in the meantime," I add. "That *is* what you pay us for, right?"

"Indeed." Decker looks straight at me, his eyes roaming over my face as if searching for something. Then, as if I'm imagining things, he plasters his fake charming smile on his face and walks toward the door again. "Keep up the good work, Aiden. It's not unnoticed. Which is why you're getting next weekend off."

I tilt my head and shoot him a confused frown. “I am?”

“Well, off from the club.” He chuckles. “I’m holding a private, very *exclusive* event off-site next Saturday and I’d like you to run lead on security. Everything is taken care of—all you need to do is turn up and hit the ground running. I need a man I trust to watch when I can’t and have my back. Is that you, Aiden?” His eyes are pinned on mine, but I don’t break. I’m not going to give him any sign that I’m on to him, or that he’s got me where he wants me, especially if this is a setup of some kind. If Decker wants me at this ‘event’ then I’ll be there, whatever the risks, whatever happens. My job is to play the part, do the work, and wait until we get the break we need to bring the asshole down.

“Sounds good. Do you need me to take a look at the venue, maybe assess the security needs ahead of time?”

Justin chuckles, elbowing Decker’s arm. “Listen to this one, sounding like a professional. He’s putting me to shame.” He shoots Decker a glance. “Don’t worry, A. I’ll make sure everything is how it should be.”

“OK, then,” I say, leaning back in my chair giving them both a grin. “Sounds good.”

“Good. Then you’re set.” He looks at Justin. “See you downstairs when you’re ready, J.” Decker claps my shoulder before disappearing out the door.

Justin’s expression turns serious once Decker’s out of earshot. “A, eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary for a while, yeah?”

“OK...” I say slowly.

“We’ve got some important deals going down. Plans falling into place that have been in the works for a while, know what I mean?” I nod. “So eyes open, all the time. Got me?”

“Like I usually do then? Is this why you’ve been holed up in your office most of the time?” I figure any information is good information at this point. Anything could be *something* to the case.

Justin nods, his eyes meeting mine. “Yeah, man. Something big is coming. We just need everyone to be on their A-game.”

“Something big?”

“Just keep a lookout for anything out of the ordinary and report back to me,” he says quickly and a little more sternly than I’d expect.

My mind races with possibilities as I wonder what’s got Justin acting so squirrely. Most importantly though, I move to reassure him. “Got it. You know you can count on me.”

“Sure do. There’s no one else I trust more right now.”

My head jerks back. “Apart from Decker?”

Realizing his misstep, he quickly covers it with a laugh. “Of course. You and Deck,” he replies. “OK, better go. See you guys later.” Then just like the boss, he’s gone.

As soon as the door closes behind him, my eyes go to the screen. I find Marlee sitting on a stool at the bar, her long bare

legs crossed, her dress hugging every inch of her curves and commanding attention. She nurses a cocktail in her hand and not only is every man in the control room watching her, I swear every male VIP is eyeing her too.

“Decker sure is a lucky bastard,” Ben mutters, before looking over his shoulder at us. “I’m not wrong.”

“No, but maybe don’t say it in front of the boss next time. Would you want your wife or girlfriend to be talked about?”

Ben smirks. “If she looked like *that*, I’d be proud that everyone else wants her.”

Chris shrugs with a cheeky grin on his face before they both get back to work.

“And look, there’s the man of the moment going to save his woman from all those prying eyes,” Ben announces. Sure enough, Decker strides into the VIP lounge from the back hallway, making a beeline for Marlee. His presence doesn’t go unnoticed, all heads turning his way as he crosses the room.

She uncrosses her legs and stands up to greet him, her face brightening before he leans in and pulls her into his arms. Her mouth moves to his ear and judging by the way Decker’s face lights up, I *really* don’t want to think about what she said to him.

I’ve been the man in Decker’s position. I know how it feels to have all of the woman’s focus on you. It makes you feel like you’re the only man in the room, a rock star, the luckiest son-of-a-bitch on the planet just because it’s *you* she wants. That’s the wonder and the lure of Marlee Manning. But

there's so much more to her than her looks—layers and layers of more.

Once upon a time, I was the man who had the honor of peeling back those layers one by one, watching her transform from an awkward shy kid to a daring teen, to the irresistible woman who has grown into her looks, confidence, and inner power. One who can slowly but surely weave her web around a very dangerous man and do it with ease.

Decker James may think he has all the power and is the man pulling the strings, but I'm not sure he realizes who he's dealing with when it comes to Marlee. That's why she's so good at what she does.

My mind is stuck on our conversation from a few days ago. *Some day...*

It's wrong to hope that she could eventually forgive me and give me another chance but I can't stop myself. She deserves so much more than I've ever given her and after not being in her life at all for the past year, I know that I'd fight for any scrap she's willing to throw my way.

Five minutes after Decker leads Marlee to what I now know of as *his* booth, Justin appears on the feed to join them. Checking that Chris and Ben are busy working, I switch channels on my earpiece comms and bring up the camera feed for Decker's booth on my computer. At the same time, I activate the microphone that's closest to them so that I can hear what's being said and keep track of where they are. Unfortunately, whatever I hear would never stand up in court, but it will be helpful nonetheless.

“You never know when something you hear might come in handy,” Harry once told me while working a high-stakes divorce case. That recording netted us details about a mistress and a whole other family that the ex-wife had no idea about. This time, hearing what they say will help the case and help reassure me that Marlee is OK.

I give Chris and Ben another cursory glance before bringing up footage I looped earlier on my computer to use as a dummy live feed. First chance I get, I switch the videos, holding my breath until it’s done and the change goes undetected, showing the same empty hallway over and over again.

Needing to move, I push off my desk and stand, grabbing my cell off the desk. I slap my pocket to check that Marlee’s burner is still there but come up empty, biting back a groan when I realize it’s in my locker downstairs and I have no time to go get it. Thankfully, I don’t think we’ll need it tonight and the audio in my ear will alert me to get out regardless. *Or so I hope...*

“Heading out?” Chris asks, looking over his shoulder at me.

“Yeah. Just going to make sure everything’s still OK. You know, since Ben has a love of the Q word tonight.” Ben chuckles and shakes his head.

Chris nods. “Sure thing, A. You’re due a break anyway, aren’t you?”

“Probably. But needing one and *taking* one are two different things.”

“Just go do what J does and sit at the bar and people watch,” Ben adds, wagging his brows.

“Don’t you mean check out the talent?” Chris muses.

I offer up a shrug. “Maybe I *should* go see what he finds so fascinating about it then if it’s the *done* thing.”

Chris shakes his head. “Whatever excuse you need to sleep at night, Lawrence. You do you.”

Little does he know, that’s exactly what I’m about to do. I just need to do it undetected and hope I find a smoking gun in Justin’s office.

Chapter 17

AIDEN

Moving down the hallway I listen to Justin talking shit in my ear as he seemingly tries to impress Decker, Marlee, or maybe both. With the feed covered off and the three of them still in the VIP lounge, I know I'm good to proceed.

That's not to say my heart isn't still pounding as I reach Justin's office door. Any slip up now could cost me everything and ruin any chance we have of stopping Decker. But I'm not going to stuff up because there's no way I'm ever going to put Marlee in the line of fire—real or otherwise—again. I've faced far worse adversaries than Decker James in my time to falter now. People are depending on me, *Marlee* needs me to get this done.

Just as I'm about to ease the office door open to slip inside, my phone vibrates in my pocket. Pulling it out, I'm surprised to see Harry's name on the screen. I quickly reject the call and put it away again, not wanting the distraction. I'm not supposed to talk to him anyway, but losing my cool in the middle of the delicate operation would *not* be a wise decision. Right now I need to focus.

Without being able to see the camera feed, I rely on the audio, pausing for a second just as Marlee's sultry voice fills my ear. "You going to tell me why you wanted to meet me tonight, Decker? You mentioned an event?"

He chuckles. "Can't a man just enjoy the pleasure of a beautiful women's company?"

"Of course. But you're a busy man, and the last time you brought me here, you left me by myself to tend to *business*. So forgive me if I want to get *that* part of the evening out of the way first, just in case you get called away again." Her tone is sassy and almost seductive, the perfect kryptonite. Hell, if I was sitting next to her, there's no way I'd be thinking about anything other than getting that woman into my bed.

"Hmm," Justin replies. "She's got you there, Deck."

"I could make it up to you if you'd let me. I've been trying for a week now and you keep brushing me off." There he goes riling me up again without knowing he's doing it. Just the thought of him making *anything* up to Marlee has my fists clenching tight.

"I'm a busy woman. You know how it is," she replies smoothly. "And we *agreed* that we would keep this professional."

"You agreed, Quinn. I never did. Definitely not when it comes to you." And I can almost see him wink at her. "I definitely don't kiss my other business associates like *that*." I clench my fists at the memory.

“Maybe I had a few too many drinks,” she shoots back with a laugh. I can’t just imagine Decker’s ego taking a hit from her brush off.

“Good to know. Maybe I’ll just keep the drinks flowing so you can get *professional* like that again,” Decker replies, Justin soon joining him. Whereas I’m thinking about storming down there to drag Marlee out of the club like a caveman instead of focusing on the office I’m about to break in to. *Head in the game, Lawrence. She can handle herself just fine.*

I take a deep breath and checkup and down the hallway before pushing the door open and slipping inside.

Surveying the room, I move straight to the desk, quickly trying the first set of desk drawers with no luck. Moving to the other set, I find the top two locked but hit pay dirt with the last one. Pulling it open, I catch sight of a generic-looking burner phone underneath a pile of paper.

“Time to focus, gentlemen. You talked about an event, Decker. Did you want me to organize it? The last time we talked, you said you wanted me to focus on the VIPs and influential clients,” Marlee says in my ear.

“I did. It’s being held next weekend, in fact,” Decker replies calmly.

“OK...I can do it. I’m sure I can. It’s just short notice, that’s all. What’s the occasion?” she asks as I carefully pick up the burner phone and try to turn it on. I’m surprised when it not only powers up but I discover that there’s no password protecting it.

“I have no doubt, Quinn. But that’s not necessary.”

Scrolling through the call log, I see nothing but four numbers. I take a photo of the screen so the numbers can be traced later but one of them I recognize and it’s the confirmation I didn’t want to get. The final nail in Harry’s coffin. I have to block that out of my head now though because until I’m out of this office and back in the control room, I’m a sitting duck and mine *and* Marlee’s covers are both at risk the longer I stay here.

“What do you mean?” Marlee asks.

Decker chuckles. “Can’t a man plan an impromptu celebration?”

“Decker James can do whatever the hell he wants,” Justin lets his hero-worship flag fly and I roll my eyes.

Marlee snorts in my ear. “I guess a man with Vegas in the palm of his hands *can* do that.”

“I like the way you’re thinking, *Quinn.*”

“You still haven’t told me why I’m here and why Justin is here if you’re not going to talk business,” she asks.

“Maybe I just wanted to see you again,” Decker replies, his voice deeper and smoother, an air of certainty lacing his words. *What the hell are they playing at?*

No longer needing the phone, I put it back in the exact position it was in and slowly close the drawer again. I scan the desk, searching for anything incriminating. Of course, Justin’s smarter than I have given him credit for and there’s nothing

but invoices and reports spread out all over the place, none of them arousing suspicion with my cursory glance.

Just as I'm about to give up I spot a folder partially hidden under some paperwork.

Curiosity piqued, I open it up. My eyes widen when I realize I'm looking at phone records for Mary Whittaker along with her DMV photo, details of her life back in Wyoming, and her CV. All of it easily to explain away given she used to work at Marquis. That's until I see another folder with the same information for her brother Jason as well as bank statements and surveillance images. That's *not* something the club would need. The problem is that none of it makes sense.

I quickly snap photos of everything I've found. Just as I go to slide my phone back into my pocket, it vibrates again, this time with a text.

Harry: Call me Aiden. It's urgent. We have to talk.

“So this event, are we talking a networking event? Promoting the club? What?” Marlee continues.

“It's a celebration for me and a welcome to Vegas party for you,” Decker answers.

Marlee gasps. “For me? Why?”

“I have a property in The Ridges that I've just closed on and it will be the perfect venue for what I have planned. And what better occasion to introduce you to the who's who of

Vegas? You'll have clients coming out your ears and you'll soon be the most sought-after event planner in the city."

I whistle through my teeth. The Ridges has houses that go for fifteen million and then some. It's also exclusive and far enough out to be private if needed.

"Really?" Marlee asks excitedly, playing her role perfectly.

"Yeah, babe. All I need you to do is turn up and look gorgeous. You can do that in your sleep, I bet." I've got to hand it to the bastard, he's smooth. "Justin, show her the real estate photos." I hold my breath and wait for Marlee to sound suitably impressed as I stand in the middle of Justin's office, looking for anything else that catches my eye.

"Damn. You don't muck around, do you? That house is beautiful" she replies right on cue, earning a chuckle from both men.

"Decker has an image to maintain," Justin adds.

"Well, that house will definitely do that. I've never seen something that big."

Decker sighs with satisfaction. "I like privacy and nice things to look at while I'm at home. Why do you think I want *you* there?" His voice is low and husky and I know the man well enough by now to know he's trying to charm her.

Marlee giggles right on cue before pausing. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound ungrateful, because I'm not. I'm honored you'd give me this opportunity. I just..."

"You want to know why? I get that. I figure, what's the point of having influence if not to use it wisely? This will be

an important night, Quinn. Memorable, even. One that no one will forget.” A chill washes over me at his words. He’s being cryptic as fuck and I don’t like it one bit. *What is he planning?*

“Are you sure you don’t want me to do anything? Caterers? Security?” she says, sounding like she’s working through a list in her head just like any other event planner would do.

Just as I turn to leave, my eyes fall onto a large folder sitting askew on a bookcase. Something carries me across the room to check it out.

“No need, Quinn. Look at you, all work and no play.” Decker muses. “I’ve asked Aiden Lawrence to be in charge for the night, do you remember him?”

“Hmm. Was he the man with Justin at our first meeting?” She’s playing this perfectly. *Quinn* has no connection to me, and that’s how it has to stay.

“Yep. That’s him. Good guy. Reliable. Predicable.” I pause with my hand resting on the folder. *Decker thinks I’m predictable?* Something isn’t sitting right about this whole ‘event.’

Thankfully, Marlee doesn’t falter. “Oh, OK. That’s good then.”

“And of course, you’ll be my guest for the evening. I’ve always had a thing for brunettes,” Decker says, his tone dripping with innuendo. I freeze in place, wondering if I heard him wrong.

I clench my fists tightly, my blood boiling. I have to remain calm and focused. I hold my breath as I wait to see whether she takes Decker's bait because it is a strange and out-of-context comment to make, almost one made to trip someone up...

"And yet you're here with me? Should I feel honored or offended that you're suggesting I change my look?"

"Not at all," he muses. "What do you think, J? Wouldn't Quinn look breathtaking as a brunette?" In my head, he's reaching out and touching one of her soft flowing waves of dusty blonde locks and in my head, I'm ripping his hand away and punching him in the mouth.

"Um, yeah... sure," Justin replies, sounding confused. "I bet Quinn would look good in anything though."

"Thank you, Justin. That's very sweet of you," she replies coolly, her voice thankfully betraying nothing. "I used to be brunette but decided that anything's possible in Vegas and that means I can try being blonde."

"Mmm hmm," Decker's hum sounds pleased at the reaction he was undoubtedly going for. But alarm bells are ringing like foghorns in my head.

"Now, since we're not really here to talk business, I think I might leave you and get on with my evening," Marlee announces, giving me my cue to hurry up and get out.

The three make small talk in my ear as Marlee says her goodbyes and I open the folder, my mouth dropping open at the first page I see—a list of names, locations, and payment

details, none of which seem to have anything to do with Marquis. The payments are all innocuous, most of them going to and coming from overseas accounts, but the people involved are names that would be recognizable to anyone in law enforcement.

My heart races as I contemplate the information in my hands. Moving to the second page, I freeze when I see Harry's name listed, followed by Barrett's mother-in-law. *That makes no sense.*

Also in the folder are lists of property locations, dates, times, and contacts that no one with legal business dealings should have.

"Have a good evening, gentleman," Marlee says in my ear. *Time to leave.*

Cursing myself for running out of time, I scan the first list again, committing it to memory before closing the folder and sliding it back in place before I carefully make my way out of the office.

I'm halfway down the corridor when Chris steps out of the control room.

"Hey," he says with a frown. "I couldn't see you on the monitors and I'm due my break. Everything OK?"

"Yeah, man. It's all good. Go take a load off and I'll take over till you get back."

"Thanks, A," he says, looking me over a moment longer before giving a chin lift and turning away.

It's not until I'm back at my desk that I realize I haven't turned the audio off from the VIP booth, and what I hear has my blood running cold.

"Everything set for Saturday?" Decker asks Justin, his voice low.

"Yeah. Just how you wanted it," the man replies.

"Good."

"You sure you want to do this? There are other ways to get it done," Justin continues, almost sounding reluctant to comply.

"This is my game and this is how I want to play it. You more than anyone know how I operate and how I always get things done. What makes you think that I'd change my plans now just when I'm close to everything I've been working toward." Decker's voice is as menacing as I've ever heard it and it's foreboding enough to have a chill going down *my* spine. *This is his game? And what has he been working toward?*

"I wasn't... I mean, I'm not—" Justin stutters.

Decker growls. "How about you don't question me, and I'll forget where you came from and how easy it would be to send you back there? Huh, Justin?"

"Ye-yeah. I hear you, Deck. Loud and clear." I don't think I've ever heard Justin sound scared until now.

"Good. Now why don't you go back upstairs and get back to work. There's a lot to be done before Saturday, isn't there? And have someone follow her home. I want to know she gets

there safe and doesn't leave." *Shit. I need to warn her.* I want to kick myself for leaving my burner phone downstairs. Deciding it's worth the risk, I pull out my cell and send her a quick text message telling her to go home and stay there and that I'll explain later.

After Justin leaves, the audio goes quiet and I watch on the cameras as Decker sits by himself and watches down over the ground floor, as if surveying his kingdom.

I turn the audio off and wait until Ben leaves to take a leak before switching the cameras back to live footage. But I can't shake the same sinking feeling that's plagued me all night.

Whatever Decker has planned for Saturday, I'll be there. Whatever he has planned for Marlee, I'll stop it.

Until then, I just need to get to the end of my shift and then I can organize a meet up with Marlee and Barrett for a debrief so we can formulate a plan and work out what the information from Justin's office means.

Because I'm more sure than ever that something big is going down. And right now, I might just be the only one who can stop it.

Chapter 18

AIDEN

The rest of my shift is a non-event. Justin doesn't come to see us again and I don't leave the control room. Instead, I send Chris and Ben to patrol the floor while I focus on making sure I've covered my tracks and that there's no camera footage of me going into the office or coming back out again. *Perks of being in charge.*

After clocking off, I go downstairs, get changed, grab my bag from my locker and make my way to the lobby where I find Justin and Hawk chatting.

Justin turns my way with a smile when he sees me. "Got any plans for your day off?"

"Nah. Will probably sleep for most of it."

He nods and it's Hawk that replies. "I hear you, man. God knows I could sleep for a week right now."

Justin watches me closely, almost *too* closely and part of me braces for the inevitable. "See you Monday?"

"Yep. Come in early. We can talk through the details for the security job for Decker."

“Sure thing,” I reply, giving them both a chin lift before letting myself out the club’s front door.

As soon as I’m outside, I let go of a huge breath, relief coursing through me. It doesn’t mean I’m in the clear, but not being in the club is a good step for me right now. Liking the fresh air, I decide to walk home, hoping it’ll give me time to try and connect all the flailing strings of information in my head.

Unanswered questions like why would Harry be receiving money from Decker?

Why was Barrett’s mother-in-law on the list?

Is Barrett compromised? Or worse, Alyssa?

Would that mean Decker has an insider at the bureau?

Is Marlee’s cover blown? She could be a sitting duck and no one would know.

My stomach rumbles as I run through multiple scenarios and possibilities in my head. Looking around to see what’s open, I spot the all-night diner at the end of my block and walk toward it.

After ordering some food and what seems like a gallon on coffee, I take a seat and eat while trying to process everything that is happening, has happened, and trying to predict what *could* happen.

What if the threat is more urgent than I think and whatever Decker is planning for next weekend is a diversion? Should call Marlee with the burner phone and warn her? Will she see

that as me being thorough and cautious, or just see it as me being overprotective again?

Because if I'm wrong and overreacting, she'll hate it and accuse me of not thinking she can do her job. Which she can, she's damn good at what she does. In some ways, she's better than I ever was.

After paying the bill, I make my way back to my apartment, still thinking about what I should do. Everything is telling me we're not safe and that we need a plan. First thing I'm going to do is call Marlee and hear for myself that she's OK.

Just as I step out of the elevator on my floor, my phone buzzes in my pocket. When I pull it out, I see the call is coming from a blocked number.

"Hello?"

"Aiden, it's me," Marlee whispers.

My heart skips a beat at the sound of her voice. "Marlee. Are you OK?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you're whispering?" I say in a 'duh' like tone.

"Oh, sorry. I'm in bed and it's late and it's dark so I whispered," she replies a little louder this time, making me smile as a huge sigh escapes me.

A huge sigh of relief escapes me. "I think Decker's planning something for Saturday," I say at the same time she says, "Something's going to happen on Saturday."

I chuckle and she snickers. “You first,” I reply.

“I’ve called in to Barrett and we’re getting the task force together this afternoon. That’s why I’m calling. We want you there.”

“That’s a good idea, but there’s more. I left the audio on after you left the table. Decker and Justin talked about making sure you got home.”

“That’s not entirely unexpected. That’s why I’m staying at the Quinn apartment. I’m *her* until we close the case.”

“I think there’s more to it, Marls.”

“Like what? Did you find something?” she asks as I get to my front door, fish the keys out of my pocket and let myself in.

“Nothing concrete. Just lists of contacts and payments and folders on Mary and her brother Jason.”

“Why would they have info on Jason? Why would they *leave* it just lying around? None of this makes sense,” she says, thinking out loud.

“I thought the same thing. There were surveillance images too.”

“Did you have time to get copies?” she asks. I can hear the tempered excitement in her voice.

“No. Didn’t want to risk it. But since I’ve just got home, I’m going to shower and try and download everything from my head onto paper. Then get some sleep because I’m beat. I just wanted to make sure you were OK.”

Marlee is silent for a moment, processing the information.
“Aiden...”

“Don’t *Aiden* me. If it comes down to keeping you safe and protecting my cover, you’ll win every time.” The line falls silent and I know I’ve said too much, but I’m at the point where I simply don’t give a fuck. Marlee matters to me, she always has. There will always be other cases, but there’ll only ever be one of her. And life is too short to waste second chances.

A soft chuckle on the other end of the line cuts through the quiet. “You’re such a worrywart, Aiden. I appreciate it, but I’m fine. You don’t have to look out for me anymore. I’m a big girl. I can handle myself, I promise.”

“I know you can. You’ve never wanted my help. Doesn’t mean I’m going to stop worrying about you. You mean too much to me. Don’t you know that?”

She sighs. “I just don’t want us to take any chances. We’re getting close to something, I can feel it.”

I drop my keys on the kitchen counter and shrug off my backpack before putting it down on the ground. “Me too. I think whatever this event is on Saturday is key to the case.”

“Bring everything you remember to the taskforce meeting and we’ll brainstorm what our next step is.”

“Sounds good,” I say, walking over to the refrigerator and opening it up, surveying the shelves mindlessly. “Can I ask why you’re calling my phone instead of the one you gave me?”

“You weren’t answering the burner. I figured you didn’t have it on you when you texted me earlier.”

I walk back toward the counter staring at my backpack. “Yeah, I stupidly left it in my locker. It’s in my bag.”

“Here’s an idea, how about keeping it on you from now on. Your phone is not secure,” she reminds me. “Harry’s status in this case is still unknown, remember?”

“Yes, boss.”

She chuckles, making me smile. “Oh, you’d like that far too much.”

“I think *you* would be the one enjoying it. You used to boss me and Marcus around all the time, remember?”

“Mmm, hmm. Good times.”

I smile at the memory. “The best.”

When she talks again, her voice is soft as silk and almost a whisper. “Get some sleep, Aiden. See you this afternoon.”

“Sweet dreams, Beautiful.” It slips out but I don’t consider taking it back because it doesn’t hurt as anymore. Not when I know now more than ever that I’ll do whatever it takes to get Marlee Manning back in my life again.

“Aiden...” she breathes, and it almost sounds pained.

“Night, Marls.” I end the call before she can tell me things I don’t want to hear, putting my phone down next to my keys and bracing my hands on the counter.

I stay like that for while, just staring at nothing, memorizing the sound of her voice in my ear, imagining the

soft sweet smile curving her lips and remembering a time when we were happy and I hadn't screwed up her life. When we could talk and touch and kiss without wondering if we should or shouldn't do it. A happier time. A better time. Something I can only hope I'll get to have again.

It's not like I've ever expected Marlee to forgive me and welcome me back with open arms. But maybe once this case is over, we can talk it out and put everything on the table—so to *speak*. She can yell, I can apologize. She can remind me of all my wrongdoings over the past twenty years, I can plead ignorance, arrogance, and idiocy for all of it. Oh, and a whole lot of male stupidity to boot.

Then I can tell her that the dumbest thing I ever did was hurt her and promise a lifetime of making it up to her if she'll let me.

“Shower,” I announce to my empty apartment before turning around and heading toward the bathroom.

* * *

I don't know what wakes me up but when I do, I know something's not right.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I check the time, seeing that I've only been asleep for half an hour. Grabbing a t-shirt and sweats up off the floor, I put them on and walk into the living room, my eyes scanning the area as I go.

Just as I'm about to give up and start thinking I'm hearing things, there's a knock at the door. A quick check of my watch shows that it's only five a.m.

Marlee... I stride to the entry and swing it open. "Marls, what's—"

But the person at the door isn't Marlee. Instead, it's the last person I'd ever expect to be standing in front of me, and he looks a wrecked version of himself.

"Get inside," Harry says, pushing me back and rushing in after me before slamming the door behind him. He pushes past me and moves to the front windows, looking outside before roughly jerking the curtains closed.

"What's going on, Harry? Why are you here?" I ask, kicking myself for not grabbing my gun from the safe.

He swings around to face me. "I can't believe I dragged you into this shit," he says, pacing back and forth. His eyes flit about, desperately searching the house. He's shaking and sweating, his skin pale white, and his breathing is fast and shallow.

"What shit, Harry?"

"It's a cluster fuck. I knew I shouldn't do it, shouldn't listen to him, but he gave me no choice," he says, his voice shaking, then he freezes, turning to look straight at me. "You've got to believe me, Aiden."

I can see the desperation written all over his face, the fear, the complete and utter hopelessness he's feeling. "Tell me why you're here."

Harry runs shaky fingers through his hair, taking a deep breath before he speaks. “A few years ago, I was struggling to keep a roof over my head, let alone the business. I was behind in my mortgage and rent and all those shitty little jobs we get weren’t enough to stay afloat. A case fell in my lap, one that would pay enough to buy me a couple of months. It was a simple job, track down a guy’s father. Find him and then I’d be golden.”

“OK... so what happened?” I’ve decided to keep him talking, remembering my negotiation training from back in the force.

“I tracked him down within a week. Took a quick trip to Wyoming, laid eyes on him myself, then flew back home and handed over the info.” *Wyoming? There’s our link... again.*

“OK. Then what?”

Harry stalks over to my kitchen, frantically opening my cabinets until he finds my half-full bottle of Jack. He grabs two glasses and bangs them down on the counter, ripping the lid off the liquor and filling the glasses with two heavy-handed pours. Lifting one of them, he slams it back, sucking in a breath as the whisky burns down his throat. He nods to the other glass and I walk over to stand opposite him with only the kitchen island between us.

“He took the information, paid his bill, and went on his way. Told me to call him if I ever needed a favor.” I grab the glass and throw it back, placing it back on the counter as I drop my head and swallow down my groan because I can

already tell where this is going. I let him continue, wanting to hear the rest of it.

“A few months later, the money ran out and the bank was threatening to foreclose again, and I was all out of options.”

“You called him,” I say, matter-of-factly.

“I asked if there was anything else I could do for him. He said no but asked to meet.”

“When was this?”

“About a month after you came on board.” My eyes close with a huge sigh as he continues. “So I met him and he offered to bail me out. All he wanted was a favor he could call in at any time.”

“Harry,” I growl.

“I know alright?” His voice cracks this time, and I know now more than ever that I’m looking at a broken man who’s out of luck and fresh out of options.

“This favor was me, right?”

He nods, his regretful gaze meeting mine. “Six weeks ago, he called and told me to get you to Vegas. Said to contact Justin and he’d take care of the rest. But no matter what, you needed to be here and stay here for a while.”

“So you lied to me?”

His guilt-filled gaze meets mine. “I had to. Don’t you get that? He didn’t give me a choice.”

“You told me this was above board. It was legal.” I shake my head. “Why, Harry? Why would you do it?” I ask softly,

my heart sinking. I already know the answer.

“I had no *choice*. Don’t you get that? Decker James is not a man you say no to. He’s a fixer. He fixes things—problems, money, people, all of it.” Harry’s voice is shaking now.

“What’s his end game then? Why me?”

“That I don’t know. But I fucked up and started investigating him, tried to get some leverage, dirt, *something* on him so I could get you back home and away from the man. And what I found, I don’t like at *all*. That’s why I’m here.”

My entire body jerks. “What?”

“Pack your shit. I’ve got a rental downstairs. We can drive to LA, then fly wherever you need to go to be safe. Then I can try and work with the cops or Barrett to bring him down—”

A loud crash interrupts him as the door of my apartment is kicked in. Harry and I both whip around and come face to face with Justin, his gun drawn, his stony expression narrowed as he walks in, kicking the door closed behind him. He turns and points the gun at Harry, his lips curling up into a snarl. The gun with a silencer so if he shoots us, no one will hear. “You couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you, Harry?”

“J,” I say, my voice low and steady despite the adrenaline coursing through my veins as I take a slow step toward him.

“Don’t talk, Aiden. Just shut up.”

I don’t respond, instead keeping my eyes locked on his, assessing the situation while wracking my brain for a way to diffuse it.

“You know, Harry here was quite helpful in getting you to come to Vegas,” Justin continues. “He had one job. Then he got curious and stupid. So now, he’s no longer useful.” His finger twitches on the trigger and my pulse spikes.

“Lucky for me, you’re both here. So I can kill two birds with one stone.” He laughs manically. “Which sucks, because I was starting to like you, A.”

He looks around the apartment. “You know, I couldn’t believe it when I heard you’d quit the force. Then I heard what you’d done and it seemed even *more* unbelievable. Then again, I’ve seen Alyssa Lucas, she’s a hot piece of ass. Pity her husband is a Fed. But wait... he’s the one who stole her from right under your nose, right? Man,” he says with a sigh. “That must’ve stung. No wonder you outed him to Gavin and nearly got him killed. Pity he didn’t finish the job, aye.”

I grit my teeth, blocking out his words and chanting in my head to stay calm and not react like he wants me to. I need to keep him talking and buy us time to figure out a way out of this mess.

“J, we can talk about this. Harry here was just leaving. He’s leaving and going away. He’s not going to be any more trouble.”

“I know he’s not going to be trouble. Not anymore, anyway. But you could be. You just *had* to go looking for shit you shouldn’t be looking for, didn’t you, Aiden? Thought we’d never know you were snooping around in my office even though we set it up for you to do that. And you fell for it too.” I narrow my eyes at him while I try to work out where I went

wrong. “I can see you trying to figure it out. Seriously, Aiden. The office door was *open* and everything you found... it was just there *waiting* for you. We knew you’d do it and just like that, you proved us right.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything,” I say, wearing my best poker face but there’s a ball of dread in my gut that tells me I’ve been played.

Justin groans and throws his head back, shaking it from side to side. “You had us bugged but we have cameras everywhere, A. Ev-er-ry-where.”

He looks far too steady now, too in control and *that* is not a good thing. If he was irrational and wound tight, I’d be able to get a better read on him, plead to his good side and hope to hell he let us go. But I don’t think he’s about to let that happen.

“Lucky for me, and unlucky for you, I’m here to fix this little problem for all of us. Bet you think you’ve got us all figured out now too.” He glares at Harry while his finger flexes on the gun. “You came to warn him, didn’t you? Maybe tell him all about your little *deal*.”

“I didn’t. I swear I didn’t. He just knows that Decker wanted him here. Not why. I don’t even know why,” Harry says pleadingly.

“Good. And now you won’t be a problem for anyone.” My heart sinks as I realize what’s about to happen.

I lunge toward Harry to shield him but Justin moves faster, his finger squeezing the trigger, the bullet hitting Harry square

between the eyes in a split second. Time stands still except for a ragged, tortured cry rumbling in my chest as I hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud and watch the man who resurrected me from my destructive black hole crumble down onto the floor, his eyes open and boring straight into my soul. He's dead before he even falls.

The man has obviously made many mistakes in his life, but no one deserves to die like that.

I spin onto my back to find Justin looming over me with the gun and its silencer pointed at the middle of my chest. "Please, J. You didn't have to do that," I rasp.

He stands there, his expression cold and unyielding. A far cry from the Justin Howell I've come to know. "Sorry, Lawrence. I just do what I'm told to. You know that." It takes me a moment to realize that Justin doesn't sound apologetic at all. His words are meaningless, his face a mask of cold and blind faith.

My heart sinks at the realization of my fate. I'm going to die in this dingy apartment in the same city as the woman who owns my heart. She went to bed having absolutely no idea what was about to happen, what's going to be done. *What if she's next? What if they're cleaning house and they know she's undercover too?*

"Justin, I can help you," I plead, all qualms about seeming weak and gutless flying out the window. If it means I can stop them from going after Marlee, I'll do it. I'd sell my soul to the devil if it means keeping her safe.

He smirks but it doesn't meet his eyes. *He's just as stuck as Harry is... was...*

"No, you can't. Nobody can. But I can help myself by doing this."

"Don't do it, J. I'm not worth it," I say, willing to say anything to save myself at this point.

"No, you're not. But that will be," he says, stepping away from me and swinging the gun toward Harry's prone body. "Because I didn't shoot him. You did."

I stare wide-eyed at him. "No, I didn't."

Then his glare turns positively evil, his grin maniacal. "Oh yes, you did." He chucks the gun and I catch it out of instinct, not realizing the gravity of what I've just done until it's too late.

"Oh sorry, no you didn't. But *now* you have. My bad." Then he turns and walks to the door.

"Why, Justin? Why me?" I ask to his back. His gloved hand pauses on the doorknob before he looks over his shoulder.

"Only Decker knows *that*. But let's just say this is karma. And you of all people should know by now that karma is a bitch."

"You won't get away with this!" I shout as he opens the door.

Justin steps out and turns to me.

“Funny, looks like I just did. It’s your gun. Your apartment. And it’s *your* prints on the murder weapon. By the way, Decker says hi.” And with that, he slams the door shut.

I’ve got to get out of here. Before the cops come. Before I’m arrested. I also need to alert Marlee that I’m compromised and she could be too.

I pocket the gun, formulating a plan as I grab my bag and grab the bare essentials, packing them in a desperate panic while my mind works a mile a minute trying to figure out what the hell I’m going to do. The very last thing I remember to do is search for the burner phone but it’s not in my bag, it’s nowhere to be found.

It means someone must’ve taken it out of my locker. Which can only mean that *they* have it. Shit!

I leave a note for Marlee, sealing it in an envelope and addressing it to “Lucas” leaving it vague enough that if someone comes back here before the cops and FBI do, she’ll still be safe. It’s risky, but I can’t disappear without leaving her *something*.

With that done and time ticking away, I stop and take one last look at Harry’s body.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” I whisper. “I’ll get him though. Whatever it takes.”

Then I tear my eyes away, and with nothing else on me but the clothes I’m wearing and the bag slung over my shoulder, I walk out and get the fuck out of dodge.

Destination – far away from here.

Keep reading for the prologue of Revenge & Redemption, the conclusion to Aiden and Marlee's story.

**PROLOGUE – REVENGE &
REDEMPTION**

Truth & Love Book 3

Beautiful,

I have made many mistakes in my life, but falling for you, loving you, was never one of them. It might just be the one thing that'll get me through whatever I have to do next.

I love you. I think I always have, even before I knew what love was and you smiled at me with that wonky grin of yours.

Whatever happens, whatever they say, whatever they try to prove, remember the man who loves you, who has always loved you and never stopped.

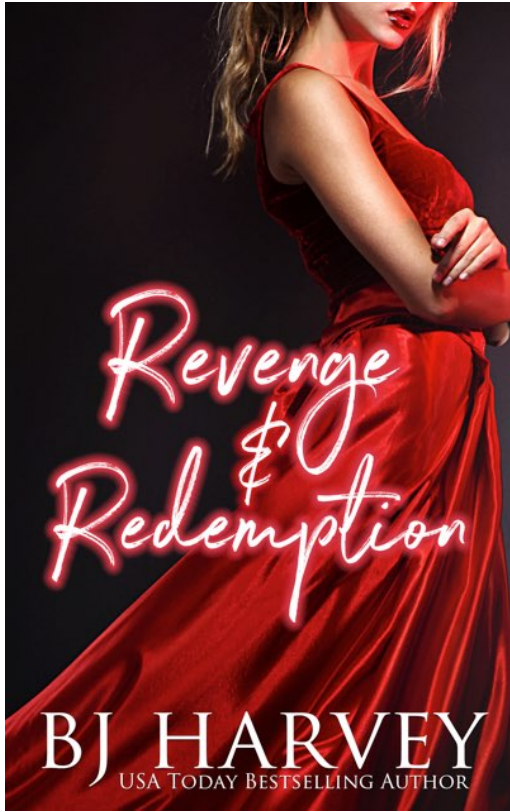
The man who would only leave to keep you free and clear and safe.

I'll clear my name and come back. I'll find the truth and use it to get justice for Harry.

Just this once, trust me to do it the right way.

Love Aiden.

[Preorder Revenge & Redemption](#)



CHANCES SERIES PREVIEW

One Shot

Boy meets girl, boy wins girl, boy nails girl—boy's gone by morning.

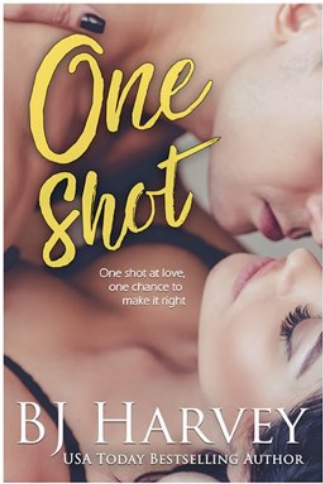
I think for sure it must've been a dream because there's no way a guy could look like that, touch me like that and be so in tune with me on every known level, and disappear, leaving me with nothing but a good story to tell my friends.

When he walks into my bar three months later, everything I thought I knew and what we'd had disappears in the blink of an eye and the blinding light of the three-carat diamond on his fiancée's hand.

It seems what I thought was a dream is now my most complicated reality, and I've got absolutely no idea how to fix it...

Or if I even want to.

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Lost Without You (Lost #3)

Standalone

Crave

ABOUT BJ HARVEY

BJ Harvey is the USA Today bestselling author of the Bliss Series. She also regards herself as a smut peddler, suspense conjurer and a funny romance thinker upper. An avid music fan, you will always find her singing some hit song badly but loving every minute of it. She's a wife, a mom and hails from the best country in the world—New Zealand—but currently lives in Perth, Australia.

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