

HE SPINS THE WEB SHE FALLS INTO. UNTIL SHE SNARES HIM.

LOVE *To*  
WRECK

*Flow*



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*Sky*GOLD

Sky Gold

Love To Wreck You

*An Enemies to Lovers Small Town Romance*

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A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink. The letters 'E' and 'p' are connected, with a horizontal line extending from the bottom of the 'p'.

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# I

## Epigraph

*Free like a willow tree*

*Free like a summer's eve*

*Free like the waves crashing on a solitary beach*

*Free like a bumblebee*

*Free like the open sea*

*Free like the minute, second, moment when you  
hold me closely*

*Free like a flying dove*

*Free like the moon above*

*Free like the four letters that spell out L-O-V-E  
love*

*Free like the bluest sky*

*Free like wings up high*

*Free like, free like, free like, free like*

- *FREE (Jill Scott)*



# Chapter 1



**T**hey escaped the bustling cityscape at midnight, leaving behind uncertainty and angst.

In about an hour, the urban panorama faded into untouched wilderness.

Pushing through darkness, they caught fleeting glimpses of road trains and massive movers that blasted past in the opposite direction.

After a few stopovers in dim-lit service stations, dawn unfurled in delightful streaks of pink and lustrous pale yellows.

Cece gasped, glimpsing the meeting of land and sea on the horizon, sensing the irresistible pull of wanderlust.

Her eyes drank the sun rising over the Pacific Ocean. Winding down her window, she breathed in the purity of nature as her compact SUV passed by spectacular cliffs and lush rainforests.

She made out a few pristine beaches and charming small towns, each adding a unique verse to the visual symphony.

For the first time in weeks, her heart soared. This journey was more than just an escape from her past.

She banked on it being the change she needed for her and her precious and trusty sidekick.

‘You OK, buddy?’

*Silence.*

Cece glanced in the rearview mirror at the boyish form with curly hair and hazel eyes. He was slumped against the back seat, gaze fixed on the landscape rushing past.

‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing, mum. Just taking in the view. I’m doing awesome if you are.’

‘I am, honey. Still no sleep?’

‘Not until you do.’

‘Ever my superhero, hey, my love?’

‘Always.’

She caught the flash of a sweet smirk, which made her melt.

Mason was her joy. He’d been through so much, yet he always had a smile, a kind word for others.

Best of all, he was a love bug. He shared hugs all day long, which made him even more adorable.

He’d taught her so much these past few years, from resilience to strength, joy and perseverance.

All this from an eight-year-old. *Who would have thought?*

Maybe she was killing it at parenting after all.

Because she wasn't winning at much more at the moment.

Weeks earlier, Cece had left her job as an events manager at a hotel in Sydney that was downsizing. She'd had no choice, given her bosses had no more cash reserves to pay their staff.

Being a single mum with a mortgage, she didn't have the luxury of no income. Panicked, Cece made a few calls looking for work opportunities.

The search had proven stressful as few openings in her industry were on the market.

Later that week, she'd made a rare lapse of mentioning her challenge at a family dinner.

To her annoyance, her stepdad had pounced on her slip-up and taken it upon himself to find her a job.

He'd come up with the goods in no time and passed her name to one of his contacts at one of the most prestigious hotels on the East Coast.

Who happened to be in the market for a new executive on their team.

Giving in to the harsh reality that beggars were not choosers, Cece interviewed for the events director role. She was shocked to get a job offer within the week.

The caveat, though, was an immediate start.

With no time to waste, she'd placed her semi-detached house on the rental market. She packed up an entire house, changed schools for Mason and took a major leap of faith.

Now, here they were, heading to a new life - which was scary AF, yet thrilling with the excitement of the unknown.

At least, that's what Cece hoped. But as they wound further north, her nervousness grew.

She'd had no time to research her new bosses in-depth.

So far, she'd only relied on the anecdotal tidbits she'd gleaned from the recruiter and the woman who'd interviewed her.

She was hoping to figure it - and them - all out when she settled in.

*It'll be OK*, she told herself. She'd survive just as she'd always done when life got dicey in the past.

Cece had risen like a phoenix from ashes that many times, she'd ink on her rib cage to prove it.

If things didn't pan out, she'd pivot to waiting tables at a local restaurant or bartending, which she'd done over the years to supplement her income.

4 p.m. rolled around as they cruised into Byron Bay. Mason had dozed off, so he missed the entry to the pretty coastal town.

*No matter*, Cece thought. He'd plenty of time to explore it in the coming months.

She entered the heart of the charming borough, where vibrant streets greeted her with a warm welcome.

She drove past avenues lined with eclectic shops, boutiques, and art galleries, each offering a glimpse into the creative soul of the community.

Where one could find themselves rubbing shoulders with the glitterati who swarmed Byron Bay to indulge at its uber-exclusive resorts.

However enticing the town, they needed to settle in before nightfall. With a reluctant sigh, she followed her sat nav directions to Falcon House.

According to the map, she was to head south of Cape Byron Lighthouse towards Tallow Beach.

Cece left the town and headed down leafy avenues until she saw a filigree roadside sign.

Her sat nav cooed at her. ‘Arrived.’

Pulling up into the gravel-lined driveway, she parked at a two-bay EV charging station, raising an impressed brow at the thoughtfulness of the eco-friendly hotel.

Easing out of the car, Cece tipped her head up at the sprawling building.

She inhaled. It was more beautiful than she’d imagined.

From what she’d read on their website, Falcon House was a luxurious, private five-star hotel that boasted impressive cottages, a pool, two bars, a spa, a restaurant, and a cafe.

Surrounded by picturesque bushland that led down to a sensational private beach packed with powdery white gold sand.

She glanced at the well-designed, established gardens and rainforest trees thick with foliage and breathed out as a weight lifted off her shoulders.

For some reason, this place felt like coming home. Cece couldn't explain it, but tears pricked her eyes as she took in the trilling birds and the scent of clean spray from the sea beyond.

*Sheer beauty.*

Cece shook her head to reorient herself, then glimpsed a sign pointing to reception.

She checked on Mason. He was still asleep in the back seat, so she roused him.

‘We’re here, handsome.’

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. ‘Already?’

‘Yup. Please take a moment to wake up. We’ll need to go inside and nab our keys real quick. I’m shattered from the drive. Thankfully, we have the weekend to rest and unpack.’

Minutes later, they ambled up the steps to the shiny midnight blue doors, pulling at the golden knob to let themselves in.

The curved stone entrance led into a plush hall in shades of navy and white with brass, driftwood and sand accents.

Echoing a ‘Hamptons elegance meets low-key Aussie beach’ style.

No one stood behind the opulent front desk, so she called out. ‘Hello.’

‘Maybe they’ve left for the day,’ Mason said.

Behind the French doors separating the spaces, Cece saw people bustling in what seemed to be the bar and dining zone. But not another soul was in the welcome area.

‘Don’t think so. The kitchen crew are prepping the dinner service, so someone must be around.’

She called out once more. ‘Hello?’

They heard the sound of scuffling, running feet rushing towards them.

Whipping their heads around, they caught sight of a body at the end of the corridor, coming to a screeching halt.

‘Sorry. Left my post for a second to nab a snack.’

It was a boy, about a year older than Mason, with long, floppy dark hair and gold-tanned skin.

‘Jake.’ He made the declaration with a toothy grin.

He was so good-looking and charming for his age that Cece couldn’t help but smile.

‘Hi Jake, I’m Cece, and this is Mason. Are you our front-of-house man?’

‘Sure am,’ he declared as he puffed out his chest in pride. ‘How can I help you?’

He eased himself behind the desk as he and Mason eyed each other. From the top of their tousled hair to the monograms on their sporty trainers. As only boys of similar age did when they encountered another of their own in the wild.

Cece used a wave to get his attention. ‘Not sure if you’re expecting me. I’m meant to meet your general manager. I’m Cece. The new weddings and events director.’

The boy’s face fell. ‘Oof! Denise had to leave for the day. Family emergency. Dad and I are filling in for her.’

A bellowed roar sounded from the corridor beyond, drowning the boy’s last words. ‘Jake!’

Cece and Mason jolted as the boy’s eyes widened comically. ‘Sir?’ he ripped back.

‘Need my faucet wrench. The large 280. From my truck. Stat. Before she blows, and we get a flood all over this floor.’

The voice, although vexed, was delicious, resonant and with a growl that had Cece’s hairs rise on the back of her neck.

*Wtf.*

Before she could indulge in the bass notes further, Jake whipped his head to Cece. ‘Can you wait? I’ll take you and the wrench to him when I get back.’

‘Sure, we’ll wait.’

Jake grinned. ‘Coming, Dad. Give me five.’



‘Three,’ came the exasperated shout.

‘Four!’

‘Buddy!’

Cece and Mason exchanged glances as Jake burst out in laughter and dashed outside to the massive truck parked alongside their SUV.

He rummaged inside for a moment, then emerged, brandishing a tool with triumph.

He loped back inside with a broad smile. ‘Sweet! Follow me.’

Cece and Mason exchanged amused glances and trailed behind the swaggering boy who oozed confidence and delightful cheek. Down a corridor with blue and white striped wallpaper, elegant chandeliers, fixtures, and paintings that captured beguiling beach scenes.

Jake paused at a navy doorway that was half ajar.

‘The staff loo,’ he explained. ‘We’ve had a massive leak, and Dad’s had to fix it.’

‘Jake, please chill with the chatter and give me the wrench.’

The same delicious voice now sounded a tad strained.

When Jake walked in, Cece peered around the corner to see him hand over the tool and place it in a lean, muscled hand.

She felt her insides lurch as she stared at the shirt riding up to reveal the washboard abs on display. Her eyes watered at the sight of a delicious-looking belly button dusted with dark hair that whirled lower and disappeared into the waistband of the cargo shorts.

They left nothing to the imagination as the man inside them shifted. He flexed his muscled thighs covered in honey gold skin and more manly hair that tapered down into well-defined calves and feet thrust into a pair of well-worn, high-end barefoot sneakers.

However, his face and upper body were hidden as he worked under the sink and behind the cupboard doors.

The clink of tools matched his breathing and occasional grunts. Cece felt her insides clench at the guttural rumbles.

She'd never reacted to a man like this in years, convinced that her lady parts had taken an early retirement. *Until now.*

Jake knelt beside the man. 'Dad, someone's here to see Denise. Says she's the new wedding person.'

There was a long pause as the unseen man stilled his hands. After a beat, they started up again, arm muscles straining as the man worked his wrench.

*Damn.* Cece struggled to control her wild reaction.

'Tell her to wait at reception.'

The tone was clipped and allowed no room for dissent. At that moment, Cece knew most obeyed this man with no question.

She gave Jake a few quick nods acknowledging the command, then backed off, nabbing Mason's arm and heading back to the front of the establishment.

'That was awkward.'

'It was something,' Cece agreed with the astute whippersnapper.

She found a long couch opposite the grand front door. She pulled her son to it, and they sat gingerly on the luxurious velvet.

Soon, Mason spied a few magazines on a coffee table nearby, so he grabbed two, handed her one and launched into the pages.

Cece crossed a leg and flicked through the glossy spreads, not seeing the words or images. She was anxious, and after a long night and a full day of driving, her mind and body were ragged and raw.

'She's at the front?'

The same husky, gravelled voice cut through her thoughts.

'Think so.'

Cece jolted at the words, and half rose to her feet just as a figure rounded the corner and stalked into the waiting area. Followed by Jake's smaller silhouette.

Her eyes met a jade and hazel gaze as an unexpected essence slammed into her soul.

*What. In. The. Actual.*

She felt a bolt spike between her and the man before her as their eyes clashed. His lean nostrils flared, drawing in his breath in a hiss of air.

He jerked his chin at her, turning the full extent of his frigid gaze on her.

Despite the coolness, his life force hit her like a gut punch to her centre while her pussy clenched in traitorous need.

She gawked at him wordlessly.

As she'd already witnessed, his body was beautiful, his hips low above ropey thighs. He was lean, tall, striking, and ripped in a white tee that contrasted his thick, dark, mid-length hair and stretched across broad shoulders.

It was his face that almost had her gasping.

The man's chiselled visage was a masterpiece, with sculpted cheekbones, a neat moustache and a beard. He was either in his late thirties or early to mid-forties. She couldn't tell, given how fit and healthy he looked.

His nose was the only imperfection on his face, the victim of a past misfortune or accident. It was misshapen and broken, but it intensified his ruggedness instead of taking away from his appeal.

*Step aside, Chris Hemsworth.* This man's physicality outshredded most muscled men she knew of.

He oozed confidence and strength. *Raw, sheer, untapped.*

She suppressed a shiver as his piercing eyes raked over her long, dark, wavy curls, shiny coffee-coloured eyes, and now flushing face. Dropping lower to her casual tee, torn jeans and open sandals.

Assessing, scrutinising. *Breaking. Her. Down.*

His perusal was scalding, almost incandescent.

She sensed a thread of disdain and wondered what he'd expected.

What he was certainly not seeing was a bombshell with beachy waves and dewy skin, who gave off a hot girl summer vibe. *Not her, not ever.*

'Who are you?'

His face was emotionless and hardened, his jade eyes cold, unyielding.

His voice was a resonant growl that sent chills through her. But it had an inflection she couldn't pick out. Like he was testing her. As if he already had the answer.

'Cece Mirren. Reporting for the weddings and events director role.'

For some wild reason, she felt the need to salute him, like he'd demanded it somehow. Without saying a word.

She also fought off the strange urge to call him 'sir'.

*Wtf?*

His eyes flashed, and his nose flared like her name meant something—an insight he didn't share.

Instead, he scanned her again, and she sensed an intense emotion behind his eyes. *Anger? Wariness?* She wasn't sure.

At that moment, her reaction to him shifted from attraction to annoyance at being judged with such open disdain.

When his cold gaze winged back to meet her own, she cocked her head in a challenge, bristling inside.

His brow rose as he acknowledged her silent defiance, and his lip pursed, twisting in barely held-back derision.

*What had she done to piss him off?*

She'd never met the man, so his reaction to her was unwarranted.

Hers to him was unprecedented.

Meanwhile, his eyes flamed over her, hot as coal. Yet there was a coolness in the air that gave her goosebumps.

She tried to ease the tension. 'Maybe you're the plumber and don't know who I am or where I need to be?'

Jake clapped a hand over his face to hide a chortle.

At the same time, a tic developed in his father's jaw, like she'd hit a nerve.

Mortified, she tried again. 'Or is it the handyman?'

The man's eyes narrowed, and then he turned around, marched to the desk behind him, and reached for a small package, which he nabbed and strode back towards her.

He extended it to her without a word.

He came close enough that she got a waft of his aftershave and the musk of his skin, masculine and intense.

It set off another tornado of flames in her, and she fought the urge to fan herself.

‘What’s this?’ she said as she took the parcel, her eyes drawn to his calloused hands and the long, lean fingers.

‘Your key card entry to your cottage. Denise set aside Number 5 for you and -’ he flicked his eyes around and found Mason looking up at him wide-eyed, and his face softened somewhat, ‘your son, I believe.’

‘Yes, he’s mine,’ Cece confirmed.

‘Hi,’ Mason said, sticking his hand out.

The man took it, crouching down from his height to look the younger boy in the eye. ‘Hey. You being a good guy for your mum?’

Mason bristled with pride. ‘Always, sir.’

The man’s jade eyes warmed. At that moment, Cece saw past his rough, cold exterior, catching a glimpse of the tenderness hidden beneath.

‘Keep up the good job.’ He straightened and patted Mason on the shoulder with a smile. One that transformed his chiselled face into heart-stopping irresistibility.

It disappeared when he turned back to Cece. ‘Follow the gravel path to the left, punch in your key code at the security

gate, and the cottage is two avenues to the left. The signs are clear.’

With that, he swivelled on his feet and strode away.

Leaving Jake behind, who shrugged, lifted two hands to indicate his confusion before charging away.

Stunned, Cece followed their departure as father and son vanished into the kitchen and dining area.

Mason, too, was nonplussed. ‘That was even more awkward, Mum. Not how the dad talked to me. I didn’t mind that. Just the way he was staring at you.’

She shook her head. ‘That man doesn’t like me, and I have no idea why.’

Her son wrapped his hands around her waist. ‘Dude’s a fool because you’re the sweetest person ever.’

She melted, pulling him close. ‘Thank you, gorgeous. You always say the loveliest things.’

Cece walked back to the car with Mason’s hand in hers, mulling the man’s attitude towards her. She wondered what had set him off.

She’d probably have little to do with him if he were the hotel’s handyman. Even though he had a body and face that would stop traffic, he had the manners of a drop bear.

Long done with toxic men, Cece shrugged him off and his stanky attitude.



Having soothed her raw nerves, Cece and Mason set off towards their new home for the conceivable future.



‘Dad, she called you the plumber, then the handyman. What a laugh!’

‘I heard her.’

‘She’s got no clue. Why didn’t you tell her?’

‘She should have done her homework.’

That said, Ash’s covert work meant his image was scrubbed from most websites and never shown on social media. Only his Defence-related photos came up in a search, and that’s when one was digging hard for them.

*Still, she could have tried,* Ash thought as he pushed through a pair of swinging doors. ‘Not a good sign if she’s come here not well prepped.’

Jake bobbed his head. ‘True. At school, Mrs Mulholland said that by failing to prep, you are prepping to fail -’

Ash Falconer half muted his son’s voice and his sage nine-year-old opinions.

Deep in thought, he brooded as he swung through the kitchens to check the water situation at the back of the property.

Stalking along, he nodded at his team.

Many of them were loyal workers who'd been at Falcon House for years. He didn't spot Rich, the Falcon Eatery's head chef. But he imagined the man was in the gardens, gathering fresh produce to whip up a sensational dish for the night's sold-out service.

He turned his head to the back window and caught sight of a silver-grey SUV.

His eyes narrowed as it made its way down the driveway and a now familiar silhouette in the driving seat.

*Cece Mirren.*

Finally, she was where he wanted her to be.

*She was the break he'd been waiting for.*

What he hadn't expected was how freakin' hot she was. She'd thrown him for her loop when he'd set eyes on her. He'd half expected to see the same sharp, acid-hard features as her father's.

Instead, she had freckles.

*Fuck. Why did she have to have freckles?*

She also had the softest, honey-gold skin and long dark curls with flecks of amber, which hinted at a mixed heritage.

Her luminous hazel eyes were lined with long lashes and light brown brows that made her eyes stand out even more in her oval face.

She was a knockout. *Sultry AF.*

Yet she had a soft expression in her eyes that served him with a yearning he'd not expected.

Her voice was melodic, but she wasn't a young girl with little life experience. She was all woman, in her mid-thirties, and a mother at that.

Damn, her body was lush and rounded, her breasts high, and he imagined they'd be heavy and full in his hands. Her hips were voluptuous, yet they fit in those jeans in a way that'd make most men sigh.

Even from across reception, her scent had wafted spiced citrus and verbena notes over him. He longed to sink his hands into her hair, pull her tight against his length, and bend down to own those lush lips.

'Cease and desist, Falconer,' he whispered to himself, using his well-practised mental discipline to rip his thoughts away from her.

After he completed the water check, he was waylaid for a brief moment in the dining area by the restaurant manager. He listened as she detailed a few issues that had to be resolved.

'All good,' he promised her. 'I'll get onto those ASAP. Just send me a quick email.'

'Sweet.'

Nadine was one of his new hires, and she smiled up at him, flicking aside her light brown ponytail while playing with the knives in her hands.

Her expression was soft and inviting, but he shut it down with a non-committal gaze, used to women coming on to him all the time.

Her eyes dropped with disappointment, but he ignored her, keeping the conversation professional before prowling past his son, who was teaching himself the restaurant's booking software.

'Jake, hang with Nadine for a moment, help with the table settings, then find me in my office.'

Child dispatched, Ash headed to his office, where he threw himself in the leather seat at his desk and pulled out his phone, making a quick call, which he placed on speaker.

The line was picked almost at once.

'Saint.'

'Brother. What gives?'

The rumbling voice on the other line was inflected with a New Zealand drawl.

Ash took a breath. 'She's here. Just met her and handed the house keys over.'

The man on the other side of the line gave a soft whistle. 'The bird has flown into the nest.'

'It has. Check the sound feed.'

The call fell into a short silence that soon filled with the tapping of keys.

Saint grunted. 'Streaming well.'

‘I’ll get her the laptop on Monday.’

‘What we need access to is her phone.’

‘I’ll get admin to ask her to upload our app onto it.’ Ash paused for a moment. ‘We’re sure this is all legal? Not some unmitigated interventionism of surveillance tactics that reek of totalitarianism?’

The man on the line served Ash with a short, amused huff. ‘Brother, we have the green light from Defence and a warrant from Judge Sampson. We’re not monitoring any private conversations, just the ones between her and the general. We’re mostly listening in. As soon as the team determines a call is not between her and our target, we’ll discard it at once and won’t hold onto any recordings, bar the most relevant. Even though we’ve location tracking capabilities, we’re not using them - only in emergencies. It all checks out.’

Ash breathed out his frustration.

Saint caught onto it. ‘You got some doubts now that you’ve met her?’

He winced. ‘She’s not him.’

‘Course not. She’s his stepdaughter.’

After a beat, Ash rasped, ‘Damn, I thought they were biological daughter and father.’

‘Nope. You read the file I sent you?’

‘Time, brother. Try raising a son, running two businesses and keeping on top of a covert op. One thing though, I’m not

sure we've got her pegged right.'

'We won't know til we've tested the waters. It's the only way. We've looked at every other avenue possible.'

'Think she knows? About him?'

'His actions have enriched the Mirren family beyond anyone's wildest dreams at the expense of many. She'd be a fool not to have taken note and, at the very least, asked herself a few questions.'

'Which makes her complicit.'

'Deliberate ignorance perhaps?'

Ash took a breath. 'Fuck. I have to work with her.'

'Why? Aren't you at the farm?'

'Nope. Denise, my GM at Falcon House, had a health scare with her husband. So, I gave her a few days off. Meantime, I'm holding down the fort here while Diesel oversees the distillery.'

'Tough luck, brother.'

'I'm tougher than that,' Ash smirked. 'Hey, I'll update you next week. Keep me posted if the Sydney crew find or hear anything new.'

'Got you.'

Ash rang off and reached for his laptop. He pulled up Saint's email to him with Cece's file. Opening it, he read through it, paying more attention to the details.

Once he'd absorbed most of them, he leaned back into his chair, lost in thought.

*Cece Mirren was a wildcard.*

He had no idea what to make of her.

It had been pure luck that she'd needed a job, and he'd spotted the email from Joseph Mirren, his ex-CO. He'd flagged the request upstairs and got the approval to proceed.

Creating a job description for her had been easy. Heck, Falcon House received so many requests for wedding venue bookings that this was the perfect marriage of opportunity and chance.

Before today, filled with rage at the injustice and wreckage her father had wrought, he'd had no care for the impact of unfolding events on her.

Now that he'd met her, his hard stance on the situation was shifting into murky waters. He knew he was in trouble. In the form of one beautiful woman and her son.

First, he had to find out how involved she was with the suspect before he could make a final assessment of her character. It didn't matter how sweet-natured or sexy she was.

If she was innocent, he had to guarantee a soft landing for them. At the very least, he owed that to her smiling boy, Mason. The kid seemed decent and well-behaved, just like his Jake, whom he'd go to hell and back to protect.

However, he was ready and willing to drag her through purgatory if she was guilty or complicit in her stepfather's

crimes. Whatever it took to get to the truth and redeem the lives of the men ex-Major General Joseph Mirren had destroyed.

Until he knew otherwise, Ash would need to keep Cece at arm's length and get the op completed without dropping the ball. He had to power on, regardless.

His jaw clenched as he focused on the mission, just like he'd done so many times before, on and off the battlefield. He gazed unseeing at the view outside, reminding himself why he was doing this, why he wanted to wreck the Mirren family.

One reason only.

Justice.

For the lives destroyed, for futures ruined and for the unwitting victims of one family's greed.

The dignity of many good men and women depended on him to get the job done.



# Chapter 2



Cece sat on an easy chair on the verandah overlooking the ocean that evening. Her eyes drank in the view, not quite believing how she'd scored this job in paradise.

Mason had long gone to bed, tired from the travel and lack of sleep.

Despite her drive from Sydney and staying awake for hours, Cece was still too wired to settle in her bed or rest.

She chose to stay up for a while longer to process her new reality.

She looked out onto Tallow Beach, where sugary sands provided the perfect blank canvas for viewing sensational sunsets and, from what she'd read, occasional whale sightings that broke along the horizon.

Pulling her knees up to her chest, she cradled her wine glass, staring at the stunning scenery and listening to the distinct 'oo-wip' calls of whip birds and squawking of black cockatoos.

The home that'd been set aside for her was spectacular. The best trade-off imaginable - just so she could be close to the hotel for extended work days, early mornings or late-night events.

The boutique hotel's touches were present all over the furnished two-bedroom townhouse. In the polished floors, luxurious rugs, quality fittings and exquisite linens.

The place also boasted floor-to-ceiling windows and a generous kitchen with a double-door fridge and Smart TV. Both bedrooms had a private bathroom with a rain shower, plush towels, indulgent soaps and silky local-made lotions.

She'd counted four other staff houses close by. Each sat a little away from the main buildings amongst the sprawling acreage of manicured grounds, established native flora, running streams, and serene ponds.

Thirty secluded coastal-inspired suites and cottages made up the guest accommodation.

They clustered around the original farmhouse Falcon Head, a 150-year-old converted mansion that housed the reception, restaurant and cafe. Staff offices were to one side of the old farmhouse. There was also an adjacent barn on site, which could sleep up to ten guests.

However, Cece hadn't had a chance to look around much yet. She'd spent most of the evening putting Mason's clothes, shoes, soccer gear and bike away before tackling her wardrobe.

Now all unpacked, she took a sip of wine and let herself dream about what the next few days would reveal. Cece couldn't wait to create a fabulous wedding offering for Falcon House.

She made lazy plans, jotting ideas in her diary of what she wanted to achieve while her eyes danced over the view.

While she mused, her mind unwound, lulled by the distant sound of shore wash and the calls of wildlife in the trees, feeling more at peace than she'd ever done in months.

*In years, she corrected herself.*

So far, this move felt cathartic, she concluded. Although life had forced this sea change on her and Mace, maybe they both needed it more than they knew.

Wine downed and feeling languid and relaxed, Cece switched off the lights and locked up, heading to bed, where she fell into a dreamless sleep.



She woke the next morning to birdsong, and after a rainwater shower, she mulled ideas for breakfast.

They were just a twenty-minute walk from the cafes and restaurants of Byron Bay.

Eager to immerse in its unique blend of creativity, spirituality, and a laid-back coastal vibe, Cece woke Mason up.

He rushed to drag on shorts and a tee.

‘Where are we going? I’m starving!’

Cece laughed. ‘Not sure there’s enough food in town to fill that rumbling tum.’

Dressed and keen to fill up, they made their way to town.

Cece had last been to Byron a few years back for the legendary BluesFest.

Where she’d tramped around in gumboots and flower skirts. Surrounded by dreadlocks and tattoos, she’d tapped her feet to a slew of blues bands and musicians, from Tom Jones, Archie Roach, The Blind Boys of Alabama and The Cat Empire, lost in hippy joy.

This time, as a resident, she gazed at the town with different lenses, noting the locations of the grocer, the local bakery and the library.

‘Can’t live without our books and croissants, Mace,’ she said as they found a small cafe near the water. ‘We’ll stock up on our way home.’

They nabbed a table outside with uninterrupted peninsula views, placing orders with a smiling server.

Gazing around them, they were captivated by the town’s infectious spirit, the friendly residents and vibrant activity. It

was a mecca of relaxation - with a touch of gloss from its rich, bold and beautiful visitors.

Cece turned to Mason as they people-watched. 'Keep an eye out, honey. You may spot a famous actor or two.'

His eyes rounded in wonder. 'Like who, mum?'

'Well, Thor, for one, and maybe even Nicole Kidman. But you'll need to look hard, buddy. They like to hide in plain sight.'

'I can see why they love it,' Mace said.

Cece sighed as she gazed at the vivid blue ocean. 'How stunning is this? A magical view always leaves an everlasting imprint on our souls.'

Mason nodded, his small face solemn. 'That's cool, mum. You need to write that down.'

Cece smiled at him. He knew how much she cherished her poetry.

Byron Bay's landscape, with its breathtaking panoramic views and picturesque quaintness, was stirring up her passion.

'Rumi once said, 'Travel brings power and love back into your life'. Let's hope this adventure offers that, Mace.'

'It will,' the curly-haired boy said in his much older-than-eight wisdom that always brought a smile to her face. 'It already is.'

Their food arrived, and they tucked into a generous spread of eggs, sausages and mushrooms on Vegemite toast.

Cece pointed her fork at her son. ‘Hey Mace, let’s have a treasure hunt on the beach. We can collect shells, rocks along the way and whatever else we find to remind us of our first day here.’

Eyes shining, he wrapped up his meal and dragged her to Main Beach. They found a heap of shells on the beach, some driftwood and even live fish darting inside the clear rock pools.

Taking photos and videos as they strolled along the shore, they stepped into the waves, lapping at their feet, soaking in the sun’s rays.

‘Isn’t this the life?’

Mace scrunched his face in earnest as he danced on the sand. ‘It’s pretty cool. May I go for a swim?’

She nodded, a small smile across her face as he sprinted towards the waves. He pulled off his shirt and jumped into the water with just his board shorts. She watched him plough through the surf, grinning with happiness.

Soon, he’d made pals with other kids on the beach in his usual open, friendly manner.

Cece found a spot to sit on the sand, basking in the sun’s warmth. The sea breeze caressed her skin, and the crashing waves serenaded her senses.

It was as if time was slowing down, allowing her to savour the simple joys of life.

When Mace tired of the water, she bought them lunch. They piled on groceries and freshly baked bread, lugging it all back to their new home.

That afternoon, Cece logged into the Wi-Fi available throughout Falcon House and Face-timed her mother.

Outside, Mason rode his BMX bike around Falcon House's tropical gardens along paths lined by fragrant mango, guava, feijoa and fig trees.

‘How are you, darling?’

The woman Cece smiled at onscreen looked as calm as ever. As well put together as the elegant house in Double Bay she sat in.

Samantha Mirren's short silver-blonde hair was styled in a close crop that was fashionable and on-trend. She was of medium height and rounded and soft in all the places that mattered.

She had a welcoming smile. She'd lent her dark skin tones to Cece, from her hazel eyes to her dewy, dark honey skin.

All her life, Cece knew her mother to be warm to the touch, her skin satiny like rose petals. Her hands were velvety and soft, always ready to welcome and soothe.

Cece smiled at her mother. ‘It's fantastic, and what it says on the cover - so lush and relaxed. The hotel is super laid-back and stylish - a touch of Long Island mixed with the beachside lifestyle of Byron. I can't wait to start on Monday.’

‘Aren’t you glad I found the job for you then?’ boomed a voice off-screen.

Cece flinched as a man appeared in view.

His hair was white, covering his entire head and beard. Imperious, with an upright bearing and rigid posture, his face stern and gaunt, his eyes brutal and inscrutable. His hawkish nose jutted out, and his nostrils flared. While his breathing was shallow, his voice was a precise clip.

‘Hi, Dad.’

*Step-dad.*

No matter how often he insisted on being called dad, she’d never forgotten that he was not her blood.

*Because Joseph Mirren had never been a father to her.*

‘Have you thanked me yet for my efforts to get you employed again?’

*I’ve said it a few times now, she thought to herself.*

‘Thank you, Dad.’ She delivered the words in a flat monotone. Cece was well-versed in keeping her inflections non-confrontational in case he flew off his handle.

She also winced that her desperate need for a job meant she was now indebted to him somehow. It’d been this way for years, his control and manipulation of their family having such a firm hold on all of them.

Running from home when she was 18 had been a way to escape him. Getting married young had been her other



circumnavigation. Now, Byron Bay was one more step removed from his control of her.

It was also where she could be as far away from his legal troubles as possible.

Ten months ago, ex-Major General Mirren received a letter from the Australian Defence Force Investigative Service, known to most as ADFIS. It was the unified investigative military police arm of all three military branches - Navy, Army and Airforce.

The missive notified him that he was the subject of an ongoing, undefined probe as a person of interest.

Panicked, the general, as most called him, obtained legal advice and consultation from a military lawyer. His legal officer insisted that the general offer his attendance at a prelim meeting with Defence investigators. Reluctant, he'd agreed to the idea.

The session focused on his tours to Afghanistan over twenty years ago.

It had been long and arduous, but to his relief, they'd let him leave without being detained.

However, over the next few months, Joseph's paranoia grew, and he got jumpy as the inquiry continued behind closed doors. The gathering of evidence was secret, which ratcheted up his delusions.

He'd taken to rage-filled rants to anyone within earshot, usually Samantha and Cece, about a host of shadowy enemies

after him.

Due to a leak from an anonymous source, the media discovered that a senior ex-member of the forces was under investigation.

While not naming the suspect, the newspapers stated that the allegations were severe. That the suspect was complicit in drug trafficking while he'd been deployed in Afghanistan. They also revealed accusations levelled at him, saying he was a bully and a perpetrator of violence against innocent victims.

The articles concluded that the matter was grave and of national interest. It stirred up debate in Defence circles and was even discussed at Joseph's Friday golf sessions, where he kept up the facade of innocence.

At home, he was a nightmare. If the allegations ended up being unsubstantiated, or if the investigation exonerated him, he claimed it would still be embarrassing.

'Even though the MPs find no evidence,' the general had railed to his wife and Cece, 'I will always be 'titled' as 'investigated' in my record. It's a black mark on my name. If my identity becomes public, regardless of the outcome, my reputation will take a hit.'

*He didn't seem to care that more than his good name would be impacted if found guilty. Her mother's life and his stepchildren's, too, would also be under scrutiny, Cece thought.*

‘Need any money to help set up in Byron?’ he said, cutting into her brain train.

She shook her head. ‘No.’

That was how to handle him. A straight refusal with no edge in for discussion. The last thing Cece wanted was his tainted cash. She was convinced the logistics company he had a part-time role with as a Board Member was shady AF.

She saw her mother’s eyes blink and felt a stab of compassion for the woman who’d had to live with him for over twenty-eight years.

‘I just called to let you know we’re OK, settling in as expected,’ Cece said. ‘Mason starts school tomorrow, so there hasn’t been much lag time with his learning.’

‘I’m happy to hear that.’ Samantha’s face was soft and full of love. ‘Let him know I miss him.’

‘I will.’

‘Say hello to Ash Falconer for me,’ her stepfather said.

Cece slow-blinked. ‘Who?’

‘Your boss, the man who hired you.’

Her brow wrinkled. ‘My interview was with a woman. A lady called Denise Mariani.’

Joseph wagged his fingers at her, dismissing her words. ‘Whatever. You’ll probably meet him soon enough. Ash was one of the top commands in my battalion. Served with me for over ten years and was an excellent operator.’

There were no photos of Falcon House's CEO or the hotel's staff on the website.

As Joseph spoke, Cece envisioned an older man with pepper-white hair and a brusque attitude, just like him.

The general kept on. 'His parents, the Falconers, are good people. Their family has ruled the Hinterland for generations. They're not just any old farmers either. They own half its hills and have their fingers in wine, whisky, property and the hospitality business. Excellent people to be connected to.'

'I see. I haven't met any of them yet.'

At least, she didn't think so.

'When you do, pass on my regards. I should come up and see them now that you're there.'

Cece suppressed a sigh. That was the last thing she needed. 'Let me settle in first, then we can discuss it.'

'Don't keep me waiting,' Joseph ordered before moving away from the camera, bored with the conversation already.

She met Samantha's eyes, clouded with concern, and they shared a quick, imperceptible nod.

Samantha winked. It was her way of reassuring Cece she'd take care of Joseph's latest flight of fancy. It was a code they'd developed over the years to manage him without him even noticing.

'Any word from Liam?' Cece kept her voice to a whisper, not wanting Joseph to hear this bit.

Samantha's face fell, her voice also low. 'Just a quick message a few days back. He said something about contacting you soon.'

Cece took a breath. 'I'll reach out to him and call you when I can.'

'Of course, dear.'

She and her mother would speak again in the next week. The two women were close and, thanks to WhatsApp, could sneak in mother-daughter catch-ups on the go.

Samantha blew a kiss to her daughter. 'Give my love to Mason.'

Cece returned it with a soft smile. 'I will.'



Early Monday morning, Cece rose from her bed, energised.

By 7 AM, she'd showered, changed and was coffeed up.

She roused Mason from bed, helped him with his uniform and breakfast, and drove him to Byron Bay Public.

'Are you excited, buddy?' she asked as she slowed for a brush-tailed wallaby crossing the road.

'Sure am, mum,' he grinned. 'New friends, classroom, new everything!'

'That's my Mason, always so chill.'

He was a treasure, and she once again appreciated his easy nature and gung-ho spirit. It had faded for a brief time when his best friend at his last school relocated interstate.

She suspected his openness to their Byron move was about giving him a fresh start and a chance to make different friends.

She ran the gauntlet of arriving students at the pretty school and led him to the administration office.

The receptionist was sweet and welcoming, offering to walk him to class, introduce him to his new teacher and show him around.

Mason waved at Cece as he walked off, and she stood back with a pang of feeling. She worried about leaving him to navigate an unknown environment by himself. Her only consolation was that she knew he would turn on his natural charm and be just fine.

Driving to work, a million thoughts raced through Cece's mind. Every nerve in her body tingled with a wariness of the unknown.

But she was also a natural leader, a go-getter who would stop at nothing to achieve her goals. So she turned on a meditation podcast and let it soothe her back to Falcon House.

She pulled into the staff parking lot and took a deep breath.

Knowing that first impressions were everything, she'd dressed to impress. She wore a tailored navy blazer over one of her signature twist-drape shirts. Plus, a pencil skirt that hugged her curves in all the right places.

Her favourite Identita pointed-toe 120 mm heels in blue satin were on her feet. They hiked up her butt and, best of all, were a dream to walk in.

They echoed the navy hues of Falcon House, fitting for her first day.

She marched through the doors, heels clicking on the premium floors.

This time, Cece didn't find a ten-year-old behind the desk.

Instead, a young blonde woman, hidden behind a large computer screen, furrowed a brow at her.

'Cece Mirren, reporting for duty.'

'You're the new events director, right?'

Cece nodded with a smile.

The woman beamed. 'I'm Penn. Short for Penny. Welcome.'

'Thank you. Can you point me in the direction of my desk or office?'

'Sure. Denise called me earlier and gave me the lowdown. I'll be onboarding you. Follow me.'

Penn, dressed in navy slacks and a white tee with the Falcon House logo, led her down a familiar corridor. Past the bathroom where she'd first glimpsed the nameless man who'd haunted her dreams all weekend.

She shivered as she powered into an open workspace.

A buzz of creativity and energy hit her. Most people sat at tidy desks, typing away on their laptops. Some huddled in discussions. Others caught up in an adjacent staff break room with their first coffees of the day.

They glanced up at her with friendly expressions and a few smiles as she passed.

Cece smiled to herself, hit with a fresh sense of anticipation. She'd always loved the world of event management and was thrilled to be doing what she loved for a prestigious establishment.

Leading her to a desk at the back of the room, Penn showed her how to log into the in-house IT system.

She also installed the proprietary admin app on her phone.

Penn explained the reason for the software. 'It's essential for collaborating with staff members because we're all so mobile. Some of us work from home some days. You'll need it to catch up with Denise, who's remote until her husband improves.'

Next, Penn logged Cece into the office email network on her new laptop and handed her a file when they were done.

'Denise told me to let you know that she's written a detailed job description and the first week's list of what she'd like you to focus on.'

'Awesome.'

'Want a tour before you get started?'



Cece nodded. 'I'd love that.'

Penn took her through her new workplace, showing her the ins and outs while Cece took in its laid-back opulence.

'Unwinding is the name of the game at Falcon House,' Penn stated as they swung past the stunning pool with direct beach access. Where pillowy, soft-topped mahogany sun beds sat under striped navy, gold and white umbrellas.

Cece shaded her eyes as she spotted a yoga session on the sand.

They went by the onsite Falcon Retreat Spa, where Penn continued the walk-through. 'We offer every treatment possible to help all guests de-stress. Even better, all staff get a free two-hour massage every month.'

'No?' Cece said, delighted.

'Believe it,' Penn shot back with a smile. 'It's one of our many perks.'

'Sounds awesome. Do you like working here?'

'I love it. Management treats us well; the pay is fantastic, and the benefits are industry-leading. Our guests keep coming back, too, for romantic retreats or quick city escapes. They're massive fans of our multi-award-winning restaurant, The Eatery. We get as many foodies here as beach lovers who swear it's the best getaway in Australia.'

Penn stated this as they walked towards the venue's restaurant. It was an elegant space featuring the same navy, gold and white accents highlighted throughout the hotel. A

chilled lounge soundtrack played through the speakers, adding to its ambience and befitting its oceanside setting.

Penn continued the tour. ‘We open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, with two separate spaces: an al fresco terrace and bar overlooking the ocean and a formal dining area inside. For guests after a more casual fare, we have a poolside cafe on the far side of the stunning gardens where they can order drinks and light bites. Staff get lunch for free.’

‘It’s better than I imagined,’ Cece said, with a growing sense she’d made the right decision.

Tour over, she returned to her desk, where she had short one-on-ones with her new co-workers, learning about the projects they were working on.

The staff and client service team were all a friendly, warm bunch. She met Brad, the social media coordinator, and Alex, the head of accommodation.

Finally, Rachel, the Head of Operations. A dark-haired woman with snappy energy and an exquisite taste in fashion.

‘Call me Rach. Everyone else does,’ she laughed. ‘Just going along with the Aussie tradition of shortening everyone’s name.’

The Spanish-born woman was charismatic and confident, with a great sense of humour, which Cece discovered when they shared a lunch table in the staff room.

Back at her desk after her meal, Cece focused on getting through Denise’s very detailed list of things to do, adding

notes as she went along.

Much was to be done, from hiring planners to creating a wedding kit, photography, marketing, and setting up themed food and wine menus.

She also had to pull together package pricing to include accommodation and spa extras.

However, she first needed to acquaint herself with the proposed wedding location.

She decided to reccie the space which lay left of The Eatery.

The Conservatory was a glass-roofed atrium at the centre of the established and ever-beautiful grounds.

Stepping inside, she gasped at the architectural gem.

It was packed with aquatic plants and vines and lush tropical blooms. The soaring dome above let in light and did justice to the majestic Australian species growing in the space.

Decorated in the signature Falcon House style, it had tables tucked between large plant installations, giving diners privacy and seclusion. Its large doors led to the gardens beyond, the perfect backdrop for any delightful gathering.

*It'd be the ideal location for nuptials and celebrations,* she thought.

Lost in wonder, she rounded a pot plant and gasped as she almost fell over a pair of long, muscled, dark-tanned legs stretched out into her path.

She snapped her eyes up to meet a deep, jade gaze. *Him.*

The confounding man from her first day at Falcon House.

His brow was knit in a frown, and his eyes cagey.

Her heart faltered. ‘Hey.’

Her blurt-out was a mix of surprise, indignation and a strained greeting.

She realised then that she still didn’t know his name.

He lifted a brow, eyes cool and neutral, assessing her as she straightened up, saying nothing.

His lips curled with faint contempt, once more confirming his dislike of her.

Unable to handle his penetrating perusal, her eyes travelled to his table. A laptop lay open before him, and a small cup of black coffee next to it.

She met his jade gaze again, which now held a glint laced with aloofness.

‘You need to watch where you’re going, Miss Mirren.’

‘I think you’re the one who needs to keep your feet out of the walkway,’ she bit back.

‘The onus here is on the person walking around corners without looking.’

She raised her brow after a few awkward moments of an uneasy standoff. ‘Fine. You play the victim. I’ll play the disinterested bystander. Or walker. Whatever.’

She stalked off, feeling the heat of his eyes sear her back—piercing and intense, like a predator stalking its prey.

Refusing to give in to the wild fluttering of her heart, she continued her inspection of the place, ignoring him.

As Cece continued her study of the atrium, she couldn't help but feel annoyed at the man.

She knew by the wild shiver that ran down her spine that his eyes were trained on her. She refused to let him distract her from her work.

*Who did he think he was, sitting like he owned the place?*

She wound up her reccie, noting everything needed to make the Conservatory the perfect setting for even the most demanding bride and groom.

As she left, she noted the man was now typing on his keyboard.

She paused midstep, then made a split decision.

She walked over to him and stood by his table until he acknowledged her, leaning back to stare at her, one brow raised.

She took a sharp breath to counter the lurch his gaze sent through her. 'Look,' she said, 'I think you and I got off on the wrong foot the other day and today. I'm unsure if I insulted you, and I apologise if I did. Clean slate?'

His jade eyes flicked over her, slow and deliberate. They were even more striking up close with gold flecks and darker

aquamarine depths.

When she shifted her heels, he leaned back even more, mouth twitching, eyes falling to her shoes, travelling up to meet her incredulous face.

Reaching for his coffee cup, he sipped, watching her over the rim of the small vessel. His expression gave nothing away.

‘No hard feelings, Miss Mirren.’

His voice was a husky rumble.

‘And you are?’

‘Nobody important.’

She stood stunned, with her mouth agape.

He downed his coffee in one gulp, revealing his corded neck.

With a satisfied grunt, he rose to his feet, shut his laptop, nabbed it and the now-empty cup and stalked away.

Leaving her standing there, incandescent with disbelief.

‘What a rude piece of shit.’

‘I heard that.’

His drawl was cutting, and she blanched, realising she’d spoken out loud, the whisper torn from her lips.

Irritated, Cece owned up to her faux pas. ‘Maybe I wanted you to!’

He paused and turned around at the entrance, framed by the climbing wisteria blooms.

A twitch played at the corner of his lips. 'I can see you're not one to mince words.'

'You could say that,' Cece said, raising her chin defiantly. 'I don't play games.'

He flicked his eyes over her. 'Is that so?' he said, his eyes flicking over her. 'Because I do. Life's more exciting with games, especially the hunter-hunted variety.'

A flush spread across her cheeks. Despite his scorn, she couldn't deny that something about this man intrigued her.

She narrowed her eyes as she tossed her hair in a challenge. 'Given you like playing games, then have at it.'

He chuckled in a timbre that sent a shiver through her. Yet it was mirthless and glacial. 'I look forward to it, Miss Mirren.'

With that, he saluted her, turned and walked away. Leaving Cece to wonder what she had just gotten herself into.

She still had no idea who he was. But she felt determined not to let him get the best of her if she ever bumped into him again.

That said, she couldn't act like the magnetism between them didn't exist. At least her body didn't let her.

'Aargh!' She let out a small scream, shook off the desire loading her body and marched back to her desk to complete her tasks.



‘Hi,’ a voice said.

Cece glanced up from her screen to see a young woman in her mid-twenties standing over her in the Falcon House shirt and slacks uniform.

Brown hair framed a pretty, if not pouty, face.

She sported a weak smile, which didn’t quite reach beyond her lips as she eyeballed Cece with some aloofness.

‘I’m Laila. Your weddings coordinator.’

Penn bustled towards them, a look of relief on her face. ‘Oh good, you found each other. Cece, Laila is a junior manager assigned to help you get the Weddings Division off the ground. She’s already got a folder of interested guests who’ve expressed interest in the service.’

Cece flashed the young woman a smile and reached out a hand to greet her. ‘Lovely to meet you, Laila. Perhaps you can tell me more about yourself and what you’ve done.’

The young woman gave her another slash of her mouth and pulled a chair as Penn took off.

When Cece invited her to do so, Laila launched into sharing her illustrious career so far, which was puzzling given she was fresh out of uni.



She outlined her work at Falcon House and waxed lyrical about significant social media achievements.

Cece soon realised she was the kind of person who could talk your ear off about all of her ideas and plans.

They were novel, but Cece also deduced they were fraught with inexperience.

Laila needed guidance, and Cece sighed, hoping the young woman's ego could handle feedback and advice.

She started by giving Laila a simple task to gauge her experience. 'Why don't you start by drafting an email to our guest database? One announcing the new wedding and reception offering. Once you have it ready, show it to me. We'll review it together, and once I've signed off on it, we can send it out.'

'Whatever.' Laila shrugged before walking away.

Cece stared after her, disquieted.

Returning to her work, she checked her messages and spotted one from Denise with the subject line: '**Team Sync**'.

She opened it and read through the agenda for a stand-up the following day with the managing director via Zoom and a few other staff members.

On the agenda was Cece's remit, plus an item concerning the potential for expanding the events division to other Falcon House properties, such as Falcon Farm.

She noted a name in the list of attendants, one which she recognised.

*Ash Falconer, CEO, Falcon House.*

For a beat, she wondered about him and what he looked like, once again envisioning an older, distinguished man. If he'd served with Joseph, that was more of what she was expecting.

Shrugging, she set aside her speculation and focused on winding up for the day so she could pick Mason up after his first day at school.

She couldn't wait to hear all his news. His energy would add to her growing evidence of whether making this move had been the right choice. For him and her.

## Chapter 3



**W**hat he'd give right now to be running down Tallow Beach.

To feel the wind as he raced the lengthy expanse of white gold sand that spanned from the Cape Byron Lighthouse to Lennox Head.

He craved it to clear his mind and regain some sanity.

*No such luck*, he thought.

Instead, Ash had spent most of his morning in admin, clearing his inbox in the quiet of the Conservatory.

Where he'd been interrupted by one sexy woman and her freakin' *'take-me-now'* heels, causing him to flee her irresistible pull.

He'd then skipped lunch so he could meet up with new distributors for the distillery.

As he sat in his car outside Byron Bay Public, waiting for the school bell, he used the time to work through his ever-growing list of things to do.

Starting with sharing the outcome of his meeting, which he relayed to Diesel over the phone.

‘The Singapore deal is locked in,’ Ash said as he toggled the volume on his Bluetooth in-car speakers. ‘They want more of the ‘21 batch on a monthly consignment. Up to sixty cases if we’ve got it.’

The man he addressed whistled under his breath. ‘Bring it, brother, great work.’

‘D, how’s the B Corp application? We need this cert ASAP, brother. It’ll get us tons of extra publicity.’

‘Going well. We hear back in three weeks. Getting accepted is a challenge, but we’ve got a good shot given we’ve met all the markers for environmental performance, accountability, and transparency.’

Diesel was his close mate and business partner in ‘Falcon By The Sea’, their gin, whisky and liquor distillery business. A concept that mirrored the Falcon Group’s successes in farming and hospitality.

In the last five years, Ash had invested in his parents’ macadamia spread, adding new varieties of plants to produce unique edible fruits, native species, and botanicals. The orchards and farm were the perfect pantry for creating a world-class selection of gins and whiskies.

Working with Diesel, an award-winning distiller, he’d crafted best-selling spirits packed with native Australian rainforest fruits and flavours.

They were on the cusp of getting global recognition for their unusual vintages. Their ciders, too, had a cult status for being somewhat lethal and almost weapons-grade.

Made in small batches, they shipped them out to hardcore enthusiasts. Most of them were his ex-military brothers, who swore it burnt through misery and staved off any crippling ennui for days.

‘Good. Let me know how it goes.’

‘Will do,’ Diesel said. ‘We’re also close to releasing the macadamia liqueur.’

‘Sweet. As soon as the first batch is out, I want a few boxes sent to Cole. He can flog it at Toby’s, and it’ll fly when he adds his magic publican touch.’

‘Done.’

Ash tapped off the call and leaned back into the headrest.

A wave of weariness hit him, and he sighed. His plate was overflowing with work, almost to a tipping point.

Not only was he overseeing Falcon House while Denise was away, but he also had to watch over the farm and the distillery. As well as his covert defence contracting hustle.

Ash had a significant stake in Sovereign Allied. The Sydney-based firm was a private military contractor that worked on an exclusive basis with the higher end of the market—providing protection to governments, celebrities, and politicians.

They also worked with law enforcement, supplying professionally trained armed personnel and logistical support. Their team was the best in cyber-security, technical counter-measures, counter-surveillance, and counter-espionage services.

The Sovereign mob was Ash's family. His brother Cole and one of his best mates, Saint, ran the day-to-day aspects of the firm.

Three other individuals also held shares in the company - Dave Ellis, Kamila Kenos and Kris Tanner.

All six had served together in the Special Air Service Regiment, a special forces unit of the Australian Army, along with Slade, their lost brother.

Their work focused on eliminating high-value targets and performed hostage rescues, reconnaissance and direct action assignments.

They'd worked together during a complicated deployment in Afghanistan, guarding supply convoys in war-torn parts of the country.

It turned into a shit show when their fellow Sabre squad member, Slade North, disappeared during an ambush. One which Ash was convinced they'd been led into with bum intel.

No sign of Slade's body had ever been recovered, and it was thought insurgents had kidnapped him.

Defence spent considerable time looking for any sign of life, but none was forthcoming, so after five years, the search

was abandoned.

On the other hand, Ash had never given up on his mate. He used his links into black ops for top secret intra-government organisations to keep searching.

Now, the firm was knee-deep in a covert operation he sensed was the closest he'd ever come to finding Slade alive.

It centred on a criminal investigation into their ex-CO in the army.

A man whose stepdaughter was now on Ash's patch and perplexing the heck out of him.

*Cece was one intriguing woman*, Ash admitted to himself.

She'd thrown his challenge back in his face earlier today, giving him lip for his efforts to wear her down.

He was still refusing to give her his name on principle. Telling himself she should have dug deeper to find out who he was.

He smirked because the thrill of annoying her was worth it. Even though he was hell-bent on making her family pay for the suffering they'd caused.

He could tell she was one strong woman, not easily intimidated, which raised his respect for her.

Still, he wouldn't let her best him, not now, not when he was so close to his goals.

The school bell chimed, and he unfurled himself from his graphite black, modded Land Cruiser 70 series rig.

Slapping on his aviators to ward off the intense sun, he strolled towards the spot outside the school gates where he waited for Jake.

A few other parents stood around, and Ash jolted as a pair of satin blue high heels caught his eye.

He snapped his gaze to the woman moving in them with the sway of a dancer.

In that instant, Ash knew who they belonged to. He'd given them his full attention earlier that day.

His eyes lingered on the beautiful ass in that pencil skirt and the sweeping line of her back and neck.

At that moment, he was overwhelmed with the need to have those long legs wrapped around his waist. To have those satin blue high heels digging into his back. To have her under him, keening for relief, to make her weep and scream his name.

*Woah.*

As he passed behind her, he took care not to pass too close but enough so he got hit with her scent. A floral-citrus mix of lemon verbena, mandarin and peach notes. Which sent a jolt to his cock.

He wanted her. *No doubt.*

But she was way off limits due to her shady shades of grey family.



She hadn't caught onto his presence yet, so he moved under a palm tree a few metres away and kept his gaze on her.

She sensed him in under ten seconds. She whipped her head around to the right, away from him, and then to the left. Landing her gaze square at where he stood, leaning against the tree.

He fought the smirk that threatened to lift the sides of his lips.

*Fuck, this was fun.*

Her eyes stayed hidden behind her sunglasses, but his skin rippled at the arctic touch of her glare. He kept a straight face on until she turned her back on him. Then he grinned to himself.

Her stance shifted to ramrod still as the air between them crackled.

His mind rebelled, and his heart rate spiralled as he realised he liked playing *whateverthefuck* this game was with Miss Mirren.

Around them, kids surged from the school gates and swarmed the pick-up area.

‘Dad!’

Jake launched into his arms, and for a moment, Ash forgot Miss Mirren.

‘Son, how was your day?’

‘Awesome. And even better, Mason goes to school here. He’s in the year behind me, but how cool! He’s awesome at handball, too, Dad, and he showed me some new moves. He’s pretty amazing.’

Without warning, Jake turned and called out. ‘Hey Mace, come on over.’

Ash looked up and spotted Cece’s son make a run towards them.

*This would be interesting.*

He noted Cece stare at the trio, take a deep breath, and then wander over, reluctance stamped all over her stiff body.

‘So Dad, can Mason come for a play date, maybe even a sleepover? Like soon?’

Ash gazed down at both boys and the eager expressions on their faces. ‘Not sure, bud.’

‘No.’

The cold refusal came from Cece, standing a few steps away, her lips pursed in annoyance.

‘Ah, y’all need to chat and know about each other, right?’ This, from his smart-aleck son.

Ash sucked in air, as he ran a hand through his hair. ‘Something like that.’

‘Hurry up and do it already.’

Mason added fuel to the fire. ‘Yeah! Do it!’

Ash almost choked as Cece looked away, her face set and cold. 'Let's give Miss Mirren and Mason time to settle in, OK buddy?'

Jake's face fell. 'Fine.'

'Mason, we need to leave. Now.'

Cece was still pissed off, and it came across in the arctic tone of her voice.

'Have a good one, Miss Mirren.'

She raised a brow. 'You too, Mr -?'

He curled his lip, nabbed Jake around the shoulders and walked away, leaving her again in the dark.

'Damn you!'

He heard her soft curse, sending the most delicious sensation through him. For a moment, as he closed the passenger door after helping Jake into the car, he imagined her saying it against his lips as his fingers drove her wild.

The image was so enticing that he groaned as he rounded his bonnet. Drawing a wide-eyed, curious glance from a passing parent with an uncanny resemblance to a famous onscreen star.

'You 'right, man?' the man called out to him.

'All good mate, all good.'

Except he wasn't, and it took a few moments before his body came down from the unexpected high Cece Mirren was

giving it. Only when his breath settled did he open the driver's door and slip in behind the wheel.

*Hell, no.*

There was no way any connection would work out with Cece. Too much was on the line, plus the chasm between them, in the form of one ex-Major General.

Given her sass, the showdown between them would be stratospheric once she found out Ash was investigating Joseph Mirren.

He sucked his teeth at the thought of what she'd do if she found out she was being monitored. That she was a person of interest and that if she'd aided and abetted her father, she too was looking at serious charges.

'Dad, let's go! I'm starving!'

Jake's hangry call helped shove Cece out of Ash's thoughts.

He put his car in motion, tamping down the urge to indulge in more fantasies of her.

Undressing her in his mind would only put the mission in jeopardy. He needed his head clear of distractions because he and his team only had one shot.

To make ex-Major General Mirren and his family pay for all the pain and anguish they'd dumped onto his patch.



Cece cursed under her breath. *Fuck that man.*

He was driving her up the wall.

Worse still, she hadn't quite stopped thinking about him since their chance encounter earlier that morning.

As she pulled away from the school, half listening to Mason's chatter, she acknowledged something was fomenting between her and Mr Nameless.

Their interactions so far shifted between outright hostility and jacked-up attraction. She had no idea where it would finally land, but she couldn't deny the pull between them, no matter how hard she tried.

However, she had no hopes for romance, at least not in the foreseeable future. Since her ex Nik, she'd set aside any expectations of true love, her heart not quite recovered from being stomped on and betrayed.

When she got home, she helped with homework, fed Mason, and put him to bed.

Soon after, her phone lit up just as she poured a glass of Rosé.

The caller ID showed it was her mother, and she picked up, eager to vent.

‘How was your first day, darling? I can talk freely because Joseph has left for golf and drinks at the club. He doesn’t return until 1 a.m. on nights like this.’

Cece gave Samantha a rundown of her day. ‘It went well. So far, so good. Mace enjoyed meeting his new teacher and making new friends.’

She sniffed, recalling Jake and his recalcitrant father.

‘That’s promising. So why is there a small hitch in your voice?’

Cece curled into her sofa and sighed. ‘Mum, why do you know me so well?’

‘You’re my world, darling. It’s my job to sense your discomfort and try to ease it. What happened?’

Cece went over her run-in with her nameless nemesis.

‘Mum, both times I’ve seen him, he’s been so cold and rude, like he thinks the worst of me. I’m so over men like that. Remember Nik? And the end of my marriage?’

‘How could I? He was your first love. You were gone from the moment you met that handsome, smiling Maori charmer at University.’

Cece huffed, reminiscing. ‘After he bumped into me when we scrambled to enter the Business 101 lecture hall. I dropped my bag, and he helped me pick it up. Later, he picked *me* up.’

Memories flooded back of how Nik had asked her for a drink later in the uni bar. She’d accepted and spent that

evening laughing at his jokes, warmed by his attention and gentle nature.

They became inseparable. A few years later, they married, bought a house and had Mason a year after.

Samantha's sigh cut through her thoughts. 'I mourn the end of that marriage as much as you, sweetheart. He was so good to you at the start.'

'Until he turned into a stranger in my home who treated me like I was nothing to him,' Cece countered as she sipped her wine. 'First, he lost his sense of humour. Then his patience, becoming sullen, withdrawn, and irritable.'

Samantha tut-tutted. 'I remember the depression. He'd had a hard childhood living in poverty. He couldn't deal with a mortgage, wife and child, so he gave up. On his job and his family.'

Cece had watched her young husband's self-esteem plummet. Frustrated by his souring moods and disappointment with himself, she'd pleaded with him to change.

In response, he subjected her to long bouts of silent treatment and open contempt. Their sex life became nonexistent as he began drinking to calm his nerves.

'I hated the alcohol, I hated the weed. I even suggested counselling, but that's when Nik disappeared, walking out when Mace was a baby.'

Months later, she found out through mutual friends that he'd resurfaced in Auckland, where he'd gone to live with his

Ngāti Te Ata people.

Their divorce had been a quiet, sad and silent affair when he'd signed and returned the papers with no question.

He'd shut her out without explanation and turned his back on her.

Samantha tsked under her breath. 'Leaving you alone to cope with a young child and mortgage.'

'What cuts the most, mum, is that he's never explained his behaviour.'

The lack of closure meant Cece had shut down her romantic life and had never dated since.

It hurt, especially when she saw Nik reflected in the smiles her son gave her every day.

Devastated, Cece had done the same as many other women. She'd rolled up her sleeves and taken charge. She'd worked hard, nurtured her young son and kept paddling.

It had been exhausting and almost soul-destroying.

Therapy helped her re-frame her decision-making and view of herself.

She'd worked her way past the chasm between her hopes and experience. Now, she saw her life in broader terms than just a failure or a wasted effort.

She chose to embrace the idea that after a relationship breakdown, all she could do was love herself, live her life independently of a man and care for her loved ones.



Mace made her journey more worthwhile. Samantha had been a lifeline.

‘If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have made it, Mum, so thank you for having my back. As for that stranger, he has no idea I’ve had enough toxic men. I’m not going to take any of his shit lying down.’

‘That’s my girl,’ Samantha said, ringing off.

Later, Cece took a relaxing soak to clear her head. As she sat in the tub, she closed her eyes.

Images of the man from earlier that day crowded her mind. She recalled how he’d iced her with his smouldering, emerald, intense gaze.

She shivered despite the heated bath. Wondering who he was and why he was having such an effect on her.

She wasn’t sure she had it to indulge in thinking about him any further, despite how freakin’ sexy he was.

*A man best forgotten*, she concluded, letting her entire body sink into the water which rushed over her, washing her cares away.



Outside his window, the world lay shadowed.

Most bush creatures were silent this far from the highway, except for the crickets and frogs, up to their usual job filling the night with their chorus.

In his primary bedroom at Falcon Farm, Ash's room was pitch-black.

A second later, a sliver of a moon slid out from the clouds, and a single shard of light fell into the room.

Fighting insomnia, Ash turned his head and gazed out his window at the faint flashes of stars streaking by and disappearing in the crack-of-dawn sky. He spotted a ghost-like owl.

*Or was that a bat flitting past, its wings a blur in the night?*

His phone buzzed.

He sat up in bed, blinking at the screen as he answered.

The man on the other line didn't waste a breath. 'Sir. It's Gil. He's relapsed again. He went out for a bite last night and got lashed. I think he got his hands on something.'

Ash sucked his teeth as he swung his long legs out of bed. 'Reg, where is he?'

'Back home at the share pad. I found him cruising the streets a few hours ago. Out of his mind.'

Ash groaned, checking his watch. It was 4 a.m., but sleep had long eluded him. 'I'll be right over.'

He headed to the bathroom. He freshened up, snagged some gear, threw on a jacket and army boots and headed downstairs.

He tapped a text to Rose, whom he knew woke up early anyway.

His phone pinged back, confirming that she would watch Jake and take him to school that morning.

Ash stepped out into fresh air, thick with the scent of sweet rain due to a late-night shower over the hinterland.

Fog rolled over the road as he drove towards Byron. The town was dark; the streets deserted, empty of the flood of tourists and sun lovers. Just the occasional car sped by, but nothing else.

Soon, he parked outside a workman's cottage on the outskirts of town.

The place was a neat, inconspicuous, one-story, five-bedroom home.

It was also a halfway house for men from Ash's former battalion. Soldiers who'd fought alongside or under his command. Those who'd run afoul of life's challenges and needed a hand-up.

Sovereign Allied paid the bills for this place. Reg Akimoto, a fellow ex-soldier and Ash's Sovereign 2IC in Byron, ran it. He also oversaw all their security contracts in the region.

Reg was Diesel's older brother. He was a good man, built like a tank and loyal to a fault.

Ash prowled to the front entrance. Reg slid the door open before he'd announced himself. The rays of early dawn lit up his rugged face, his eyes shadowed with concern.

'Boss.'

Ash jerked his chin at the burly, mixed-race, Japanese Australian man in greeting, his expression grim. 'How is he doing?'

Reg shook his head. 'Not good. He's in a bad way.'

Ash stalked inside, sliding off his jacket. 'Where is he?'

Reg led him along a narrow hallway.

Both men tracked past the kitchen, where three other men stood around, looking worried.

Ash nodded at them, and they saluted back. 'Sir.'

He paused. 'You men doing OK?'

They nodded at him, their faces solemn, arms crossed over their chests.

'Good. Reg and I will take care of Gil. You guys go on with your day.'

They nodded and returned to their breakfasts, preparing to fan out to their gigs in construction, trades or hospitality—work designed to keep them out of trouble.

The kind Gil fell into.

Reg led Ash to a small bedroom at the end of the corridor.

A young, swarthy, dark-haired man lay on a bed, sweat pouring down his face. His eyes were closed, and he panted, his lungs labouring hard.

The rank smell of his body odour filled the room with the scent of stale desperation. The moist night air pressed against his flesh, doing little to cool him. Ash could almost see the heat radiating off him in waves.

‘Shit,’ he muttered under his breath. He walked over to the bed and checked Gil’s pulse. It was racing.

Ash gently shook him. ‘Gil. Wake up, man.’

Gil stirred, his eyes fluttering open. He looked up at Ash, his eyes bloodshot and unfocused. ‘Sir. What are you doing here?’

‘I’m here to help,’ Ash said, his voice firm but kind. ‘Remember anything?’

‘Met some dudes on Main Street; they took me to some bar. We were having a good time, then -.’ Gil’s voice faded off.

Ash shook his head. ‘You need to stop taking that stuff, my friend. You’re killing yourself.’

Gil groaned and tried to sit up but collapsed back onto the bed. ‘I can’t do it, Sir. I’ve tried. It’s too hard.’

Ash sighed, softening the hardness in his voice. ‘You can’t keep living like this. It would be best if you went to rehab.’

‘I don’t need rehab. I can handle it,’ Gil slurred.

He slumped back, eyes rolling. Moisture sheeted off him, and Ash spotted a damp stain under his body.

He turned to Reg. ‘Elevated temperature, sweating, delirium. Any idea what he took?’

Reg nodded, ‘Found this on him.’

He handed Ash a small folded light brown pack. It had a logo stamped on it. Ash looked closer. He peered at the red snake imprinted on the surface.

‘What’s this?’

‘The baggie his coke came in.’

‘They’re branding these days, hey?’

‘Everything’s a brand, my friend. Even coke.’

‘Damn.’

‘They call it ‘Red Adder’, thus the crimson snake logo. From what some of our crew say, it’s the newest, hottest thing on the streets. It’s laced with a high percentage of fentanyl for faster, wilder highs. It kills just as quickly.’

Ash clenched his jaw as he fingered the baggie. ‘Fuck. I know the name, ‘Red Adder’. It’s a cartel.’

Gil let out a moan, and suddenly, his eyes rolled.

‘He needs medical attention,’ Reg said, his voice tight with worry.

Ash nodded, moving in a clip to Gil's side. 'Looks like he's ODding. We need to drive him to a hospital. Now.'

Reg grunted, and together, they lifted Gil off the bed. Carrying him through the house and past his concerned mates.

Outside, they bundled the young man into Ash's car.

They raced in tense silence to the nearest emergency room.

Ash's mind scrambled with thoughts of Gil's predicament as they waited for the doctors to work on his charge.

He couldn't help but feel guilty for not being more engaged with the young man.

He suspected Reg felt the same, given his hang-dog expression. The men his 2IC cared for at the halfway house were his responsibility. He took his role seriously.

After a long wait, a thin, harried male doctor bustled towards them. 'Mr Falconer, Mr Akimoto, your friend is stable now. We were able to revive him, but he's not out of the woods yet. We've admitted him to the ICU and will monitor him over the next few days. He should recover well.'

Ash nodded, relief flooding through him. 'Thank you, doctor. Can we speak with him?'

The doctor hesitated for a moment before nodding. 'I'll allow a short visit, but please try not to overexert him. He needs his rest.'

Ash and Reg followed the doctor down a hallway to the ICU. They entered a small room where Gil lay in a ward bed.

Tubes protruded from his arms, and monitors beeped beside him. He looked pale, weak, and fragile.

A wave of guilt and regret washed over Ash. He'd brought Gil into the halfway house and promised to help him get his life back to a better place. Which the young man swore he'd do.

Yet here he was, lying in hospital after an overdose.

Ash walked over to the bed. 'Hey.'

Gil opened his eyes and gazed at Ash, pupils unfocused. 'Sir.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Like shit.'

Ash gave the young man a raised brow. 'You don't say? You gave us both quite the scare. The doc says you're going to be okay. We're going to find you the help you need.'

Gil closed his eyes again. 'I don't deserve it.'

Ash squeezed his shoulder. 'Everyone deserves a second chance, Gil. You have to want it for yourself.'

Reg cleared his throat. 'So, man, you'll be under observation for a few days. I'll talk to the doctors and negotiate for an early discharge.'

Gil nodded, eyes fluttering open. 'Thank you. I appreciate it.'

Ash patted the man's shoulder. 'We'll see you soon, Gil. Take the rest you need.'



Reg jerked his chin. 'I'll call you to find out how you're doing.'

Gil nodded and slid back into a stupor.

Ash turned to his 2IC. 'I want a report on him every couple of hours.'

'Yes, Sir.'

Ash stood for a moment, gazing at the sleeping man before shaking his head, his frustration palpable.

He turned around and left the room, Reg in his wake.

The two of them walked in silence back to Ash's waiting vehicle.

Ash paused at his car door. 'The snake snow. We know where it's coming from?'

Reg gave a non-committal shrug. 'I've had noises from the boys that it's moving fast between current and former soldiers. It's all over most barracks across the East Coast, and now it's here. I suspect Gil met up with a buddy from the service and got a score off him. We're also seeing it in the clubs. Some of my bouncer guys have nabbed it from kids on the dance floor.'

Ash's jaw clenched as he raised a booted foot onto the sports footstep to tie the undone lace on his shoe. 'If it's Red Adder, it's linked to ex-Major General Joseph Mirren.'

'Mirren? The guy being investigated?'

'You heard?'

'It's only the worst kept secret on the East Coast.'

‘Just so you know, I’m running an investigation into the general. On behalf of a joint task force led by the ADFIS MPs. They’re understaffed and overwhelmed, so they brought us in to help.’

Reg whistled under his breath. ‘Why us?’

‘Plausible deniability. Our security gigs give us access to those he’s dealing with, especially his wealthy clients. Means we can also keep an eye on those who make their lifestyles possible - from limo coke delivery services to money laundering and tax evasion specialists.’

‘How long have we been looking into this shit?’

‘Saint and I have been working on this for months. Now that Red Adder is in Byron, you need to be in on it. We’ve got intel that Mirren is working with them. They’ve industrial-scale supply lines, nation-sized GDPs and arsenals of weapons. For months, they’ve flooded the local drug scene, making top dollar from well-off individuals desperate for a high.’

‘Sounds like a traitor to me.’

‘That’s because he is. It isn’t enough that he got so many kids hooked when he was their CO. Now, he’s prancing around like a self-styled drug lord after leaving the service. His deadly product was now in Byron, risking countless young lives. Worse still, he also betrayed us in Afghanistan. I can’t wait to ice this man for all the fucking pain he’s caused.’

Ash had witnessed the man's cruelty while serving under Joseph Mirren on tour.

When the call came to look into him, he'd stepped up to investigate Mirren without hesitation. Keen to bring him down after his actions on tour and now, when his dark influence was destroying lives, including those of naive young veterans.

Frustratingly, the man was elusive, always two steps ahead of the law, using his contacts to cover up his misdeeds.

For a second, Ash wanted to rush back to Falcon House. To tear down Cece's door and demand she come back with him. To meet Gil and witness the effect of her stepfather's callousness.

He let go of the impossible illusion.

What he needed to do right now was ensure Gil was on the path to recovery. Only then could he focus on the bigger picture.

'What are we doing about it?' Reg asked, breaking through Ash's thoughts.

'We have a blank cheque to do whatever it takes to bring him down. So let's use it to our advantage.'

'How so?'

'Use all you've got to track down where this shit is coming from.'

'Understood.'

‘Give me concrete evidence. We need to fucking nail him, once and for all,’ Ash said, his voice tight with emotion.

Reg nodded. ‘I’m with you. I’ll stay with Gil for a bit today, then head out later and put some feelers out. Perhaps find out who the source is in town. It’s got to be coming in somehow.’

Ash opened his car door and slid behind the wheel, touching a button to start the engine. ‘Do it. I’ll also chat with Saint to see if he has a bead on the baggies. We’ll need all the ammo we can get our hands on to take this monster down.’

# Chapter 4



Cece loitered near the reception of Falcon House.

She strolled in circles with her phone to her ear, like she was on a call. When all she was doing was replaying her mother's message to her earlier that day.

*'Hey honey, I'm spending time with my old school friends at the club today. I just wanted to let you know Joseph concerns me a little. He's not home often, and he doesn't talk to me when he does come in. He takes calls from strange people and shouts at them. It seems the investigation isn't going well. He's also forgotten to top up the shopping card, so I'm using the money you and Liam gave me. He leaves me alone most of the time, so don't you worry. I hope this season will pass soon; he's driving me bonkers. That said, I'm so proud of you for making a life for yourself and Mace. Without needing a man to come to your rescue.'*

There was a short sigh, then, *'Love you darling and speak to you soon.'*

Cece pressed her lips together, lost in thought. She could do little to help her mother besides listen, hoping she still had

access to her secret bank account.

Cece made an impulsive decision and dialled her brother's number.

It went to voicemail, and Cece bit her lip, unsure what to do.

Just then, a voice cried out.

She reared around to see a pregnant woman about her age rushing past. She was struggling as her rounded belly slowed her charge toward the Eatery.

'What's wrong?' Cece called out.

'My daughter,' the woman panted. 'She escaped as we were loading up the car. Now she's headed for the pool.'

Cece whipped around to look through the Eatery's glass walls and door.

Indeed, a small, chubby figure was toddling past seated guests towards the inviting blue water beyond.

Cece calculated in that instant that the mother would not reach the child in time.

'I'll get her,' she called out to the distressed woman, slipping her phone into her pocket.

After a few steps, it became clear her hot pink Identità heels were not up to the task. So she paused at an empty console outside the restaurant, kicked them off, and sprinted on.

Barefoot, she nimbly wove between tables as curious breakfast diners followed her trajectory.

Summer's sultry heat swamped Cece as she launched herself through the open doors of the restaurant. She glanced around, her eyes honing on the target.

The giggling, blonde-curled girl was just seconds from the pool's edge. Her plump arms were reaching out. Just as she was about to dive bomb into the cool waters, Cece snagged her from behind and swooped her into the air.

‘Gotcha, gorgeous girl.’

The surprised little human let out a yelp as she squirmed. Her tiny face scrunched into a scowl, ready to open her mouth and rip.

Until Cece turned her around and made a funny face.

To her satisfaction, the almost howl turned into loud giggles.

‘Esme,’ Cece heard. ‘You gave mummy a scare.’

She turned with the child still in her arms. The woman she'd encountered earlier was rushing in her direction, arms outstretched.

‘Mama,’ the child gurgled, wriggling like mad.

‘Here you go,’ Cece said, handing the precious bundle to her relieved mother.

‘Thank you so much. I wouldn't have made it.’

Cece smiled. ‘All good. I’m well versed in the two-year-old streak.’

Both women laughed in shared camaraderie. ‘My son was an escape artist,’ Cece added. ‘He almost made it to the end of my street one day.’

‘Thank you again,’ the woman said. ‘Come baby girl. Grandma has a treat for you in the car.’

The chubby girl waved at Cece as her mother stuck her to her hip and left.

Cece took a deep breath and followed, seeking her discarded shoes.

She uncovered one in the corridor between the restaurant and reception; the other was under an occasional table. Glancing around, she determined no one was looking in her direction. So she crouched, got on her knees and reached for the shoe.

She backed out, turning just as she sensed a presence.

Looking up, her eyes met a jade-coloured gaze.

She cursed under her breath.

He raised a brow, his eyes sliding to the pink heels in her hand.

‘Problem?’ he rasped.

‘Just in a barefoot mood,’ she tossed back.

His lips twitched. ‘Your boss OK with walking you around without shoes while at work?’



‘Why would you care? I was helping a guest, so I needed them off.’

The brow rose even higher. ‘I see.’

‘I think you see what you choose to,’ she flipped back, leaning down to slip on her right shoe. She managed to get her toes in before she lost balance and almost fell over.

Until a strong arm came to her rescue.

‘Fuck,’ she whispered.

Not so much at the stumble but that he had to be the one to save her from it. Her heart stuttered, roaring as his arms steadied her.

‘Relax, babe,’ he murmured, reaching for her other shoe.

He placed both on the floor next to each other and swung an arm around her waist to lift her into them.

She yelped in surprise as she settled into the heels.

His arms lingered, and the feel of his corded strength sent a wave of arousal through her.

Pushing off him, she stuck her hands in her hair and fluffed her curls. A habit of hers when she got flustered.

‘You’re welcome,’ he murmured. His eyes flicked over her in a vexing mix of cool disdain and amusement.

She sighed. ‘Thank you. For the save, carry, lift.’

‘Call me anytime you need a rescue in those heels.’

‘You like them?’ she said in an unexpected rush.

His lips twitched, curving upwards in a hint of warmth. 'They're something else,' he rasped, turning on his heel to walk away.

'You're something else,' she called out, unable to help herself.

'Never a truer sentiment,' he rumbled, not breaking his stride and powering out the doors to the front of the hotel.

Her eyes lingered on his hips and delicious tight, muscled butt in the trousers as he stalked off. *Such a waste of a gorgeous bod on such a rude boor of a man.*

She realised then he was decked out more formally than she'd seen him before. Instead of his customary casual work shorts and torn tee, he wore a crisp, fitted white shirt.

One moulded to his broad chest and tucked into contoured light-coloured slacks. Hiding nothing of his delectable derriere and thick thighs and calves. With feet tucked in a pair of gorgeous RM Williams leather boots.

She wondered who he was once more. She should have asked her colleagues by now, but unsure of his status at Falcon House, she'd hesitated. Unwilling to have them cast aspersions on her curiosity.

For a handyman, he had some balls, that was for sure.

*But was he the hotel's jack of all trades?*

*Or king of all spite? Because why did he have such a bee in his bonnet for her?*

She had questions but wasn't sure whether they'd ever get an answer.

Yet, he lingered no matter how much Cece tried to push him out of her mind. Like a ghoulish ghost going out of its way to piss her off for the rest of the day.

She was a tad riled up later when she walked into the conference room. The Team Sync was about to kick off, and she took her place next to Rachel, who gave her a reassuring smile.

Denise, onscreen via Zoom, began the meeting, going through the progress of bookings over the next few months. Cece listened, taking notes and offering suggestions where appropriate.

As the meeting progressed, she couldn't help but feel disappointed that Ash Falconer wasn't present. She was curious to meet the company's owner, keen to meet the man associated with her stepfather.

Suddenly, the door opened, and a man stalked in.

Cece's eyes widened in surprise as she recognised her nameless nemesis. Her heart pounded as she took his dark hair and chiselled jawline.

He gazed around the room, and his piercing jade-green eyes met hers, flaring before icing over.

A flash of heat rushed through her body, biting her inner lip to disguise her reaction to him. She cast one more look in his direction. He pulled his eyes from her, a tic in his jaw.

Cece shivered, wondering whether he, too, felt the same jolt.

‘Ash, nice of you to join us.’

Denise greeted the man sliding into her view onscreen with a smile full of affection.

‘Hello, everyone,’ he said, his voice deep and smooth. ‘I apologise for not being able to join earlier. I had some pressing matters to attend to.’

*He was Ash Falconer?*

Cece’s mind reeled. Her cheeks flamed as surprise and embarrassment washed over her.

*The man who had been driving her insane with his unyielding attitude was none other than the CEO of Falcon House.*

It now made sense, and she kicked herself for not seeing it. He carried himself with an air of conviction that only someone in his position of power possessed.

Cece tried not to let his presence distract her, but she couldn’t deny the electricity in the air.

At one point, his eyes lingered on her for a moment.  
*Cutting. Tearing into her.*

She didn’t know whether to be intimidated or exhilarated by it.

Annoyed by how much he was affecting her, she met it with a chilly gaze of her own.

He flicked his eyes away and gave her no more attention.

When Denise opened the floor to miscellaneous business, Cece's junior raised her hand.

'Yes, Laila?' Denise called out.

The young woman beamed. 'I want to report that I sent all our past guests a newsletter. The theme focused on the new wedding services, and I've had an awesome response from them already.'

As Denise congratulated her, Cece's blood ran cold.

For the past few days, the girl had brought up excuse after excuse whenever Cece asked Laila for the email draft.

Laila had claimed she was finalising other marketing projects and how snowed under she was. The other zinger was that she'd sent the draft to Cece, but it must've gotten lost in spam.

Now, here she was, flaunting the distribution of an unauthorised newsletter. Cece sucked her teeth, irate that she had no idea whether it was on brand.

Or if it was laid out well. It certainly didn't include the key messaging she'd been working on for days, that was for sure.

Laila had pipped her to the post, jeopardising Cece's efforts.

She huffed in annoyance as Laila met her puzzled look with a triumphant smile. Cece snapped her eyes away only to clash eyes with her intractable CEO.

His gaze was a cool assessment; she met it with defiance and a tip of her chin.

*Because wtf?*

So she'd been played by a junior.

Cece clenched her jaw and vowed to be on guard with Laila moving forward.

She also made the choice not to confront her junior about the email newsletter. There was nothing she could do about it now. Admitting she'd been bested on such a small matter would also be a poor power play.

So Cece chose her battles and decided to take a hit this time. While vowing never to let the young woman humiliate her again.

Despite her irritation with Laila and, more so, Ash, Cece's eyes drifted back to him.

Drawn to his magnetism, the way he took subtle control of the room without effort. His baritone, too, was a dream. It rasped as if dragged over rough-hewn rocks, leaving everyone in a trance.

When he turned his head, his face went from shadow to light. She lingered on his profile, chiselled and set with purpose. On his jaw, steady and firm, his cheekbones carved like a statue.

He was a force to be reckoned with; she suspected he was aware of it. He was potent, bending all and sundry to his will.

There was quiet confidence, sometimes even a menace that made the hairs on her body stand to attention.

But Cece was not one to be intimidated. She needed to let him know she was not to be underestimated.

So when the meeting ended, and Ash stood up to leave, she made her move.

Heart thumping, she drew up close to him. ‘Mr Falconer, a moment, please?’

Ash paused mid-step and turned to her, his eyes locking onto hers, his face cold and unyielding. ‘Miss Mirren.’

Cece took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. ‘I just wanted to let you know I didn’t realise who you were before. I hope I didn’t insult you in any way.’

He gave her a hooded look. ‘Takes a lot more than that to offend me. That said, you should have done the legwork.’

She closed her eyes, feeling the sting of his reprimand. ‘Yes. I should have.’

He stared at her for a beat, his eyes enigmatic. ‘I’ll let it go if you will.’

‘Of course.’ She nodded, keeping her expression neutral despite her fast heartbeat.

‘One more thing, I don’t suffer fools, Miss Mirren. So here’s hoping you don’t turn out to be one.’

She cocked her head, her eyes widening in disbelief. Maybe Laila’s underhandedness had hit the mark if the big

boss himself was questioning her abilities.

‘Just focus on doing a good job moving forward.’

He jerked his chin at her and walked out of the boardroom, prowling away with his long legs.

‘I’m not saying I hate him,’ she whispered. ‘But that man is becoming the Monday of my life.’

Her incredulous eyes followed his departure. Capturing how well his ass moulded his trousers.

Her traitorous mouth watered at the sight of his muscled back and broad shoulders as he powered through the office.

With a shake of her head, she checked herself, noting how every woman in the place was giving him surreptitious looks, admiring his form.

Dragging her eyes away, Cece sat back at her desk.

Moments later, she caught Penn and Rachel talking about him in hushed tones, sharing tidbits about his wealth and reputation as a man of mystery.

She’d never been much for gossip or digging into people’s privacy, so she shut out the whispers.

Yet it didn’t do away with the fact that the pull to him was visceral. Regardless of the mad attraction to him, she was annoyed about her missteps around him.

She had to convince him he hadn’t made the wrong choice in hiring her, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was a chasm between them.



One filled with unspoken mystery and ambiguity she couldn't fathom.

Which she was sure had nothing to do with the fact she'd mistook him for a plumber lash handyman. *Not that there was anything wrong with that.*

Ever the practical woman, Cece pushed him out of her mind; dwelling on him would not pay the bills.

Determined to turn around the close call with Laila this morning, she emailed Denise to clarify her junior's reporting structure.

'You're her manager. She reports to you,' Denise confirmed in writing a few minutes later.

Satisfied, Cece set Laila a set of tasks. Nothing too tricky. All quite reasonable. However, Cece suspected Laila lacked the imagination to pull them off or would try and fob them to someone else. Only time would tell.

Cece set herself an ambitious plan, pouring over details and brainstorming new ideas for her remit. Of which she'd be careful about sharing with her backstabbing junior.

She wanted to ensure that she'd never be caught on the back foot and that Ash Falconer would never have an excuse to fault her again.



Ash decided to take an early morning beach run.

The sun was golden and warm on his skin. Above him, seagulls took flight, their gleaming feathers reflecting against the sky's cerulean gloss.

The white sand sifted under his feet, while beyond the shoreline, the crystal clear blue waters of the Pacific Ocean rippled towards the shore.

His soul and mind hummed as he raced along the coast.

Freedom, beauty, peace.

*This was what he'd fought so hard for, what many had no concept of.*

He never took any of it for granted.

An hour later, he walked into the Falcon House VIP Villa, where he sometimes overnighted during the week.

The architecturally designed beach house sat on a ridge. One that towered above the iconic beach below.

Designed to make the most of the stunning views, space, and natural light, the house showcased Byron Bay's natural beauty.

It had two spacious open-plan living areas, a designer kitchen, and four bedrooms. Each with its ensuite, plus a guest bathroom. Making it the perfect hideaway spot.

It was sometimes rented by Hollywood A-listers, celebrities, billionaires, and socialites.

Especially those seeking a more laid-back lifestyle. Drawn to the beach town's idyllic setting and relaxed culture, where everyone received equal treatment and privacy was cherished.

Churlish about influencers, wannabes and main character energy, residents left the stars to themselves. On any given day, one could find the most famous faces on the planet in the local grocer, with the freedom to wander around without worrying about paparazzi or stalkers.

The place had also attracted movie producers who'd set camp in the coastal town to film their TV and cinema creations. Some of which went on to make them billions.

The problem was that Byron Bay was now attracting the bottom feeders.

It was Ash's mandate to keep them away.

He used a towel to dry himself after his ocean dip while he went into the study, checked his phone and saw a message from Saint.

He made a call, balancing his phone between his shoulder and ear.

Saint picked up almost at once. 'Hey, man. You good?'

'Got a lot on my mind, but all good.'

'Ready for this?'

'Hit me.'

Sovereign's CEO sighed. 'Jax uncovered something on Cece Mirren.'

Ash braced himself, sitting in his chair, running a hand through his wet hair. ‘Tell me.’

‘Three years ago, she began depositing two to five thousand dollars every month. In small denominations into an account, she’d set up in her mother’s name. The bank flagged the latest cash deposit, made just before she started working with you. Jax worked with the cops to study the bills. The money is tainted with coke.’

Ash whistled under his breath. ‘So she’s in on the game?’

‘Somehow she is, but to what extent we’re still not in the know.’

Ash sank deeper into his chair, pulling on his short beard with a sigh.

*Fuck Cece and the puzzle she was proving to be.*

He let out a hiss and gazed outside the massive windows, seeking peace in the stunning vista.

The beach house offered breathtaking panoramic views of Byron Bay, the northern coastline, the western hinterland, and Arakwal National Park. His eyes lingered on the waves beating against the distant golden shores, and the headache forming behind his left temple eased.

‘So she deposited these coke-dusted bills into an account for her mother? Where d’you suppose she found them?’

‘Not sure. Cash paid to her father by his lower-end dealers? Or direct, meaning she could be in the game. Regardless, she was handling drug money.’

‘Fuck.’

A wave of disappointment hit him. One so deep he realised he’d been hoping Cece was clean. He felt his chest constrict with tension, uneasy with his attraction to her in the face of mounting evidence that screamed stay away.

‘We also found something else.’

Ash groaned. ‘What?’

‘Her brother was or still is one of the Mirren’s gendarmes in Sydney. He’s a major dealer, and we think he’s getting his product from the general. He’s also been seen hanging out with some bikies caught up in the recent gang wars. But he’s gone underground in the last few weeks, disappearing from his regular haunts.’

‘Was he involved in the shootings?’

‘Maybe. Whispers are that Joseph and his Czech counterparts ordered the hits as a way to control Sydney’s drug market. All evidence points to them being behind the execution of Tony Hassan, the Turkish cocaine kingpin, a few weeks ago. The man was shot in the basement of a Coogee apartment block near Cece’s brother’s last known address.’

Ash cursed under his breath. ‘Didn’t this trigger a month-long round of killings? Five men died, for goodness sake.’

‘Liam Mirren may be trying to escape the heat,’ Saint said. ‘Given local and federal cops are under pressure to prove they have control of the streets.’

Ash sighed. Sovereign's Defence contract was an urgent attempt to staunch the bloodletting they suspected the general was involved in. And Cece was their current and hottest lead to him.

He shook his head in disbelief. 'Somehow, this is cutting me up more than I thought.'

'Sucks, brother. How's she working out at Falcon House?'

Ash scrubbed his face as he bent over his desk. 'She's excellent at her job, fearless in sharing her ideas. From what I can also see, she's a good mother.'

'What can I tell you? Tis the way the cookie crumbles, my friend. Her phone calls and wiretap have given us diddly squat, but let's keep our ears to the ground. One thing,' Saint mused. 'Didn't you say Mirren stated he might want a visit? Perhaps we can find a way to nail him when he's there.'

'You think?'

'It's a play. Find a way to invite him.'

Ash hesitated. 'Can't make it so soon. It'll look suss. Let's give Cece more time to settle in. I'll find a way to get her to extend an innocent invitation to Joseph and see if he bites.'

'Sounds promising. Later.'

'Talk soon, brother.'

Ash hung up, flinching as a second call lit up his phone.

'Reg.'

'Sir. I know the source of the snow.'

Ash perked up as he flicked the call on speaker. ‘Do you, now?’

‘Yup. It’s a new mob in town. They’ve come in with a fleet of luxury vehicles, flashing cash, designer threads and diamonds. They’re spending big time at the bars. We’re also seeing them buy huge quantities of top-selling grog to lure in women, influencers and celebs. They’re flaunting their Byron pics and money on the Gram while dealing on the side. You’d think they’d stop making our job so easy.’

‘They Red Adder?’

‘Minions of. Caught them with snow packed in the brown packs with the crimson serpent stamp. Similar to what we found on Gil.’

‘Ballsy. Where are they parked?’

Reg named a luxury B&B house on the coast. A location notorious for hosting major parties *a la Ibiza*. ‘They’re using the place as their HQ, running the drugs into town using a young crew. Someone’s paid off the local council. Because they’re not being done for noise complaints from their neighbours.’

Violating sound levels was a severe issue in the Byron Shire.

Locals had even engaged Sovereign Allied teams to monitor their streets. If they deemed the disturbances from the road disruptive to the neighbourhood, the firm could shut down parties and hand out fines on behalf of homeowners.

This freedom to monitor neighbourhoods also gave Sovereign leverage when it came to scouting the homes of suspects.

‘We’ve done some surveillance,’ Reg continued, ‘and most of this new crew are just out of high school. They’re making deals on social media and funnelling the cash to two older handlers. Czech, going by their dress style and the language. They’re the moneymen and who the crew report to.’

‘All business is being conducted from this one premises?’

‘One hundred per cent.’

‘Sounds like we need a midnight raid.’

Reg grunted in approval. ‘Let’s introduce them to the real Kings of the East.’

The moniker was one given to the Sovereign crew by their federal cops and spy colleagues due to the firm’s high success rate at breaking up the operations of some of the most dangerous international gangs supplying Australia with drugs.

In recent wins, Sovereign’s crack team had infiltrated the underworld. They’d sent buyers packing back to the jungles of Colombia and intercepted hitmen sent to the lucrative East Coast market by foreign cartels.

The firm had also worked with federal cops to listen in on global crime groups using a fake encrypted app. One that Jax, their badass IT genius, had designed.

Sovereign’s intelligence led to a doubling of cocaine seizures around the world.



The app's reach had sent global drug syndicates into a panic. Importations dropped, and drug consumption hit a record low.

However, the gangs were unrelenting. In recent months, Byron Bay had become a flash point in the war, being a coastal town that attracted high listers and A-list celebrities. Ash's work in the area included identifying new players looking to make a play here and shaking them down with *carte blanche* on how he went about his ops.

Just last month, he and Reg intercepted a yacht offshore carrying over 300 kilos of coke bound for Byron Bay. They'd made the discovery from the Sabre, Sovereign's offshore surveillance ship that kept an eye on the oceans.

'Let's get 'em in a good ol' ambush.'

'This is the way.'

Despite his gloomy mood, Ash chuckled. It was a well-known fact that Reg was a Mandalorian tragic. 'Get the crew prepped. Please research the best night we can hit all of them, then feed it back to me. I'll give Saint a heads-up in Sydney. In case there's any fallout.'

'I'll put it in drive, boss.'



The next day, Cece waded through a mountain of supplier contacts, making calls and securing meetings.

After powering all morning, she glanced at the clock on the wall: 12:15 p.m.

Lunchtime. Her stomach growled in agreement, but she first needed an urgent pit stop.

She headed toward the ladies' bathroom down the hall, where the navy frame and frosted glass door glinted under the chandelier lights.

It brought back memories of her first day here and her initial sighting of Ash. She let her mind linger on him for a moment, remembering his intense, jade-piercing eyes.

How he eyed her sometimes made her feel like she was being stripped bare, vulnerable and utterly at his mercy.

She shook the thought away, chastising herself for letting her mind wander during work hours.

*Focus, Cece*, she told herself.

She opened one of the stalls and did her business.

At one point, she heard footsteps outside and thought nothing of it.

When she was done, she pulled open the stall door and strode out.

Cece's eyes widened as she caught sight of her young assistant in the mirror's reflection.

Bent over the long bathroom counter, Laila was sniffing a line of white powder up her nose.

Cece's heart hammered against her rib cage, her mind racing to process.

'What are you doing?' Cece tried to keep her voice steady but failed.

Laila jerked upright, her eyes wide with shock and fear as she locked eyes with her manager in the mirror. 'Cece! I-I didn't hear you come in.'

'You don't say,' Cece said, her voice tight as she struggled to suppress her anger. 'Care to explain yourself?'

'Explain what?'

Laila's cheeks flushed as her pupils dilated.

The feigned innocence act didn't fool Cece. 'Cut the crap, Laila.'

She stepped closer, her mind racing about how to handle the situation. *Was this happening? At work, no less?*

'Look, it's not what you think.' Laila stammered, her voice shaky, betraying her nerves.

'Really?' Cece raised an eyebrow. 'Because it looks like you're snorting up in the office.'

'Okay, fine!' Laila snapped, her facade crumbling. 'It helps me get through the day, alright? It's not a maj deal.'

Cece stared at her. 'You do realise this is unacceptable, right?'

‘Of course I do!’ Laila said. ‘It’s not like I’m hurting anyone.’

‘You are. Yourself.’

Cece’s soft retort was laced with concern for her junior, outweighing her anger for a moment. ‘There’s also your job to consider. Your workmates will suffer, too, because there’s no way you’ll be focused now. It’s also a violation of your work contract. The Falconers have a strict code on substance abuse in the workplace.’

‘What are you going to do?’

Laila’s voice was small, a stark contrast to her earlier bravado.

Cece hesitated, torn between her manager’s responsibility and empathy for the young woman. ‘I don’t know,’ she admitted as she shook her head. ‘I’ll need to think about it. That said, I can’t have this happening at work. It goes against our corporate ethics and behaviours. Whatever you do in your personal life is your business, but at work, this is a no-no.’

‘I don’t see the big deal,’ Laila muttered, looking down at her shoes and crossing her arms. ‘It’s just a bit of fun. Everyone does it.’

Cece huffed. ‘I don’t.’

Her junior paused for a beat, then capitulated. ‘I promise it won’t happen again.’

There was fear in her eyes - a vulnerability that made Cece’s decision even more difficult.

‘See that it doesn’t,’ Cece warned, her heart heavy. ‘However, you’ll have to give me that baggie.’

A brown package lay on the sink, and Laila curled her fingers around it, shuffling her eyes between it and Cece.

‘Hand it over to me now.’

The young woman’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you want it for?’

‘It’s half full, Laila. I need to trash it.’

‘No, you won’t! I paid a hundred and fifty for it.’

Cece’s patience broke at the defiance and attitude rolling over the young woman in waves. ‘Please don’t tell me what to do.’

Cece marched over to Laila, held out her hand and waited until Laila placed the bag in it.

The red snake emblazoned on it seemed to coil around itself, a sinister symbol of danger and temptation.

‘Get back to work, Laila.’ The paper crinkled beneath Cece’s grip. It felt like a lead weight in her hand. ‘Now.’

Laila’s expression turned belligerent, and she took a step to leave. ‘Whatever!’

‘Get rid of the lines before you go.’ Cece was firm, waving a hand at the leftover substance on the bench.

Laila’s mouth twisted, and a gleam developed in her eyes. Then she bent down and blew away the remaining coke dust.

Most of it landed on Cece’s shoes.

The younger woman stood up straight with a smirk and flounced away.

‘The hell?’ Cece murmured as Laila disappeared out the door.

Pulling a bunch of dry paper towels out of the wall unit, she wiped the coke off her heels.

‘They’d better not be sniffer dogs in Byron,’ she muttered to herself, annoyed she’d need to give her shoes a thorough clean later.

When she was done, she threw the wad of towels away and lifted the empty baggie, staring at it.

*What to do with it, she wondered. Talk to Denise or keep the find to myself?*

Her mind raced as she considered the implications of either choice. Reporting Laila would risk the younger woman’s career. On the other hand, Cece had a duty of care as a manager.

Cece recalled all the times she’d made foolish mistakes in her early twenties. Maybe all Laila needed was a second chance. Yet, for a fleeting moment, Cece wished she had never stumbled on her coked-up junior.

‘Damn it,’ she whispered, clutching the edge of the porcelain sink. With a shaky exhale, Cece pushed away from the counter.

She rushed out of the bathroom into the corridor, buzzing with the overflow sounds of clattering keyboards and busy

movement, adding to the turmoil that raged inside her.

Ignoring her surroundings, she grappled with the weight of her decision.

Inattentive for a second, her fingers loosened around the baggie.

She groaned as it fell from her hands onto the floor. The red snake pack slithered across the tiles, fluttering along, kicked up by the draught going through the corridor.

She bent over to nab it when a booted foot stepped over it.

Her eyes hit a pair of black RM Williams boots. Her heart jolted.

She tracked higher still, and her gaze clashed with a familiar jade scrutiny.

‘Why do we keep meeting this way, Miss Mirren?’

Ash’s drawl sent a shiver through her as he lifted his foot away and nabbed the offending baggie.

His expression froze, his eyes narrowing as he studied the red logo branding before extending it towards her.

‘This yours?’

Ash’s voice cut like a blade, his tone taking on a harder edge.

She blinked at the assertion of guilt in his nuanced question.

Heat bloomed on Cece’s cheeks, and she swallowed hard, making a hard, fast decision. ‘Someone misplaced it in the

women's bathroom,' she said, her words running over each other.

She extended her hand to take the bag back, her fingers brushing against his.

He lifted it away from her, keeping a hold on it. The unexpected touch and his reticence sent a shiver racing down her spine.

'Who's is it?'

She closed her eyes for a moment. 'Can't say.'

'Or won't say?'

He let the accusation hang in the air for a beat.

'Interesting design,' Ash added, raising an eyebrow as he glanced from the offending item to Cece. 'One of a kind.'

'It is,' she admitted, her voice wavering. She forced herself to meet his gaze, determined not to let him see the panic that threatened to overcome her.

'A rare find,' Ash suggested, his eyes never leaving hers, one finger tapping the half-full pack. It was impossible to tell whether he believed what he was saying or was toying with her, testing her resolve.

Cece shrugged noncommittally, her heart pounding like a drum. She couldn't shake the feeling he saw right through her flimsy facade.

He gave her an extended assessment before handing it to her without a word. 'I think you should throw it out.'



He said the words with such emphasis that she suspected he was clued up about what it contained.

‘I will,’ Cece mumbled, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment as she took the incriminating evidence from him.

Her mind raced, searching for something—anything—to say to ease the tension that now hung between them.

‘Better get back to work,’ Ash said, breaking their intense stare-down.

As he turned to walk away, Cece let out a quiet sigh of relief.

‘Wait,’ she called out before she could stop herself.

Ash paused mid-step, his eyes narrowing in anticipation.

‘Thank you.’

He raised a brow, and she rushed to explain. ‘For picking it up,’ trying hard for nonchalance. Yet her heart hammered in her chest.

‘Of course.’ He nodded, his gaze never leaving hers. The intensity of his stare made her feel exposed and vulnerable.

Cece shifted her weight from one foot to the other, struggling to maintain her composure. *Focus*, she told herself. *You can't let him see through you now.*

She plastered on a smile. ‘I should get going. Lunch is almost over.’

‘Right,’ Ash agreed, his voice still laced with curiosity. ‘Enjoy the rest of your break, Cece.’

‘Thanks, you too.’

With that, she turned on her heel and walked away, her heels clicking against the floor, echoing in her ears.

As she walked down the hallway, she heard his footsteps falter, and the heat of his gaze burn through her silk blouse.

Cece clutched the packet in her hand, her thoughts consumed by the implications of their encounter. *Did he suspect anything?*

She sighed, kicking herself once more for putting herself in his crosshairs. Worse still, she had no idea what to do with the find in her hand.

‘Great,’ Cece whispered, the word bitter on her tongue. ‘Just great.’

She had no clue whether her decision to overlook Laila’s infraction would have any ramifications down the line. Right now, though, she only wanted to sink into her office chair and wish the world away.



At the corner of the corridor, Ash paused, swivelled around and studied her walk away, his heart sinking.

He clamped back the wild emotion roaring to the surface of his icy demeanour, threatening to overwhelm him.

*How the hell had Cece got a hold of a Red Adder baggie?*

*Was she using? Dealing? Or was her story genuine about someone else dropping it?*

Ash cursed under his breath. He'd wanted so much to believe in her innocence.

However, the find, especially in light of what Saint had divulged the day before, was enough to put her under more scrutiny. It looked, reeked and screamed incriminating.

He felt his heart turn brittle over as he decided to avoid Cece at all costs.

With a bitter twist to his lips, he stalked away to log the incident, adding it to the growing evidence against her favour.

# Chapter 5



**T**hree dark SUVs with tinted windows flew past the centre of Byron Bay. Racing towards Lennox Head.

The clock on the dash of the lead car flashed.

2.17 a.m.

While a few tourists still partied at the beach town's hot bars and club hot spots, most locals were fast asleep.

'On approach,' Reg warned as he pumped the accelerator.

Ash nodded beside him in the sable sports Range Rover.

As they neared the target address, they shut off their headlights and slowed the cars to a crawl in darkness.

Parking a street away, nine Sovereign operatives slid out of the vehicles.

Leaving a driver in each vehicle, they disappeared into the lush underground. Their approach was towards a villa designed with a modern Australian sensibility and contemporary solid finishes.

According to their intel, the location was a stunning five-bedroom, five-bathroom home with multiple living areas and a sparkling pool.

*With a sprinkling of snow and low-level crims,* Ash thought.

He edged his way to the boundary of the filled nature reserve in the historic quarter, across the road from their target.

Each move he made was silent, unusual for his body size. An attribute of his years of training. He turned on his night vision glasses and scanned the perimeter, trying to match his intel on the location with what he was seeing.

Earlier that day, a slight, pretty, purple-pixie-haired woman in a generic engineer's uniform had arrived at the home.

She'd produced credible business cards and a letter authorising entry from the house owner to check on the national broadband network conduit.

Her no-nonsense attitude convinced the current residents to let her in. Once inside, she'd announced a possible outage later that night.

'Due to the NBN upgrade, your electricity might also be disrupted, but only for a short time,' she promised.

The woman, Jax, was, in fact, Sovereign's head hacker.

Paying no mind to the leers and jeers of the gangsters in the house, she'd fiddled with equipment and signal boxes.

Done, she flashed a sweet smile at the two Czech handlers and exited, ignoring their glares.

Unknown to the thugs, she'd managed to plant listening devices and cameras in the short time she'd spent in the home.

She'd also placed a tiny breaker on the mains that could be operated via remote access.

An hour later, she was back at the Sovereign offices in downtown Byron, drawing the house's layout from memory in her brief to Ash and Reg.

'Downstairs is multi-level with several open plan zones, break-out spaces, and kitchen dining. Upstairs are two king-size bedroom suites. Where I assume the two handlers are sleeping. You'll also find three other rooms with bunk beds for the worker bees. Entry is simple as, with no guards on the street.'

Ash confirmed Jax's thorough assessment as the quarter moon dipped under a cloud. His crew, masked like he was and in dark, non-reflective jumpsuits, crept out of the tranquil undergrowth.

They fanned towards the location. Ash led them, lifting a hand to pause their advance.

They were all working to a precise time, and at 2.45 a.m., the mains cut out, and the residence fell into darkness.

Ash grinned at Jax's efficiency. She'd also taken care of the redundancy batteries for the video intercom and cameras, which went down at the same time.

He gestured, signalling his team to vault over the timber gates.

He followed, sidling past the alfresco zone beside a heated NakedSwim set-up that pumped purified water into a natural stone pool.

The space featured oversized loungers and umbrellas for poolside relaxation, surrounded by lush tropical landscaping.

Ash saw none of it.

His focus was on his crew as they picked the door locks. Giving them access through the large glass sliders connecting the outdoor lounge area to the indoor living and dining.

The doors slid noiselessly open, and Ash raced past the north-facing, open-plan space.

Empty bottles, syringes, weed pipes and sleeping bodies scattered the living and rumpus room. One figure was slumped against the glass café-style folding doors leading to a modern yet dirty kitchen.

Dirty dishes and drug paraphernalia covered the custom benchtops.

Ash winced at the thought of the house owner's forthcoming cleaning bill.

With his nod, two of his men subdued the slumbering men with well-placed choke holds. Tying up the unconscious men, they moved them to the centre of the living area.

Ash and the rest of the Sovereign crew flew up the stairs.

They entered the bedrooms and caught five more thugs in deep sleep. They neutralised them with pepper spray and fast ties.

A few resisted, but the intruders were on their best game. They dodged any sleepy punches and soon had their targets bound and trussed.

Ash came in behind the team, checking for hidden bogeys.

He compartmentalised and isolated the rooms, reducing the chances of an unseen ambush.

He whirled on his feet when a groggy man staggered into the hallway, raging in Czech.

Ash recognised him as one of the gang's leaders from a photo Jax had also provided earlier. He tucked his lethal weapon away, lifted his stun gun, aimed at the unarmed man's chest, and fired.

The zap hit him, and he fell to the ground writhing.

Another body, the second Czech lead, darted towards him, ranting. Ash tapped him, too.

He strolled over to the fallen men and trussed one up while Reg tied the other.

‘All good?’

‘That's the lot upstairs,’ Reg confirmed as he urged a recalcitrant gangster to his feet.

Ash tapped his sophisticated ear-pods linked to a WiFi call to Sovereign's genius hacker, who was spotting for them



outside. 'We're good, Jax. Light us up.'

They heard the sound of the mains hum to life, and the lights in the residence flickered back on.

The pair dragged the dazed and confused moneymen downstairs while the rest of the crew did the same to the entire gang. They were all placed in a circle where they sat glaring at the masked Sovereign infil team.

Ash lifted a hand, and his crew fanned out again, gathering evidence and incriminating proof, dumping what they scored within the circle's centre.

At the same time, Ash took pics of the haul and the faces of each gang member with his phone. 'Say cheese.'

Reg trudged up to him after a few minutes. 'That's all, Sir.'

'Done?' Ash asked.

'Dusted.'

Ash checked his watch. Only twenty-five minutes since infiltration. 'Fantastic time. Let's roll.'

The Sovereign crew melted into the darkness of the stunning bushscape. Leaving behind the raging and thumping drug gang, howling into the rags stuffed in their mouths.

When the cops arrived, they found the Red Addermen trussed together and riled up. With kilos of coke stacked up inside the circle they'd been placed in.

The outcome suited Byron's understaffed constabulary to T.

Sovereign did the dirty work.

The local cops got the glory.

They uncovered drugs and briefcases packed with washed bills. Which had been readied for transport, most likely to a yacht waiting offshore.

Among the items also seized in the garage of the sprawling house were a Lamborghini Huracán, a Rolls Royce Ghost, an Audi R8 and a Mercedes CLS63. They also found a Porsche Cayenne, a Range Rover Sport, and a BMW M4. Worth roughly \$1 million altogether.

‘A significant haul for the blue team,’ Saint said when he called from Sydney the following day. ‘I’m watching it all unfold on the news here to much fanfare. But this is just the tip of it all. Red Adder’s leaders will be raging after this, and they have the cash to fund real, proper warfare.’

Ash lay on his lounge at the Farm, espresso in hand, recovering from a night of little sleep. ‘So do we. Let’s hope Joseph and his thugs get the message. That Byron Bay, scratch that, the East Coast is off-limits. And that we Kings of the East don’t share or play fair with anyone. ‘Specially those looking to bring the fuckin’ drugs or a war onto our patch,’ he growled.



Cece spent the next few weeks conducting an in-depth review of Falcon House's competitors in the area, analysing their services and putting together a strong case for what would differentiate their wedding and events marketing.

She also devised a strategy to understand the target market, local population size and demographic profiles.

When she was done, she emailed the proposal to Denise and Ash.

She also reviewed the catering options with Rich, Falcon House's chef.

Cece then turned to the required marketing and promotions, pulling together the concepts for a revamped website, photography and videos.

However, the going could have been smoother when it came to Laila.

Cece's act of kindness in overlooking Laila's drug problem delivered zero remorse or appreciation.

Instead, the young woman's audacity only increased. Her delegated tasks never met deadlines. She continued to ride her excuse train. She showed up late for work and responded with a distinct sourness to Cece's questioning.

'She wants your job,' Rachel explained one day over lunch when Cece shared her frustration with her junior.

Cece paused mid-bite of her sandwich. 'No way. She's just out of college and has never run an events portfolio.'

Rachel huffed as she stabbed her fork into a feta and cucumber salad. ‘There a word for it. Entitled. She’s also got a thing for Ash Falconer, as does every red-blooded woman within five metres of him. I swear, every time he comes into the building, she giggles like a schoolgirl. She’s trying to impress him by making you look bad in front of him.’

Cece huffed, toying with the lettuce on her plate. ‘I don’t care about her crush. I just need her to do her job. Her performance is impacting my workload.’

‘Sucks balls, hey?’ Rachel commiserated.

Cece gave her an eye roll. ‘I get that people can be under pressure, but she’s on another level. Whenever I ask about a project, she claims it’s under control, but it never is. Her only response is to blame someone else when it all falls apart. I have a major problem on my hands, and I need to have a formal sit down with her.’

‘Do it,’ Rachel urged. ‘And put everything in writing.’

‘Always.’

Rachel leaned in with a grin. ‘On a different tack, Cece, I’ve been meaning to say I love your style! That blouse is divine.’

Cece glanced in surprise at her swooping cowl neck top with a wrapped bow at the waist.

‘Thanks. It’s an old favourite in my wardrobe. But make no mistake, Rach, while some of it is elegant, some is also an unapologetic ode to being a couch potato. Regarding my style

sensibility, I either have my hair, heels and makeup done, or I'm rockin' shorts, sneakers or pyjamas all day. There is no in-between.'

Rachel laughed. 'Love your vibe. So European. So, too, are your shoes.'

Cece's eyes lit up. 'I have a fetish. From high to low boots and sandals in all colours of the rainbow.'

Rachel grinned. 'I'm with you, girl, because I love shoes too. What are those heels, though?'

Cece had on a pair of red hot ankle boots. She twirled them as she spoke. 'They're from my collection of Identità heels that I adore. Italian, sexy, easy to wear, comfy, and great with almost anything.'

'They're hot. I want a pair.'

Cece beamed. 'Why don't we go shopping one day soon, see what Byron has to offer?'

'You're on. I'd love that.'

Cece walked away from her break with a smile. Making new friends in your 30s could be challenging, but she sensed that Rachel would be a fun and trusted companion to hang out with.

*Life was looking up in Byron.*



The next day, Cece called Laila into the boardroom.

‘What?’ the surly young woman grumbled as she dragged herself through the door and threw herself into a chair.

Cece launched straight into it, keeping her voice calm. ‘Laila, I’ve got a few concerns. I’ve noted you’re not getting your tasks done in time. Last week, I needed you to work on the website copy for the Wedding pages, and you’ve still not handed it in. Even after promising I’d have it last Friday. If you’re not coping with your to-do list, I need to know so I can delegate resources to ensure things aren’t slipping through the cracks.’

Laila’s twisted her mouth. ‘I told you I’m managing the social pages and don’t have time for these other tasks.’

‘I thought Brad, the social media manager, was in charge of it.’

‘I help him out, and he’s asked for my expertise a lot in the last few weeks,’ the girl mumbled.

Cece bit her lip, holding back from giving the young woman a reaming. ‘Laila, you’re not on the social team. You’re the events coordinator, and I need you to be across our division’s work. We have a deadline we’re working to, and I can’t have any more delays. From now on, I’d like you to meet with me every morning for 10 minutes. Go over the day’s objectives and decide if you need support with your tasks.’

‘That’s micro-managing!’

‘It looks that way, but it’s only for a short time until I see improvements. There’s also no other way to keep us meeting our deadlines as a division. I’ll keep these check-ins short and only offer assistance where it’s warranted.’

Laila gave her a look loaded with sass. ‘Fine. Is that all?’

Cece shook her head as the younger woman pushed off the table.

Laila shot her another baleful look and flounced away to her desk, where she fumbled around for her vape, a frown on her face.

She hated Cece’s guts. That much was clear.

Cece gave a wry smile. She wasn’t one to be cowed with such ease.

‘Bring it,’ she whispered as Laila barrelled past her again, heading outside. No doubt, to vape in the back of the kitchen. Where the junior team members tended to congregate and where Laila could bitch to her heart’s content about her new boss.

‘Serenity now,’ Cece whispered before wandering towards the welcome lounge to see if Penn needed help during the busy checkout period.

She’d noticed that all staff rolled up their sleeves at Falcon House and helped wherever needed.

So she did the same, extending a hand, especially to Penn, who was inundated with guests mornings and evenings.

Today, during a whirlwind of check-outs, she stepped in to track down a guest who'd left the property but abandoned his suitcase in the lobby.

She checked the name on the luggage tag, found his phone number in the property management system, and called him.

Thankfully, he was only a few minutes away and turned around before returning to the airport.

Next, she was waylaid by two guests who approached her and asked how to get reservations at the most popular restaurant in town.

'Other than the Eatery, dear. We love the food here but need some variety,' the silver-haired wife said.

'No problem.'

Cece recommended a popular spot, and the pair smiled sweetly, thrilled with her suggestion.

The work was non-stop, but she loved it.

Mason, too, was having a fabulous time. He was settling into school well. He reported that his teacher was ace and that his group of friends was growing, helped by Jake's popularity at Byron Bay Public.

At pickup for a few afternoons now, Cece noted Ash's son leaving with an older woman. She had a warm smile and was elegant and well-dressed. Going by her features, there had to be a biological link to Jake and, therefore, to Ash.



She realised then she hadn't seen the man for a few days. He'd been coming to the office less since Denise returned from her carer's leave.

Cece felt somehow bereft, missing her taciturn boss, until she did bump into him.



One mid-morning, she walked into the Eatery looking for Rich to discuss his latest email about the special events' menu pairings.

She slowed her roll when she caught sight of Ash standing with the chef.

Both men sliced their eyes in her direction as she approached.

While Rich's eyes were warm, Ash's were the polar opposite. Cold, arctic and with a touch of outright hostility.

His lip curled, and he turned his back on her as if she didn't exist.

*What the hell?*

She took a slight step back as Rich met her confused gaze and shrugged.

The men's voices rumbled a minute longer, discussing a new macadamia whisky and food pairing concept.

Ash gave her a second, even colder look and stalked away.

Rich stared after him and then swung his head back to her.

He paused his lips. 'He's in a mood.'

'You don't say. It's the Nth time he's been rude to me, and it's getting a little tired.'

Rich reared back his head and gave her a puzzled look. 'Rude? Ash? He's quite laid back, easy going, the best boss I've had.'

Cece shrugged, her lips tightening.

Rich picked up on her irritation. 'Hey, pay him no mind. Probably got loads on his plate.'

Cece was keen to move past her annoying and moody boss. 'Speaking of plates. Let's chat about seasonal menus. We must nail autumn and winter to include them in the first marketing kit.'

'Gotcha,' Rich grinned as he finished his notes from his meeting with Ash.

The tall, sandy-haired man had a solid frame, his body built like a brick house. He always seemed up for a laugh, with a quick grin and good humour.

She'd come to find out he was also Penn's brother and his resemblance to the hotel's sunny receptionist was uncanny.

He also cheffed like a dream. Which Cece didn't hesitate to share with him. 'Might I say, your food is phenomenal?'

The Eatery's food embraced a pure farm-to-table philosophy with ingredients from Falcon Farm and the smaller vegetable gardens on the grounds. It celebrated the flavours of local produce, and Rich created each dish to tell its own tapestry story of Bryon Bay's rich husbandry.

He beamed at her compliment. 'Is that right?'

'Hand on heart, I loved it. I shared a tasting platter last evening with Rachel when my son Mason had a late soccer practice.'

'You had the matching cocktails, too? Flames, drama and all?'

'Loved it. I relished each mouthful!'

'You haven't seen anything yet.'

Cece returned Rich's wide grin with a smile. He was a decent bloke, and she liked him. Most of all, he didn't seem to have any issues with her.

Together, they discussed the latest trends in themed cuisines, tasting different dishes and brainstorming unique ideas to impress their potential bridal clients.

When their catch-up drew to a close, Rich clapped his hands together. 'All right, I think we've got some great ideas here. I'll start putting them into action.'

Walking off with a wave, Cece was beset with the unsettling cloud of unease she'd been trying hard to ignore since Ash's earlier reaction to her.

*What else had she done wrong?*

She couldn't think of anything, so part of her began to suspect something was more going on with Ash than he was letting on.

Years of being around a stepfather with a temper had taught Cece to be attentive to the subtle changes in people's behaviours. Her intuition told her something about Ash didn't sit right.

She couldn't help but feel that the man was hiding something, which made her curious, wondering what was happening beneath the surface of his chilly exterior.

Yet he was a respected leader, well-liked by everyone at Falcon House.

He had a warm smile for all the guests, some of whom made an annual Falcon House pilgrimage. They even called him by name and insisted on greeting him when they arrived.

He had a strong working relationship with his executives - from Rich in the kitchen to Denise, whom he treasured.

He had an excellent reputation among the staff.

'He always pitches in on busy days, handling reception, cleaning messes and general repairs,' Rach gushed to Cece one day after their morning stand-up with Denise. 'He works hard and has no qualms about getting his hands dirty. He's a dream.'

Cece shrugged. To her, he was a shadowed nightmare.

She felt it in their interactions, distant and cold.

He barely acknowledged her presence if and when they crossed paths.

Which they did over the next few days.

When he spotted her entering a hallway or the staff office, he stepped aside with a tight nod to let her pass. She tried greeting him once, and he'd just grunted.

In meetings, he ignored her, even when Denise called for Cece to present her strategy and ideas.

After her presentation, he made zero comments. He pursed his lips, letting Denise lead the feedback session.

So far, Denise and most of the team supported Cece's proposal, except him.

He was making it clear she was not someone he focused on.

*Except when he was.*

Cece caught him watching her a few times. His eyes narrowed as if he was trying to figure her out. He never engaged when their gazes met; he just glanced away, pensive.

Despite his cold demeanour, there was something about him that intrigued her. Maybe she wanted the challenge of trying to crack his tough exterior and find out what lay beneath. To get under the allure of this powerful, successful man who commanded respect from everyone around him.

*Like that was ever going to happen.*

Cece told herself to forget it. She had more important things to worry about.

She diligently perfected her seasonal wedding reception packages, and Rich was a solid help, always ready with new ideas and suggestions.

He also kept serving her the ‘keen look’, indulging in low-key flirting and joking with a glint in his eye.

One afternoon, when they’d just finished tasting some new desserts, he laid his intent on the table.

‘Hey, I think you’re one cool lady. Care for a drink and dinner with me one night?’

Cece’s eyes widened, surprised.

‘Please,’ he said, repeating his ask with a waggle of his brows.

Cece laughed. No doubt, Rich’s easygoing personality charmed her.

Yet she felt a flutter, not from excitement but more concern. Romance with a coworker made her uneasy. ‘I don’t know, Rich. I’m not sure about dating someone I work with. It could get complicated.’

Rich laughed. ‘Come on, Cece; it’s just dinner. No pressure, no expectations. Just two people enjoying good food and each other’s company.’

She thought about it for a beat. ‘What about Mason? He needs someone to look after him.’

Rich smiled. 'Penn will kid-sit him.'

'That's quite the assumption.'

He grinned, ever affable. 'She's my sister and owes me for getting her this gig here. She'll do it.'

Penn was gregarious and outgoing. She'd even looked after Mason a few afternoons, entertaining him at reception while Cece wrapped up for the day.

Cece capitulated. The date could be a welcome distraction from her unhealthy fascination with Ash. 'If she's up for it, then you win. I'll go out with you.'

Rich's grin widened. 'Sweet! It's a date, then.'

They made plans for Sunday evening when both of them were off duty.

She felt good about it. The fact that an attractive and charming man with no behavioural challenges wanted to hang out gave her hope about testing her waters in the dating world.

As she returned to her office to grab her things before the school run, she caught a glimpse of Ash in the distance.

Standing by the Eatery bar, his eyes fixed on her.

Cece's heart skipped a beat as she tried to avoid eye contact, but it was too late. He'd already caught her gaze.

They just stood there for a moment, glaring at each other without a word.

Suddenly, Ash turned and walked away, disappearing into one of the back rooms.

Cece sucked in a breath loaded with vexed feeling, trying to clear her thoughts. *What was wrong with the man?*

*Was he against fraternising at work? Or was he jealous? Indifferent? Did he even care at all?*

She shook her head. It didn't matter what Ash thought.

What mattered most was her job, her boy and her new life.



# Chapter 6



‘I promise you fantastic food, tempting drinks and a choice of bars to suit any taste.’

‘Oh, I don’t doubt you.’

Rich grinned at Cece from the driver’s seat as he negotiated a treelined avenue with practised ease. ‘What I love about Byron is that there’s plenty to explore once the stars emerge. From a casual speakeasy to a lively brewery and iconic views to gigs by the roadside, I’ll show you the best bits of the town’s eclectic nature after dark.’

‘I can’t wait.’

An hour earlier, he’d picked her up for their date on time, with Penn tailing him in her car.

When Rich’s sister walked into Cece’s place, Mason cartwheeled in excitement. ‘Hey Penn! Check out my new soccer moves and how good I’m getting with my footwork!’

‘Show me!’

Both Mason and Penn had discovered a shared passion for the game a few days earlier when they’d bumped into each

other in the after-school soccer class that Penn taught.

Now, it was all Mason could talk about as he tumbled outside to learn more moves from the young woman in the cottage's front yard.

‘So we good to get a pizza at the Eatery?’ Penn said.

Cece nodded. ‘Sounds good. Just add it to my staff tab.’

Penn nodded with a grin. ‘Mace and I will chow down, then return home for a movie. Isn't that right, champ?’

The boy nodded, his head bobbing in excitement. ‘Mum, you look awesome,’ he added in his typical Mace way.

For the night, Cece had tapped into her inner Athena with a summer-ready draped midi dress in foam blue.

She'd kept to her casual yet elegant Hellenistic theme by throwing on a pair of gladiator sandals.

Rich's eyes waggled in appreciation as she whirled around for her audience.

Mason clapped, and Penn added a wolf whistle as Rich whisked her into his humble sedan.

In minutes, they motored away towards Byron's night lights.

Cece studied Rich's profile as he drove.

She still wasn't sure about him. The man was attractive if you liked the sturdy, muscular, long-haired chef look, but she wasn't getting tingles from him.

Not like she did every time she bumped into her enigmatic boss.

That said, she was willing to give Rich a chance.

Soon, they were parking at Main Beach.

It was spring, and businesses were already embracing the warmer temps and street vibe. The town's commitment to supporting local artists was evident at every turn, creating an atmosphere of appreciation for the arts.

Cafes spilled onto the sidewalks alongside local artisans showcasing their masterpieces, handcrafted jewellery, intricate ceramics, and vibrant paintings.

She couldn't wait to indulge in the diverse culinary scene that Byron Bay boasted. From quaint mom-and-pop kitchens serving fresh-roasted coffee and delicious pastries to beachfront restaurants offering exquisite seafood dishes.

They walked towards a bar that Rich had recommended. It was a small, dimly lit space with vintage posters and flickering candles on the tables. A live band played in the corner, and the air was thick with the warm, heady scent of cocktails and beer.

Rich led her to a table by the window, and they settled in to peruse the menu. Cece couldn't help but feel a little nervous; it had been a while since she had been on a date with someone new.

Rich, however, seemed perfectly at ease. Cece relaxed in his company, enjoying the easy banter. They ordered drinks

and perused the menu, chatting and laughing while waiting for their food to arrive.

It came in a flourish of platters, colours and delicious smells, which they tucked into with relish.

As they ate, Rich regaled her with stories of his travels worldwide, sharing his love of food and the culinary arts. Cece found herself drawn in by his passion and enthusiasm, and they lost themselves in deep conversation, discussing everything from their favourite restaurants to their shared love of classic films.

She laughed at his kitchen anecdotes and found herself having a good time, forgetting about work and her niggling worries about Ash.

When their meal was finished, Rich paid and led Cece to another lively bar with a live band playing on stage.

At one point, he grabbed Cece's hand and pulled her onto the dance floor, but every time he tried to pull her close to sway to the music, she pulled away, preferring to dance alone. She just wasn't there with him yet.

As the night wore on, they left the bar and wandered through town, listening to the talented buskers that lined Jonson Street and the beach nearby.

From solo guitarists busking acoustically to jazz sax players with a full stage-style setup, the street entertainment was an eclectic addition to Byron Bay's nightlife that they meandered through slowly.

They even encountered a throng of dancers swaying to an impromptu jam as a sweet-voiced busker brought a tear to everyone's eyes.

As they strolled along, Cece couldn't help but notice how Rich kept glancing over at her, trying to gauge her interest. She smiled, flattered by the attention but not returning the same favour.

At one point, crossing a street, Rich stretched his hand out over her shoulders to guide her, but as soon as they were safe on the other side, she shrugged away from him.

She saw the flitting hurt on his face and knew at that moment that she needed to call an end to the night.

'I have to get back. I've got a full day tomorrow, and Penn does need to get away by 11:00 tonight. She has an early start.'

She kept her tone light, not wanting to upset the good vibe between them.

Rich cocked his head. 'It's only 9.30. Plenty of time.'

She gave him a slight smile as she shook her head. 'I can't stay longer, Rich. I had a great time, though. Thank you for showing me around.'

Rich gave in with a sad shrug. 'Let me drive you back.'

As they returned to Falcon House, she felt a twinge of guilt for hurting his feelings, but she knew in her heart that she couldn't force herself to feel something that wasn't there.



‘He’s panicking. We’ve got him on a wiretap to his wife. He’s told her he’s prepared to lie under oath and will sue for defamation if his name gets into the newspapers or if he’s portrayed as a drug trafficker and criminal.’

‘What a freakin’ loser.’

Ash leaned back into his chair at his work desk, an unusual place for him this late in the day and on a Sunday.

With Denise back on board, he’d no reason to be working at or from the hotel. Yet here he was.

Earlier that evening, after dinner at the farm, he’d wandered his house feeling restless.

Uncomfortable with the unease, he’d decided to head into town and do some work.

Rose had stepped in to look after Jake, and Ash had driven to Falcon House.

In his office, he’d fired up his laptop and tried to work, but it hadn’t helped, his mind consumed by thoughts of the investigation.

If he was honest with himself, it wasn’t just the inquiry that had him churning inside.

*She had a hold on him.*

He was hanging around the hotel because he wanted to keep an eye on the woman rattling his world.

Her essence drew him in. He wanted to peel back her layers and dive into her depths. Not just on a physical level, but he wanted to delve into her, to know her on an intimate plane.

He'd never felt this unnerved by a woman, which was driving him insane.

He'd always been in tight control of his feelings, keeping his dates to flings when away, on travel. The only commitments he'd been willing to make in years were to his job, calling and family.

It felt like Cece was shearing his walls away and running amok with his heart.

Saint's call with an update on her stepfather was a slight distraction. He shook his head, trying to focus on what his mate was telling him.

'He's also stalking some of the men who served under him, trying to find out who is testifying against him.'

Ash sucked his teeth. 'He wants to intimidate them. Keep them from speaking against him in the defamation case.'

'Or persuade them to change their evidence to the Defence Force inquiry,' Saint added.

'He can try all he wants, but Mirren is going down, no matter how much he fights it.'

‘A fucking Military Cross Award for bravery. He doesn’t deserve it.’

‘Agreed.’

‘Keep the updates coming, brother.’

‘Will do.’

The call dropped off, and Ash stared down at the file onscreen. At the face of the man who’d been his senior commanding officer. Hawk-nosed, cold, even cruel.

In public, Mirren was a career soldier famed for his bravery and service, recognised for his distinguished conduct.

In the shadows, however, he was a ruthless leader who’d used his position for greed and gain.

Lost in thought, Ash almost missed the sound of wheels crunching over gravel.

He glanced at the view from his office as a car pulled up at the hotel’s entry. Rising to his feet, he moved to the window, intrigued at who would be arriving so late.

A gut punch hit him as he recognised the woman easing from the passenger seat. Dark curls swung down her back towards the lush ass he traced with his gaze.

*Cece.*

The woman he’d studied all last week, searching for any sign of sin and guilt.

Instead, he’d only seen a warmhearted woman with a caring nature.



Who'd shown a deaf customer to the restroom when she'd chanced on the poor soul wandering the staff corridor searching for help.

She'd also pitched in to clean the restaurant after a hectic, understaffed lunch service one Saturday so that the dinner bookings would be on time.

She'd even made time for his son, Jake when he'd wandered into the office with 1001 questions for their newest staff member.

There was always a sweet smile for everyone she encountered.

She was the woman he felt in his gut was innocent. Yet also, the woman with a growing mountain of guilty evidence against her.

Ash watched as she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and turned to speak to the driver, who exited the car.

*Rich.*

Another jolt went through Ash as he watched the chef round the hood of his car and approach Cece.

Rich smiled at her, and Ash felt his heart sink.

Rich said a few words and leaned forward as if for a kiss.

What happened next sent an inexplicable rush of emotion through Ash.

Cece leaned away from the burly chef, touching his chest to stop his advance. He couldn't quite see her expression, but

he saw Rich stiffen. The pair exchanged a few words before the chef stalked back to the driver's seat.

Ash smirked and then checked himself.

*Damn, if that wasn't sheer relief.*



When Rich rounded the front of his car, Cece caught the look of intent in his eyes and stiffened.

He leaned in close to her with a warm look. 'Been thinking about one thing all night.'

She froze, fighting the twisted flutter in her stomach. 'What's that?'

Rich grinned. 'How much I want to kiss you right now.'

When he moved in, Cece's heart skipped a beat. Not in excitement. In wariness.

Just when he was about to press his lips to hers, she stepped back, placing a hand on his chest to stop him.

His eyes lit up with hurt, this time unmasked. 'You playing games with me, Cece? You that kind of -'

She shook her head, cutting him off. 'I wouldn't do that. I'm just not sure what I want yet.'

He gazed at her for a long moment, then pulled away, moving back to the driver's side. 'Fine. I'll see you around.'

‘Thank you for a good night.’

Her conviction was weak.

‘Yeah. Whatever.’

His voice was cold, and she winced at how butt-hurt he sounded.

Then she straightened her back. She’d never made Rich any promises, and it was unfair of him to expect she’d be ready for physical contact on their first date.

She sighed, pulling her shawl closer as he peeled his car away.

Turning, Cece headed towards the Falcon House entrance. She’d asked Rich to drop her off here. So she could pick up her laptop and get stuck into a brief for the photographers that she’d realised she needed to be done by Monday afternoon.

She had plans to work from home the following morning, where she could focus in blessed silence.

Using her staff key card, Cece let herself into the empty reception.

Most staff were gone for the day. The Eatery had shut down at ten. The place was hushed with silence.

She made her way to the office block and her desk, where she unplugged her laptop and placed it into its carrier bag.

Done, she raced to the entrance, keen to get to Mason and relieve Penn.

She heard a sound as she hit the reception area and reached for the front door.

She whipped around and jumped at seeing a silhouette stepping out into the dim light.

A scream almost tore through her until she recognised the man.

He stood before her, arms crossed over his chest.

‘Fuck. You scared me.’

Ash paid no heed to her whisper, his eyes glittering with a dangerous light. His jaw worked as he glared at her.

He did that ‘raking-his-eyes-over-her-body’ thing, and she felt every tiny hair on her skin stand to attention.

In one long-legged, power-driven stride, he surged forward.

‘What do you want?’

He ignored her coming closer. So near she could smell the scent of his enticing cologne mixed in with spice, manliness and sheer power.

She caught the intensity in his gaze and felt the heat of his body as he loomed over her. Cece’s heart pounded in her chest.

‘What are you doing?’

‘What he should have.’

His rasp was a husky growl, sending a wild jolt through her, ending in an aching throb between her legs.

She must have moaned because his eyes shot to hers, and he moved.

He reached a muscled arm around the waist, pulling her flush against him.

Cece gasped as she felt the hard planes of his chest against her breasts, the heat of his body seeping through her thin blouse. She could feel his pounding heartbeat beneath her hand.

He paused for a beat, his eyes searching hers.

She nodded, and they lit up as he leaned down and captured her lips in a fierce, possessive kiss.

The suddenness took Cece aback, but she soon responded, tangling her fingers in his hair to pull him closer.

‘Tell me to stop,’ he groaned against her lips. ‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘Does it feel good?’ Cece breathed.

‘Fuck yeah.’

‘So don’t stop,’ she found herself moaning back.

His lips fell once more on hers, intense and passionate, filling Cece with a raw, wild need.

Ash’s hands roamed over her body, caressing every curve, pulling her closer until there was no space between them.

Cece slid her hands under his shirt. She could feel the rugged ridges of his muscles and his skin’s heat. She wanted to

explore every inch of him, run her tongue over every groove and crevice, and learn his body's hard-packed planes by heart.

Ash's hands slid down her back to the curve of her ass, and he squeezed, making her gasp as her clit throbbed in response.

Cece felt a rush of heat as Ash's hands slipped under the bottom of her shirt and skimmed over her bare skin. She gasped at the feel of his fingers on her naked flesh, at the way they trailed up her back.

She arched her back a little, pushing her breasts against his chest and grinding her hips against his.

As Ash deepened the kiss, his lips moved over her cheek and neck until his hot breath sent shivers down her spine.

All thoughts of work, Mason, of everything bearing any sign of logic, flew from her mind.

Her body was buzzing with a fierce pleasure that burned through her, deep, intense and wild. All she could think about was the sensation of the man she'd been fantasising about for weeks against her.

She whimpered as he nipped her earlobe, her fingers tangling in his hair.

'That's how it's done,' Ash murmured against her neck, sending shivers of lust shooting down her spine.

His teeth grazed her neck as her hands slid down his body to cup his ass. He kissed her again, his lips so hard against hers that they sent another shiver through her body.

She gasped as he suddenly drew back, his hands sliding down her arms as he gently pushed her away.

Her mouth formed a silent 'oh'.

In the near-darkness, she could barely make out his features, but she could still see the burning desire in his eyes, hear the harsh breaths and see the rise and fall of his chest.

'Go.'

'What?'

'Leave. Now.'

The words were gentle yet hoarse with need, sending a kick through her body.

He surprised her by leaning into her, but only so he could push open the large doors behind her.

She obeyed, turned around, hands shaking as she pulled her laptop bag close and stepped out into the night.

It felt like a dream as she walked away.

She could feel his eyes on her. Burning her, inflaming her. Her head was spinning, and she wanted to run back into his arms, to get lost in his embrace and forget everything but this moment.

She moaned softly, licking her swollen lips as she forced one leg in front of the other. Her breathing was ragged, her body a seething mass of sensation, and her mind clouded in deep confusion.

She could only hope that her treacherous body would be under control by the time she got back home.

That her son would be in bed and not abducted by aliens or zapped by lightning, and Penn would not be out cold on her living room floor because Mason had turned into a two-headed beast.

*Because what the heck was this night so far?*



*What the hell had he just done?*

Ash cursed at himself as he stood there watching her walk away, every step slow and careful.

Her hips swayed, and he hissed, wanting to rush after her and whisk her in his arms, head to a secluded dark corner on the beach and fuck her senseless.

He watched her disappear into the shadows, groaning as he lost sight of her. He could still feel her body against his. She'd been so soft, her lips against his, her smell, those tits.

He licked his lips, mesmerised by how her body seemed to mould with his. His cock was aching with the need to bury itself in her, and his body was still humming with the need that had rushed through him and almost brought him to his knees.

And the way she'd responded to him. Wild, hot. *Hungry.*



At the very least, his kiss had been primal, not thought through. He'd had no idea she'd react to him with so much passion.

She'd blown through his no-strings approach and responded as if he was claiming her for his own.

*If only.*

'Far out!'

He let the shout out as he pushed close the hotel's front door. It thudded shut, and Ash stalked back to his office after securing the place.

He nabbed his car keys, headed for the staff entrance and into the parking where his truck waited. He threw his bag and keys inside, stripped down to his shorts, tossed his clothes into the back seat, and sprinted towards the beach.

The deserted waterfront was dark, the moon and stars hidden behind a dense cloud front.

This suited him just fine, and he plunged into the water, hissing slightly at the cool temperature.

He set out with purpose.

His body was still as fit as when he'd been selected for the SAS. Then, he'd undertaken demanding feats of endurance, some in freezing temperatures, swimming and treading water in the ocean for hours.

*It was almost the same torture that Cece was levelling on his heart.*

The sea was wilder than usual tonight, and the waves heaved up and down, crashing against the shore in time with his beating heart.

Ash paid them no attention, focusing instead on his body and purging himself of *her*.

At one point, he slowed his swim and floated to his back, eyes on the expanse above him that he loved so much.

He followed stars tracking across the darkness and meteorites streaking into vapour until his mind and body stilled.

Having cooled down, he stroked back to the shore, rose from the ocean and walked back to his truck.

Pulling on his clothes and swinging inside, he roared out of the Falcon House driveway and headed east.

Towards Falcon Farm. As far away from Cece as he could manage - within reason.

The speakers in his car boomed with a melancholy brass band overture that reflected his mood.

The road wound through the hinterland, his headlights catching the fleeting glimpses of darkened rainforest punctuated with macadamia groves, waterfalls and farms.

He was soon speeding through the historic village of Bangalow.

This picturesque town with its alternative roots was packed with funky restaurants, cafes, craft shops, and galleries.

On weekends, it filled up with tourists visiting its famous markets keen to enjoy a coffee or a meal, peruse a gallery, or seek an antique.

Ash was oblivious to it all, his mood dark and stormy as he berated himself for his lapse in judgement.

In moments, he turned into a long driveway in the sought-after hinterland between Newrybar and Bangalow.

Falcon Farm was a significant estate with over 10,000 macadamia trees producing approximately 100 to 150 tonnes of bounty annually.

Alongside the nut bushes were 550 custard apple trees, mangoes trees, local wild berry bushes, and traditional plants, where Ash sourced his whisky and gin distilling ingredients.

As well as the orchard, there were two large sheds, three dams, and two sprawling original Queenslander homes dating back to 1912.

Owned by Ash and his brother Cole, each house had a mix of old and new features and a vast undercover deck with a pool, swim spa and heated jacuzzi.

Three adjacent two-bedroom villas on the property were used for guests, each featuring all the mod cons one could dream of inside and out.

At the centre of it all was a prestige homestead with sweeping views over the stunning Byron and Ballina landscape.

This was where Ash's parents lived in a five-bedroom provincial-style residence with a custom-designed kitchen featuring state-of-the-art appliances.

Out the back, there was also a fully equipped barbecue zone, a 12-metre mineral heated pool, a self-contained pool house and an eight-person spa. To the side was a large distillery barn, workers' quarters that could be used for visitors or an office.

As well as a freestanding office space was a double garage with loft accommodation, all surrounded by flower gardens.

He pulled up outside one of the Queenslanders and sat for a moment inside with the engine turned off, mulling his life choices. While the evocative cornet solo, sounding out over his speakers, trailed into silence.

The porch lights turned on, and he spotted the silhouette behind the glass side panels of the front door.

He pulled himself out of his car with a sigh, locked it and walked with heaviness up the steps.

The door swung open, and an elegant woman appeared, her eyes filled with life and twinkling with cheer.

Rose Falconer was a force of nature. She was always dressed with impeccable taste. Today, she wore a silk jumpsuit that flowed effortlessly to her bare feet.

Her skin was tanned and smooth, making her look much younger than her 66 years. Her hair was pixie cut, her nose and lip pierced with diamonds.

She was stunning for her age, and she carried herself with grace and joy that was ever a soft landing for Ash and his brother Cole.

He adored her, and after years of military housing, he'd been drawn right back to the farm to be close to her.

She was a whipper-smart woman who'd raised two sons and knew when to call bull on her children's shenanigans growing up.

She was also a good friend, and right now, she peered at him with a raised brow with two amber-filled tumblers in her hand.

Her eyes honed in on his still-wet hair, ruffled clothes, and troubled eyes.

'Whisky?'

'You know me so well.'

He took the heavy tumbler she extended and strolled into the home.

He made his way into the living area and sat heavily in the velvet grey lounge, his face sullen.

'What's eating you, honey?'

Rose folded herself into a love chair across from him, sipping on her glass.

His mother had an uncanny way of discerning his mood. She was also not easily put off. He'd no recourse but to share.

'Got an op that's doing my head in.'

Rose nodded as she pursed her lips. 'Tell me what you can.'

She was aware of his covert status and, as such, took his lead on how much he wanted to share.

'On paper, the prospect looks suss as all. In person, though, they seem to be innocent. So I'm not sure which way to go. I have to pursue the evidence, but I'm torn.'

'You don't want them to be guilty.'

He shook his head. 'I thought I did. Yet, some things she does say she's clean. Others make her look guilty as all hell.'

His mother's eyes lit up. 'She?'

He groaned at his slip-up. 'Her gender doesn't matter.'

'As if. Why is your face red and those jade babies not meeting mine?'

'Fuck.' He hid the low groan against his whisky glass, but it was too late. Rose had the same impeccable hearing as he did.

She grinned. 'You just gave yourself away, soldier.'

He scowled in response.

'Who is she?'

'Nobody.'

'Liar.'

'I won't make her somebody.'

‘Another lie. At this rate, I should apply to conduct military interrogations.’

‘Mother.’ He rasped in indignation.

She laughed, a tinkling sound that he responded to with a huff.

‘She’s different. I can tell.’

‘How so, Mother?’

‘There’s a light in your eyes. One I haven’t seen since Bianca.’

Ash groaned, pulling on his hair. ‘Do we have to bring up my ex?’

‘Only to remind you how selfish she was. So you don’t repeat the same mistake.’

‘Never. She cheated on me when on tour, tired of waiting for me to return home. Worse still, the betrayal had been going on for years with her high school boyfriend. I’d be a fool to go for a woman like her again.’

When he’d found out eight years ago, he’d filed for divorce and come to a shared custody arrangement for Jake.

Except over the years, Bianca focused more on her new family and two new babies. She had little time for a growing, rambunctious boy.

The result was Ash’s full custody of Jake, who now lived with him on Falcon Farm.

This worked well because Kit and Rose, who lived in the main homestead, looked after Jake when Ash left for work trips or needed a sitter.

Rose wagged a finger at him. ‘She was the fool, honey, not you. As long as you bring home a woman who adores you and your clever, sometimes snarky and energetic son, I’ll be happy.’

‘Not sure that’ll happen anytime time soon.’

Rose chugged back her whisky and unfolded her long legs from under her. ‘My hope is eternal. I’ll leave you to your woman troubles. Your father has been blowing up my phone, demanding I return to his bed.’

‘Stop!’ His groan this time was accompanied by an eye roll.

Yet deep down inside, he yearned for the same passionate connection his parents shared. His relentless high dating standards resulted from witnessing what true love looked like for most of his life.

‘Anytime you need to talk about her, I’ll be here.’

‘I don’t doubt you for a moment.’

Ash grinned as she walked away, her stride still youthful and packed with grace, and for a moment, he envied his father for the security and love he’d been blessed with for over forty years.

‘Here’s to finding my own,’ he rasped, toasting thin air.



# Chapter 7



**M**onday morning arrived with a sluggishness that clung to Cece like a second skin.

She'd not slept much the night before, restless and shifting between the sheets.

Consumed with reliving her unbidden kiss with Ash, her overheating skin caused her to flee into the shower for a cool down.

She gasped as the cold water sluiced over her, but it did nothing to put out the flames he'd lit up in her.

The fact was she wanted more, needed more, of him.

For a few minutes the previous night, she'd shared in his wild aphrodisiac and was drunk on him. On his lips, his taste, his smell.

*Why did he have to smell so enticing? Like a rainforest with hints of fresh tropical tones, honey, and citrus after a storm?*

She slapped her hand on the shower glass until her mind recalibrated.

It still took a monumental effort to get her shit together, prep for work and get Mace ready for school.

Using a meditation poetry podcast to distract her, she pulled it together somehow and arrived at work early.

She hovered a coffee and croissant at her desk while checking her emails.

Yet the unease lingered as if something dark was looming over her.

She sat at her desk as her fellow staff members trickled in one by one, sharing their weekend experiences. She'd little to offer except a smile and nod, her mind preoccupied.

Her phone buzzed, jolting her out of her thoughts.

The caller ID came up from somewhere else in the same building. She hesitated for a moment before swiping to answer.

‘Hi, Cece.’

The voice on the other end was all business. ‘Alan from Finance. I’ve got some questions for you.’

She leaned back in her chair and studied her shoe. ‘Sure. Shoot.’

‘It’s about the work credit card you have access to. We’ve noted a few abnormal purchases on it with your name against them.’

Cece’s eyes flicked to the cupboard at the centre of her workspace where all her department’s files lived.

She shared the space with Rachel, Laila, and Brad.

In one of its drawers was a leather file that contained a corporate card.

One that each of them used for small purchases related to work purposes or up to \$5,500 for marketing expenses. It was a dispensation she didn't take for granted.

Cece flushed as she sat back upright. 'Abnormal? What do you mean?'

'We've come across three restaurant bills from The Pearl – that fancy place on Tallow Beach.' The accountant rushed his words. 'Also, a couple of significant UberEats orders of KFC and a basic Netflix subscription. All in your name.'

Her eyes widened, her hand gripping her desk. 'They can't be mine, none of them are. I've never even been to The Pearl. I swear. Maybe you should check with the other managers?'

'Cece, we've already done that.' A hint of annoyance threaded through Alan's tone. 'None of them know anything either.'

'So sorry. I wish I had more for you. Can you please send me an itemised list of the purchases so I can examine it myself?'

'Sure. We'll also keep exploring.' The accountant sounded unconvinced before hanging up.

Cece stared at her phone, her mind reeling. She wasn't responsible as she'd only used the corporate card once to authorise design drafts for the wedding services brochure.

Lost in thought, she only stirred at the sight of her junior coordinator walking by.

‘Hey, Laila.’

The young woman paused, her face screwed up in annoyance.

*Churlish at being interrupted on her way to do nothing in particular,* Cece thought, holding back the urge to give her junior some serious side-eye.

‘Yeah?’

‘Just had a call from the finance team. They say someone might have wrongly used the card we share. Have you noted anything strange?’

Laila cocked her head. ‘Strange? No, not at all.’

She added a smile, but Cece locked onto the sly glint in her eye.

Cece nodded slowly, her mind working as she gathered her thoughts to figure out her next move.

‘All right then.’ She dragged her eyes away. ‘Just thought I’d ask.’

Laila walked away, leaving Cece with a nagging suspicion she knew more than she was letting on.

She sank into her chair, fingers tapping on her desk. ‘Get it together, woman.’

Her thoughts were a tangled mess, suspicions creeping like shadows on the edge of her mind.

A soft chime pulled her focus back to the present.

A message from Alan in her inbox detailing the unauthorised transactions.

She scrolled through the list, her throat tightening as she read through the itemised receipts. None of it made any sense.

‘Hey, Cece!’ Rachel stood across the room, waving a coffee cup. ‘Coffee before our stand-up?’

‘Not right now.’

Distracted, Cece’s voice was a mumble as she kept her eyes fixed on her screen.

Rachel wandered over, her face screwed in concern. ‘You okay? You’re a little pale.’

‘Uh, yeah,’ Cece managed, forcing a smile. ‘Just some weird stuff with the purchasing card. I’m sure it’ll get sorted out soon.’

‘Let me know if you need any help, all right?’

Rachel gave Cece a kind smile before disappearing towards the boardroom.

‘Thanks.’

Cece’s whisper was drowned in the office chatter. Her eyes flicked back to the email, the numbers taunting her.

‘Focus.’ She inhaled. ‘Dig deep. Seek the truth.’

Her thoughts circled back to that subtle smirk on Laila’s face. At that knowing glint in her eyes. Was it possible that her junior had something to do with this?

She shook her head, not wanting to make assumptions.

Yet the more she tried to push the thought away, the more it clung on, refusing to be ignored.

Rising to her feet, she nabbed her iPad for the meeting.

Inside the boardroom, the murmur of the staff members gathering buzzed around her. Cece was oblivious to it all, consumed by the mystery of the purchasing card.

Worry clouded her attention, and she delivered a distracted update on her work.

Just as the catch-up wrapped, Denise called out.

The GM's voice cut through her haze like a knife. 'Cece, would you please come into Ash's office for a moment?'

Denise adjourned the catch-up, and Cece's heart leapt into her throat as she followed the petite woman into Ash's modern, panelled sanctuary.

His office interior matched the man. The furniture was minimalist and expensive. Pale wooden floors gleamed under the overhead lights, a wood-panelled reception desk and large, floor-to-ceiling windows. The walls were lined with leather-bound books and plush seats, and a large oak desk sat in front of the windows.

The entire space was surrounded by broad windows and a skylight, with expansive views of the beach and lighthouse, enhanced by a dozen potted plants, all tall and dark with large leaves that emitted subtle notes.

Her eyes skittered until they met an emerald gaze. His arms were crossed his chest, and he sat on the edge of his desk.

Her angst ratcheted as she remembered how those same cold eyes had heated in molten passion when he'd kissed her.

She dragged her gaze from his and took a shaky breath to reorient herself.

*Now was not the time to indulge in reliving their mindless moment.*

'Have a seat.' Ash gestured to the empty chair before him.

Cece complied, her fingers fidgeting in her lap.

Denise pulled a chair beside Ash.

'Accounts have informed us of some irregular purchases made with the company card.' Denise's tone was clipped and formal. 'You had access to it, correct?'

Cece nodded, swallowing hard. 'Yes, but I swear I didn't make those charges. I don't know anything about them.'

'You've seen them?' Ash's voice was tight.

'I have, yes.'

Denise slid a piece of paper across the table towards Cece. Her tummy flipped as she recognised the list of transactions she'd seen earlier that day, all under her name.

'Alan called the restaurant, Netflix, and Uber.' Ash's gaze never left her face. 'He discovered these subscriptions and

payments were in your name and linked to a cecedan456@gmail.com email.'

Cece's breath caught in her throat, her vision swimming as the room closed on her.

'Cece?' Denise prompted. 'Anything to say about this?'

Her heart pounded as she struggled to find the right words. She met their gazes, hoping her sincerity was convincing enough. 'All I know is that I didn't make any of these purchases.'

'The card is a privilege, Cece,' Denise reminded her. 'You signed an agreement regarding appropriate use. No matter who's responsible, this is a severe breach of trust.'

Cece shook her head, her curls fluttering around her face. 'I'm devastated that this happened. But it's not me. I have Premium Netflix, not basic, and I've never eaten at that restaurant. It's either a vindictive move or an amateur play, at the very least.'

'On whose part?' Ash rasped.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them back, determined not to show weakness. 'I'm not sure, but I intend to find out,' she insisted. 'I'll need to dedicate some time today to find out.'

Ash's face remained expressionless.

He didn't have to say he wouldn't hesitate to show her the door if she didn't prove she wasn't the guilty party.



Ash leaned back, the long, lean fingers of one hand tapping a rhythm on his opposite upper arm. He studied her for a moment before nodding. ‘You understand that we need to resolve this issue soon.’

‘I do.’

She felt the weight of Ash’s gaze on her, which only magnified her anxiety. The dim light in his office cast shadows across his face, making his expression unreadable.

Denise cut through the tension. ‘Cece, you’ve only been here a short while, but we like what we see so far. So please know we’re hoping what we find works in your favour. However, we also need to follow due diligence.’

Cece took a sharp breath. Although confident she’d done nothing wrong, being held accountable for something she didn’t do was suffocating. ‘I get it. I’ll do some digging around. Just give me some time. Please.’

Denise’s expression softened, and Cece drew hope from it.

‘We’ll give you until the end of the week. You can leave now,’ Denise said.

Cece sensed the woman liked and was rooting for her. Ash, she wasn’t so sure.

She nodded to the pair, rose to her feet, and left his office.

She tried to steady her breathing but couldn’t shake the sensation that her world had been thrown off balance.

Clutching her notepad, she made her way to her desk.

Where Laila sat waiting, a smirk plastered across her face and a cup of tea in her hand.

‘Hey! I’ve been waiting for our morning catch-up,’ Laila chirped.

Cece narrowed her eyes, suspicious at the transformation in the young woman’s attitude.

‘Something came up.’ Cece tried to sound casual. ‘Can we do our check-in tomorrow instead?’

Laila’s eyebrows shot up, feigning confusion. ‘Oh, will you be here?’

She smiled, all innocence and light, tilting her head to one side.

Something was off about how Laila asked that question. With a sly undertone that sent shivers down Cece’s spine.

‘Yes.’ She kept her voice steady, working hard to keep the strain away. ‘I will be here. Why wouldn’t I be?’

Laila’s lips curled into a small, secretive smile as she lifted her cup of tea to her lips. ‘Oh, no reason.’

Her voice dripped with honeyed sweetness. She turned away from Cece and sauntered back to her desk.

Cece narrowed her eyes at her departing junior. *Why was Laila acting smug?*

‘Hey.’

Cece spotted Brad and Rachel waving her over.

She rose and went to them.

Brad leaned in. ‘What gives?’

Rachel whispered. ‘Does it have to do with the bean counters? And why they’ve been blowing up my phone asking about some strange charges on the work credit card?’

Cece waved them into the boardroom, giving them a quick rundown of events.

‘It’s not me. I’m super careful with company spending. I’d never risk my job like this.’

Rachel lifted a hand. ‘From what I know of you, Cece, you’re an honest bean, so maybe, just maybe, someone else is to blame.’

She cocked her head and waggled her eyebrows as she spoke, pursing her lips to point out someone beyond the glass walls. The trio stared at Laila, who sat at her desk looking a little too pleased with herself, oblivious to their shared side-eye.

Rachel sucked her teeth. ‘She’s always been a thorn in someone’s side since she started here, but this feels different – more calculated, more personal.’

Brad nodded. ‘Know what? I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve. I suggest getting more data about the purchases and sending me what you find. I’ll see if I can help.’

The offer took Cece by surprise. ‘You’d do that for me?’

Brad snapped his fingers with flair. ‘Yes, girl, because I’ve also had to contend with Miss Thing, trying to take over my

social media manager's role. She's an upstart with no qualms climbing over bodies to get what she wants.'

'Keep your head up, Cece.' Rachel spoke with conviction, concern evident in her dark brown eyes. 'We'll figure this out.'

'Thank you,' Cece responded, her throat dry and tight.

'Meanwhile, don't give away anything to her. She shouldn't know we're looking into her,' Brad cautioned, wagging a finger at her.

Cece sighed. 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, hey?'

Back at her desk, Cece glanced at Laila, fighting the urge to confront her junior.

Instead, she bit her tongue and focused instead on proving her innocence.



With her phone pressed to her ear, Cece paced back and forth in one of the smaller meeting rooms within Falcon House.

Her brow furrowed, and she gritted her teeth while waiting for someone to pick up on the other end.

'Welcome to Uber customer support. How can I help you today?' The voice on the line was cheerful.

‘Hi, my name is Cece Mirren. I’m a current account owner, but I believe someone has created a fake one in my name.’

The customer service support ran her through the required identification questions.

Once the prelims were out of the way, Cece explained the reason for her call.

‘I’ve just been informed of a fraudulent user of my details. Can you please help me figure out what’s going on?’

‘Of course, Cece! Give me a moment to pull up that information.’

After a beat, the friendly voice continued. ‘Okay, I found the account,’ said the support agent. ‘It looks like whoever made it used a Gmail account. Cecedan456@gmail.com. Is that yours?’

‘Nope.’ Cece gritted her teeth as she drummed her fingers on a table. ‘Not mine at all.’

‘All right, I’ll flag this account as fraudulent, and we’ll investigate further. I do apologise for any inconvenience this caused you, Cece.’

‘May I ask where the food deliveries in that name got delivered to?’ she murmured. ‘The address, please?’

The support person gave her a street name and number, which Cece typed into her iPad.

‘Thank you.’

She hung up the phone and rubbed her temples.

Fuelled by the find, Cece sent a message to Brad with the data she'd received.

She exited the meeting room and headed to his desk.

Where she found Brad staring at his screen. He waved her over, the corners of his mouth turned up in a sly smile. 'Is this our perp's locale?'

'Seems so.' Cece pulled a chair next to him. 'That's the addie the Uber Eats deliveries were sent to.'

'The suburb is familiar,' he said, tapping his fingers on the desk. 'It's the same one where Laila lives because I once dropped her off at her apartment after a work function.'

'Check this out,' he said, pointing at the Google Maps screen. He dropped a pin on Laila's place and then searched for the location that Uber Eats provided Cece. 'It's right around the corner of her block.'

'Unbelievable.' The rage simmering inside Cece threatened to boil over.

'Let's not jump to conclusions just yet,' Brad cautioned, though his eyes betrayed his growing confirmation of Laila's guilt. 'You need more evidence to confront her when we're sure.'

Cece sucked her teeth, struggling to keep her emotions in check. 'So what do I do? Everything keeps coming back to my name.'

‘Take what we’ve found to Ash.’ Brad gave her an encouraging nod. ‘He can get onto any data. I know because we had a troll on social media that he unearthed in under a day. He disappeared the man, cancelled his shit, and we never heard from him again. He’ll help you get to the bottom of this. If Laila is responsible, he’ll have no qualms proving it and setting this right.’



The sea was molten gold, reflecting the sun as it dipped over the horizon.

Each glittering wave was a sight to behold. They crashed upon the shore in a kaleidoscope of colour, the churning water roaring in Ash’s ears.

He slowed his run, the warm sand hard-packed under his bare feet. The waning rays touched his skin as a gentle sea breeze played with his hair.

He strode into the wet until he was waist-deep, scooping up handfuls of water to spill them over his sweat-slicked body.

Finding his steady breath again, he headed to where he’d dropped his towel on the beach.

He glanced at his watch. He’d an hour before he had to pick up Jake from soccer. So he headed back to the office to shower and change before leaving.

He stopped short as he jogged up the stairs to the staff entrance.

A lone figure paced by the window. Their attention turned to the view of the sun dipping below the horizon. Their eyes met, and his heart lurched in his chest.

*Cece.*

The vulnerability in her face jolted him, flooding him with an irrational need to protect her. To hold her in his arms. To soothe the worry from her eyes.

Instead, he tore his gaze from hers and walked inside.

He had no idea how to feel about the accusations levelled at her. For some reason, he was rooting for her innocence even though he'd many unanswered questions about her other activities.

She met him in the doorway. Dusk's light streamed through the large windows of the office. It cast a warm glow on her face, and his breath caught as his cock twitched.

*Fuck. She was beautiful.*

'Cece,' he clipped, arranging his face into a mask to hide his reaction to her.

She sighed. 'Ash, I think I found something. That might show I was speaking the truth this morning.'

He glanced at her, raising a brow.

'But to prove it, I need your help.'

'Why?'



‘Because you’re the only one with all access to staff laptops.’

He turned to face her, tilting his head to study her. ‘What are you saying? Out with it.’

‘Someone set me up. I’ve managed to track down the delivery address of the person who requested the food delivery. Brad is sure it was Laila’s home. Or somewhere by it.’

‘Laila?’ He paused for a beat, searching her golden eyes for a moment, sensing her sincerity. ‘Not surprised,’ he murmured. ‘She’s had it out for you.’

‘You think?’

‘I know. I’ve noted how insubordinate she’s been with you. And how patient you’ve been with her.’

He pursed his lips as her eyes fell away, looking so guileless.

Her skin flushed, sending a wave of need crashing through him.

‘Will you help, Ash?’

He had to. It was his moral obligation as her employer.

He also needed her to be clear of these accusations in case they meddled with his separate investigation.

Most of all, because Cece was so damn appealing. His mind told him to flee, but his heart wanted to believe in her goodness.

He gave her a curt nod. 'Where's Laila's desk?'

Cece pointed it out. 'To the left.'

He marched to the desk and opened a drawer. Pulling out Laila's laptop, his eyes narrowed as he flipped it open.

Cece wandered over as the computer powered up.

Ash sat on a chair and typed out a master password to get in.

His fingers flew, and his tapping echoed in the empty room.

After a beat, he found something.

He gestured for Cece to come closer.

Walking over, she peered at the screen.

'This.' Ash pointed to a Gmail sub-account on Laila's laptop.

Cece's breath hitched as she tugged a hand through her curls. 'It's the same email used on the orders - cecedan456@gmail.com. I've never had that address, ever.'

Ash's expression was grim, accessing the inbox. 'Looks like she's been using this fake email to register the unauthorised accounts and transactions.'

He pointed to the screen where a series of messages sat. 'Each corresponds to the purchases listed by the Falcon House accounts team.'

Cece licked her lips, and he dragged his eyes away from the tip of the pink tongue. 'I feel sick.'

Ash shook his head. 'She thought she was being clever. She used the Falcon House office IP address, which would've tied back to you. Having the food delivered to her home? That was her downfall.'

'Is it enough, though?' Cece's voice wavered with uncertainty.

Ash sat back in the chair, wanting so much to reach out. To fold the woman into his arms and put her at ease. To rock her into bliss until the ugliness in her world faded.

But he couldn't give in though to their freakin' insane attraction. He had to keep her at arm's length.

'It's enough. Trust me, Cece, she'll get what she's due.' He hoped his voice held a reassuring edge.

'Thank you, Ash.'

Cece's expression on her face relaxed somewhat, and the knot in his stomach eased. He was beginning to care for her, and that thought threw him for a loop.

To tamp it away, he clenched his jaw. 'I'll hand over the evidence to Denise in the morning. She'll be able to handle the situation with Laila from a corporate and legal standpoint.'

Cece nodded. 'I appreciate it.'

He jerked his chin at her and rose to his feet.

Her eyes slid to his, and for a moment, he recognised the need amongst the shadows in her hazel depths.

It echoed the same desire that was flooding him.

He'd crumble if they stood staring at each other for one moment longer.

She gave him the beauty of her luminous golden eyes, which he dreamt of at night.

He bit back a groan, longing to reach for her and do things that would make them both moan.

He needed to shut this down once and for all.

Ash ran a hand through his hair and sighed. 'Cece, go home.'

It was a plea, a heartfelt ask in case he lost all control and owned her, right here, right now, on the floor of the Falcon House office.

She stared up at him, rooted to the spot, so he forced himself to move. He powered, sweeping past her.

Away from the woman he craved but had still to wreck.



That evening, the sunset and the sky took on shades of pink and purple.

Cece stood at her kitchen counter, prepping homemade pizza and a light salad dinner for her and Mason. Her eyes were fixed on the surging ocean. She was seeing yet unseeing, processing how Ash dropped everything to help her.

The man was such a maddening puzzle.

He'd also driven her insane in his gear.

She trembled as she remembered how the water-soaked tee moulded to his chest muscles, how his jogging shorts accentuated his ass.

He'd been barefoot, too, and she'd had to clench her hands. To stop herself from touching those powerful thighs.

*Lord, she wanted him.*

Yet the angst between them haunted her with unspoken emotion she had no idea what to do with.

As the last rays of sunlight vanished from the sky, Cece steeled herself for the upcoming storm.

She served dinner, checked Mason's homework, and sat beside him on the couch, where they settled in for a movie before heading to bed.

An uneasy tension settled over the workplace like a heavy fog the following day. Cece could feel the weight of it pressing down on her as she tried to focus on her tasks.

It was impossible to ignore that something big was about to happen.

Just before 10 a.m., there was a commotion.

She glanced up to see Laila walking into Denise's office, where Ash stood inside, his face closed off and stern.

The young woman's eyes were strained with fear and confusion as she disappeared into its confines.

Cece's heart raced as she exchanged looks with Rachel and Brad.

Moments later, raised voices, Denise and Laila's, drifted through the air.

'Seems like it's happening,' Rachel whispered, her eyes never leaving the closed office door.

'Good,' Brad agreed, his jaw set in grim determination. 'I hope they throw the book at her.'

Cece remained silent as she tried to ignore the muffled arguing from the office. Finally, the door swung open, revealing a tearful Laila stumbling out.

Black mascara streaks ran down her cheeks, and her face was twisted in disbelief.

As she passed Cece's desk, their eyes met for a brief moment before the guilty-looking woman pulled away.

'Laila,' Ash called as Denise followed behind. 'Please gather your belongings and leave the premises.'

'I-I didn't mean to—,' Laila choked out between sobs, but Ash held up a hand to silence her.

'Enough,' he rasped. 'Your actions have consequences, and you must face them. Now, please leave.'

Laila tearfully gathered her things. Denise then escorted her out of the building a few moments later.

Ash tracked their departure, and catching a glimpse of him, Cece sensed the tension in the air dissipate.

For now, at least, the nightmare was over. She shared relieved glances with Rachel and Brad, knowing they all shared the same sentiment.

‘Thank God she’s gone,’ Rachel muttered, shaking her head in disbelief. ‘I can’t believe she tried to pull that stunt.’

‘Me neither,’ Cece replied, her voice still shaky from the day’s events. ‘At least it’s over now.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ Brad agreed, his eyes reflecting a quiet determination. ‘We don’t need any more drama around here.’

When the fuss died down, Cece sat at her desk, her fingers tapping her phone screen.

With a few quick keystrokes, she ordered Kentucky Fried Chicken through Uber Eats.

‘Perfect,’ she murmured to herself, hitting the submit button.

She couldn’t help but feel a little thrill of justice done as the confirmation message appeared on her screen.

Revenge might be a dish best served cold, Cece thought. This time, though, it’d have a side of crispy, delicious fried chicken boxed in a special home delivery for Laila.



Later that afternoon, Cece sat at her desk, sorting through the last few days' paperwork.

'Cece,' Ash's voice called out from his office door, drawing her attention away from her tasks. 'A word, please?'

'Of course,' she replied, rising from her chair and stepping into Ash's office. The door closed behind her as she sat across the two of them.

'Listen, Cece,' began Denise, clasping her hands on the table. 'We wanted to apologise for everything that happened. It was quite the ordeal.'

'Unbelievable, really,' Ash chimed in, his brow furrowed. 'We never should have doubted you.'

'Thank you,' Cece murmured, grateful for their understanding. 'So, what now?'

Ash shook his head, leaning back against his managing director's desk. 'Denise and I discussed it, and we've decided not to get the authorities involved. Laila has promised to pay the Falcon Group back. We'll chalk up her actions to youth and inexperience and put this mess behind us.'

'Same here.' Cece sighed, relieved at their decision. The last thing she needed was more drama and complications in her life. 'I appreciate your support, guys. Really.'

'Of course, Cece,' Denise smiled. 'You're an important part of our team; we trust you.'

'Let's just focus on moving forward,' Ash suggested. 'We've got plenty of work to do, and we're counting on you.'



Cece nodded, filled with a renewed sense of purpose.

‘I won’t let you down,’ she agreed, offering them a confident smile.

As she left Ash’s office and returned to her desk, Cece couldn’t help but feel that things were falling back into place.

The storm had passed, and she found herself more resilient than ever in its wake.

‘Here’s to fresh starts,’ she whispered, diving headfirst into her project plan, keen to leave the chaos of the past few days behind her.

However, Ash put up his aloof and unapproachable walls once more.

Cece tried her best to ignore it and focus on her work, but she couldn’t shake the sensation that he was still harbouring resentment towards her.

Yet he’d given her his vote of confidence.

Surely, she was missing something.

As the days passed, Cece tried to brush off her concerns and focus on her work.

However, whenever she caught Ash’s eye, he’d look away, his lips pressed into a thin line.

Whenever she tried to engage him in conversations about work, he gave her curt responses.

After a few days, she gave up as they returned to their previous silent stand-off, and she resigned herself to their

uneasy tension.

# Chapter 8



‘**M**um, can I go to the beach with Jake? Can I? Can I?’

Cece gave her son a long look. She narrowed her eyes as she glanced between Mason.

The boy was dancing on his feet, as was his companion, both grinning so sweetly at her.

‘I suppose I can allow it. Only because you did all your chores today and took out the trash without me asking.’

The boys gave a collective cheer and cartwheeled in tandem on the green lawns of Falcon House.

She gave them a fake side eye, half smiling at their antics.

‘Only on one condition. You stay within the flags and in the shallows. You start surf training next week, Mace, so no tricks until you’ve got the basics.’

‘I’ll take care of him,’ Jake called out mid-tumble.

The two boys had been playing together most days after school. Also, on the weekends, when Jake came into Falcon House with his dad.

So far, it had been incident-free.

Warmed by Jake's easy nature, Cece welcomed the natural friendship growing between both boys.

What was not developing was any sign of thawing between Jake's father and herself, to her daily consternation.

Because she still had no clue why Ash couldn't stand the sight of her.

She snapped back to the present. 'Mace, if you need me, call me.'

He nodded, clutching at the smartwatch on his wrist. Enabled to make calls, it was water and kid-resistant.

At least that's what she hoped, having shelled out more than she'd expected for it.

Still, it was a lifesaver when it came to reaching Mason these days on his wanderlust jaunts with Jake.

The boys dashed through the gum trees to the golden sands beyond Falcon House.

Waving goodbye to them, she walked through the corridors at Falcon House, heading for the office.

Although it was her day off, she intended to review the edits to the booking platform Falcon House intended to use for weddings.

The web designers' plans needed vetting and approval first thing on Monday.

She settled behind her desk and soon lost herself in copy layouts and wireframes.

Outside, the sun shone with the white-hot brilliance of a summer's afternoon, sharp and crisp. The day brought a hint of strawberries, vanilla ice cream, fruit and fresh-cut grass to mind.

She gazed out of the office windows with a sigh. Wishing she was lying on the shore watching Mace and Jake play in the warm blue sea.

*But wishes were for fishes.* She'd be a fool if she didn't finish her work.

A while later, she looked up, rubbed her eyes and shut off her laptop.

Rising to her feet, she tossed with the idea of a coffee from the Eatery's baristas. Or whether to keep to her water bottle and its dwindling rations.

She was so lost in her musing that as she stepped out into the corridor, she slammed, hard, into another body.

It was forceful and solid, and because they had been moving at a clip, the wind got knocked out of her.

Gasping for air, she flinched as two hands banded around her—muscled, thick arms.

Her head snapped back, and their eyes met in a clash of fever and ire.

She smelt him: a musk so individual she'd pick him out sight unseen. It was a heady scent of mint, forest and potent spice.

It hit her so hard that her knees weakened, and she sagged against him.

‘What in the hell?’

His face was tight with low-key suppressed emotion, his eyes narrowed, and his mouth a slash of disapproval.

She reacted with a snarl as her mind wheeled. ‘You slammed into me.’

‘You weren't looking, woman.’

Pushing off against his chest, she stepped back, her anger rising. He let her go, crossed his arms and served her that cold gaze he'd mastered so well.

Her temper took over, and she could hear her inner voice telling her to stop. It was no use. Her train of fury had long left the station.

Turning on him, she poked a finger in his muscled torso.

Her nail snagged on a bare white cotton tee, but she carried on, not caring. ‘You know what, Ash Falconer. I'm sick of you treating me like shit. Of acting like I'm a stain on your clean, white, pristine, controlled world. You'd best tell me what the fuck I've ever done to deserve your shitty attitude or -.’

She paused, heaving, having not thought further than that.

‘Or what?’ He drawled the words, taking his time to enunciate each syllable. Playing, toying with her. His jade eyes glittered with an emotion she couldn’t quite fathom.

She leaned in. ‘Men like you fucking annoy me.’

He cocked a brow. ‘Is that right? What have men *like me* done to women *like you*? What did we wreck *in you*?’

He emphasised certain words, drawing them out, vexing her even more.

As he spoke, he lowered his head. Until he was so close, she could feel his breath on her lips.

She snapped. ‘You’re fucking arrogant, twisted and full of your hot air. You act like your God’s Gift. Hell-bent on making women who work for you always feel on edge. Because we can never be sure whether you’re about to break out in a rage or undermine us with your cold toxicity.’

Ash’s brows flew up his temple. ‘It’s not me you’re angry about then, sweetheart. Sounds like some other bloke used or abused you. Just because I don’t fold at your cute, sweet self doesn’t mean I don’t respect you. It’s just that I’m not your everyday bubbly personality. That’s your domain.’

She sucked in air, wanting to choke him with her bare hands. ‘Fuck you.’

He smirked. ‘Maybe I should fuck you, as you’ve suggested. So hard you’ll forget the fools in your past who’ve fallen for your fun and bubbly wiles.’

Her body jolted, giving him a mortified glare. ‘You wouldn’t dare.’

His face and voice dipped even lower, his eyes glinting with a wildness that told he, too, was losing control. ‘Try me. I’d be delighted to finish what we started the other night.’

He was so close and driving her insane that her vision clouded.

At that moment, unthinking, she nabbed his face in her hands and kissed him.

She yanked him down and slammed her body against his. Their lips met in a flash of fire. His mouth a sudden inferno on hers, their teeth clashing, their tongues hot and fierce.

With a growl, he pulled her closer, his mouth hot, wet and hard. He bit her lip, and she gasped. Tingling burst through her, the heat radiating out to her limbs, her body responding to him, her nipples tightening, her pussy throbbing.

His hands were on her ass, pulling her closer, and she could feel the scald of his cock against her. Her body shuddered with need, and she slid her tongue into his mouth, winding her arms around him and pulling him closer.

He let out a low groan and tensed, his hands gripping her ass tighter as his shaft swelled against her tummy. She moaned into his mouth as he nipped and sucked at her.

He pulled her a few steps down the corridor and into his office, their lips still locked together. He kicked the door shut behind them and pulled Cece through the space.



She noted little of where they were and more of his handsome, chiselled jaw and jade intensity.

As her hands stroked the length of his throbbing cock under his shorts, he took her face and looked into her eyes.

‘Are you sure about this? I don’t want to hear about non-consent later.’

She thought for a second and firmed up the crazy decision in her head. It was too late anyway. Her body was so far gone for him.

All she wanted at that moment were his hands on her. His lips on hers. His tongue stroking her own. Him inside her.

She pulled him to another searing kiss, but he paused, his breath heating her face. ‘You’re sure you want this, woman?’ he growled, seeking confirmation.

She nodded.

‘Fine. Not a word. We do this my way.’

‘Yes.’

And that was it. With a groan, he yanked her to him.

His mouth was hungry and demanding, his hands and lips on her everywhere. She tore off his t-shirt, and he did the same to her running pants, and they fell to the floor.

She dragged off his shorts, and now naked and without breaking their kiss, he picked her up.

His arms bulged as he set her on the couch in his office.

She fell into the deep-backed sofa covered in lush velvet. The coolness of the material under her was a harsh contrast to his incandescence.

He stood before her, his massive shoulders heaving, the light from the desk lamp shining on his hard, muscled body.

She took in his magnificence. Staring at the elaborate tattoo of a snake in black and grey ink. It wove across his shoulder blades, chest, and lower to his slim hips, those muscled thighs sprinkled with dark hair and the hint of his sculpted sun-kissed ass.

Then her eyes fell on his jutting, throbbing length.

He smirked as he saw the adoration in her eyes, then moved to her.

First, he pressed his lips to her temple, then her nape and shoulder. ‘Your freckles drive me insane,’ he whispered.

She shivered with feeling as he almost ripped off her shirt and bra and sucked one pink-tipped breast into his mouth.

Arching up, she pushed her tits deeper into his mouth. His hand worked its way down to her waist. Her body shuddered as his fingers yanked aside lace, and one finger slid into her.

Then, a second finger.

She curled her fingers around each of his arms, and he inserted a third and pumped it into her.

She wanted to scream. At the insane sensation, the sheer intensity of the pleasure.

He lifted away from her tits. His fingers pumped. She bit her lip and dug her nails into the sofa's fabric.

He kissed her again, and she opened her mouth to him. His tongue tangled with hers while he ripped down her underwear and parted her knees.

He looked at her as he moved up her body. He stopped at her ink just under her tits. He traced the edges of the rising phoenix, and with so much tenderness, Cece's eyes teared up.

'You're a dream, babe.'

Those words said with such rasped feeling, were her undoing, and all inhibitions disappeared.

He switched it up, tracing his fingers lower across her soft tummy. Over her c-section scar, and lower still, towards the sensitive flesh on her thighs, his finger swirling around her ass.

She convulsed as red-hot passion shot through her. She barely registered as he opened a drawer in his desk. Pulling out a condom, which he rolled over himself.

*God, she was dripping wet just seeing him sheathe himself.*

His thick thighs rippled as he balanced himself above her.

He leaned closer, the tip of his shaft pressing against her cleft. Cece growled as he eased the head of his cock into her, taking his time.

She welcomed the stretch and slight discomfort, but she was so ready he slid right inside.

She swung her legs back and groaned, loving how he filled her, how his length and breadth sent hot jolts through her.

He held still, his hips pressed to hers, his eyes locked on hers. The look in them, the intensity, sent a shudder racing through her.

He withdrew out of her, and she moaned in protest. He took her wrists in his hands. He pinned her to the couch with one quick move, her arms above her head.

He rammed inside her again, and she gasped, her body tingling.

When he pumped into her, she gripped his arms, feeling his heavy, muscled strength. He moved her legs up so her ankles rested on his shoulders. She clamped her legs around him, her pussy shuddering at the feeling of his thrusts.

He shoved back into her, his lips lashing and sucking her nipple as he thrust into her, deep and hard.

Unable to handle the pleasure, she dragged his head away from her breast and kissed him. He obliged for a moment before moving back to her tits, licking and sucking and biting each nipple.

With no warning, he pulled out of her, pushing her knees further apart, and dropped his mouth to her clit. Her head fell back as his tongue flicked into her, and she lost it, so amped up by his raw sensuality.

His fingers stroked her cunt, and she grabbed his head. Panting and bucking as he licked and lashed over her sensitive

folds.

With a snarl, he rose to his knees and was back inside her. Plunging into her, rocking her hips against him.

Sucking her breast, nibbling her neck, kissing her with such intensity she almost passed out.

Moving in and out of her. Rocking her into oblivion.

The pressure building inside her was a tight knot that begged for release. Her back arched, her hands in his hair, biting her lip so hard to prevent her from screaming the office down.

He drove into her, his hips hard against hers, and sensation exploded inside her as he plunged into her again.

The relief was so intense that she sobbed, every muscle in her body aching, her sex throbbing as he thrust into her over and over, incessant with need.

His mouth on her breast and his fingers digging into her skin, he grunted and rushed into her, his cock so hard inside her.

The scorch of his cum spilling into his protective hood made her clench, and she called out, moaning his name as she trembled through her orgasm.

*Hands down, the best she'd ever had.*

He continued slicking in and out of her before he dropped to his elbows on either side of her on the sofa. His forehead rested on hers, his breathing wild.

The heady mix of sweat and the scent of sex mingled on his skin filled her senses. He brushed a strand of hair off her face, the gentle touch unexpected.

‘You okay?’

She nodded, barely able to whisper. ‘Yeah.’

‘Also, with what just happened?’

‘I can confirm two consenting adults are present, Judge Falconer.’

His lips twitched. ‘Good. I’d hate to be accused of taking advantage of you.’

His tone was playful, and yet she stiffened at his words.

‘Funny. Are *you* OK with fraternising with the staff?’

His chest rumbled. ‘There’s a policy about that. Not sure I’ve read the latest version, but I think I’m in violation.’

She shared his amusement as they lay there for a long minute, his arms walling her in, staring into each other’s eyes.

Cece couldn’t believe what she’d just done. And with whom she’d done it. She wondered if this would change anything between them.

But she was a big girl.

She hadn’t had sex with him so that he could change his attitude toward her. She’d been one hundred per cent sure of what she was doing, which was scratching an itch.

Her dilemma was that Ash Falconer was a master at scratching it well.

She wasn't a just-for-kicks kind of woman; all power to those who were. She was traditional in many ways and had always wished for a committed relationship.

Which was why how she was with Ash was unnerving her.

Regardless, she'd behaved like a wanton with her boss, which had some ramifications. Just what exactly she had no idea yet and, at that moment, decided to let go and let flow.

Mind made up, she reached behind his head and tangled her fingers in his hair.

He raised a brow.

She leaned up and gave him the gentlest kiss.

He hissed against her lips and gave back some of that sweet.

Cece's heart thumped as they shared the most intimate of embraces. It was scary, it was poignant, and it was beauty.

With no warning, he reared up, shot her a frown and moved suddenly, out and away from her. She groaned as his body left hers, stifling the sound with one hand.

She stood and pulled on her scattered clothes, only meeting his eyes once she finished dressing. He'd since moved to his chair, where he was pulling on his tee and shorts.

She took a deep breath and turned to face him, eyes meeting his. They stared at each other for a long moment.

'Why d'you hate me so much?'

Hands crossed over his wide chest, he mulled her words for a beat. One that stretched so that she thought he hadn't heard her.

She was about to ask again when he murmured. 'Hate's a strong term.'

'Dislike then.'

His eyes scoured her. His lean fingers traced his lips as if he remembered how deep they'd been inside her. 'You're complex.'

She let out a breath. 'Like that's a surprise to you. I am complicated. I'm a single mum without a trust fund and a family with issues. I've had to survive some of the nastiest experiences. Baffling is my default setting. However, I'm a big girl. I can deal. Can you?'

He bit his lip. 'I don't like complex. With everything I have on my plate, I don't need it.'

She thought about it and shrugged. 'I don't believe you for a minute,' she exclaimed, 'because you're ace at keeping complex secrets.'

Those jade eyes narrowed, and his entire body froze. For a moment, she glimpsed a lethal energy burst from him that knocked the air out of her. He wasn't a man to be toyed with.

'What the fuck? What secrets?'

She raised her hands to indicate her innocence. 'Before you blow your top, I say it as I see it. Which is that I know you're keeping something from me.'



His expression shuttered into a mask. ‘OK, Einstein. What secret would that be?’

‘No clue. All I know is that you’re a tight-lipped man who keeps his cards close. I don’t trust you.’

He huffed. ‘Do we need trust between us?’

‘Doesn’t count. I can’t demand trust from you. I’m not your woman.’

He sat back up, his eyes raking over the body he’d just ravished. ‘No. You certainly are not.’

This got Cece’s hackles up again. ‘You enjoyed saying that.’

He leaned back in his chair, feigning thoughtfulness. ‘Yes. I did.’

She glared at him, and he smiled, the warmth not quite reaching those cold jade eyes.

‘You’re a dick.’ She turned on her heel and went to storm out of the room.

In seconds, he was in front of her.

His arms walled her in as she stood at the half-open door, and he glanced down at her. His body heat and pheromones enveloped her, and she fought the urge to fold back into his arms again.

He spoke, his crackled baritone sending sparks through her. ‘I need to figure out complex. Until then, you’re in the

uncertain bin. That said, I will endeavour to treat you better, Miss Mirren.'

He scanned her with a dark and watchful gaze, his eyes hooded, his lips parted.

He was still coming down from their lovemaking, and his chest rose and fell, the motion hypnotic.

'Don't bother. I prefer the Arctic bear form of you. It's less confusing than all of this.'

Cece waved a hand around him to make her point.

She tried to brush past him, and he caught her arm in a gentle hold, stopping her in her tracks. Her breath hitched as she turned to face him, their bodies inches apart, their eyes locked.

His eyes were dark and glistening like a storm brewing inside them. 'Thing is, babe, I could come to like complex and confusing.'

Still, she spotted the wary shadows in his eyes and sighed. 'Yet you have misgivings.'

'I won't lie. I do.'

'So hang tight in your world of confusion. I'm done with this.'

Cece pulled her arm out of his hold, and he let her.

She stalked out of the room. Her bag clutched to her front like a shield against the emotions that he was throwing at her.

'Cece.'

She turned around at the sound of him rasping her name in his distinct reverb. ‘We’re not done. Not by a long shot.’

She cursed and turned, fleeing away from him. Legs shaky from the heart-stopping, body-melting orgasm he’d given her.

Heart ripping. Mind blown.

She tamped down the emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

She did not ever want to feel how she’d felt in his arms again. Not because it was wrong, but how right it freakin’ was. *Worse still, Ash Falconer was not her portion.*

Racing towards the Eatery, she turned the corner that would take her out of Falcon House. As she looked back, she barrelled into another body.

*Not again.*

‘Cece?’

*Rich.*

It’d been some considerable time after their non-date. Since then, they’d hardly spoken, and any conversation had been relegated to awkward, stiff discourse.

Right now, flushed, overwhelmed and sex funky, she couldn’t deal with him.

So she raised a hand and walked past him, giving a polite smile in the face of his incredulity. ‘Good to see you, Rich. I’m so sorry to have crashed into you, but I’ve got to run. Mace is somewhere outside, and I must get to him.’

She felt the burly chef looking after her, his expression bereft and a tad surly.

Darting away, she moved towards the sands and safer, calmer waters.



*Damn her to hell.*

*Damn her beauty, her smile, her sass.*

Damn, how she'd moved under him and moaned his name without knowing she'd done so.

How she tasted, how her skin under his was like satin, how she felt like she belonged in his arms. How she'd broken his walls down with that last kiss.

He knew instinctively he shouldn't have gone there with her.

He shouldn't have made love to her nor creamed with such intensity as she imploded around him in the best release he'd ever had.

Ash spent the next few minutes kicking himself for his moment of weakness. He'd also violated one of his rules. Never to fraternise with his staff.

But she'd been so sassy, so in his face, that he'd wanted to own her.

Instead, she'd owned him and called him out for his secrets. Despite all that, he was overcome with a rush of need for more from her.

*Why and how was she wrecking him? How dare she undo him before he had time to wreck everything she stood for?*

A shout interrupted his brooding.

'Dad?'

His son burst into the room, eyes shining.

'Had a blast today. Mace and I played beach soccer with some of the other kids. We were on the same team together, and we won.'

Ash forced himself to listen and be present. 'Sounds awesome, buddy. Where's Mace now?'

Jake's face fell for a second. 'His mum took him home. He had to get his homework done.'

'How was she?' Ash asked, flinching with guilt at using his son as a source of information.

'She's great, Dad. Always happy and smiling. Mace says she's a cool mum. We should hang out with them more often.'

There was a tinge of wistfulness in his son's voice, which Ash caught. 'Hey,' he said, trying to deflect the sadness because, for years now, Jake yearned for a mother who was present and engaged.

He'd be damned if Cece Mirren was on his son's desired lineup. 'Why don't we go into town? Grab some takeaway and

see that movie you've been asking me to for ages.'

Jake groaned. 'Which one, Dad? They've been many.'

'Your pick.'

The boy fist-pumped the air. 'Yes! Spiderman and the Multiverse.'

Ash smiled. 'I'll go with your choice, buddy.'

'Woot! Let's roll.'

Ash followed his son out into the evening, his mind still caught up by Cece.

His body still humming with the sensation of being thoroughly sated, and his heart roiling with an emotion he couldn't quite explain.

# Chapter 9



A few days later, Cece found herself face to face with Rich in the Eatery.

He'd finalised the wedding menus and was walking her through them.

At the start of their meeting, he'd been stiff and offhand. However, as the minutes flew by, he relaxed, and their stilted conversation soon turned into banter.

Her mood also lifted as she thought the chef would be a great friend if he gave her a chance.

'The selections sound great, Rich.'

'Glad you approve. I'll start with a few tasting platters this week. I'll call you in when I've something for you to try.'

She gave him a wide smile. 'Can't wait.'

Outside, the view from the Eatery's balcony was Byron perfection. The sky was a bright blue, the air crisp, with just a hint of a breeze. A band of dark clouds loomed in the distance, but they were too far off to worry about.

Tanned bodies lay on the beach, soaking up the sun's warmth. Ocean waves crashed against the sand, which surfers rode in. Scattered across the beach were toddlers building sand castles. Others jumped up and down on the water's edge, laughing in delight.

They fell into silence before Rich spoke up. 'About our date -,'

She lifted a hand to stay his roll. 'We don't have to.'

'I want to,' the sandy-haired man insisted. 'The thing is, I like you, and I enjoyed spending time with you. If you're ever interested in going out again, just let me know.'

Cece turned to face him, giving him a half smile as she served him the truth. 'Hand on heart, Rich, I'm not ready for anything right now. While we get along real well, I'm not sure if we have that kind of connection.'

Rich nodded, his expression falling. 'I understand. I just wanted you to know how I feel.'

Cece smiled, thinking he was a good man—just not the one her body, mind and soul yearned for.

'I'll keep that in mind,' she said.

Her phone rang, interrupting the moment.

The number was unknown, so she hesitated, not wanting to deal with a scam caller. For some reason, though, she felt compelled to take it.

'Hello?'



After a short pause, a man's voice sounded out, clearing the throat, then a rasp. 'Cece?'

A gut punch hit her as she absorbed the familiar voice. 'Liam? Is that you?'

'Sis, it's me.'

'My long lost, no-contact twin?'

'Funny.'

She lifted an arm at Rich and waved at him, indicating the call was important. He nodded his understanding as she tracked fast towards an empty corner of the Eatery and sat in a leather-embossed booth.

'How are you?'

'I'm OK, sis.'

Cece exhaled in relief. Since they'd been kids, Liam struggled. He'd inherited an angry streak from their father, Malcolm, a soldier in the Australian army. A man who'd perpetrated violence on their mother until he'd OD's, a victim of drugs and mental health issues.

Distraught, Samantha turned to Joseph Mirren, Malcolm's fellow squad member and close mate.

She'd made a poor choice, falling from the arms of a physically abusive man into those of an emotional control freak.

Liam wore the full brunt of the fallout and lack of balanced fathering.

Over the years, he'd made violent decisions. Trigger-happy, he'd created enemies and ripped people off - in a hazardous and volatile drug dealing world. Caught in an exhausting cycle of believing that life was either an all-win or all-lose situation.

To hear he was on an even keel was good news.

'What do you need?'

It was the only question Cece relied on. Knowing from experience that lectures, prying and insisting on soberness only served to push Liam away.

'Nothing. Been clean for a week and a half, now, sis.'

She gasped. 'What?'

'Yep. I'm done, baby.'

Elation washed over her. 'Oh my. What triggered the change? Not that I'm not over the moon about it.'

'Had a chat to a mum some time back. The general was away, so she was able to be more open with me. She broke down, sis, and that killed me. She said how much my habit hurt her and how she hates that all the men in her life have let her down. I guess that was my moment of revelation. It got to me, so I cut back. I started snorting less every day, and after about three weeks, I was able to stop. The withdrawal is shit, though. I'm on edge, can't sleep, keeping very little food down. Been fighting it for days now, but it's improving.'

'That's such good news.'

A pulsating static, high-pitched humming interrupted her words. Cece thought the call had dropped out and checked her phone, which showed it was still on.

The static died away after a moment. ‘What was that?’

Liam was silent on the line for a moment.

‘Keep talking, babe.’ He sounded tight, stressed.

‘Why?’

There was a click and a soft beep as she uttered the question.

‘Not sure. Think there was something in the background.’

‘I got it too.’

‘You’ve heard this before?’

She gave his question some thought. ‘Sometimes. Also, some static.’

‘Starting when?’

‘It’s been recent, but I haven’t paid it any mind. I thought it was just a poor network connection.’

‘Sis, just hold on for a moment. Going to try something.’

There was shuffling and a few taps. Followed by a series of loud beeps at a higher frequency than before.

Liam whistled. ‘Cece, I’ve just checked your device using a sound-bandwidth sensor detector app on a low frequency. One I use, given my line of work.’

‘Use for what?’

‘To check and measure sound on a potentially tapped device. Your iPhone may be under surveillance if it makes those sounds several times in one minute. Which it has in this case.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Honey, someone’s listening in.’

Cece sat back in the booth in shock. ‘No way. Why?’

She wracked her mind.

‘Joseph!’

The twins said the word at the same time. Cece’s temperature rose as Liam’s breathing got ragged.

‘The fuckin’ investigation,’ Liam growled. ‘Another reason why I’ve gone clean. I can’t be caught up in his mess.’

‘Should we hang up?’

‘Too late, they already know we know, so let’s keep them on their toes. At least for the next three to five minutes before they can triangulate my location.’

Cece struggled to form words. ‘Who would be tapping me and how?’

‘Anyone, anywhere. Most likely, it’s an app masquerading as something else. A game, music, even corporate software.’

Cece froze. ‘The only one I’ve installed in recent weeks is an office collaboration one.’

‘Where are you working?’

‘At Falcon House. A hotel in Byron Bay.’

‘Your boss?’

‘A lady called Denise Mariani. She’s a sweetheart with zero IT knowledge. It took her ages to figure out her Zoom background settings last week. I had to help her. No way she’d be our suspect.’

‘Her boss?’

She thought about the man she hadn’t seen since their ‘moment’ in his office during the weekend. He’d gone MIA, keeping his office door closed, and she’d wondered whether she was to blame. Had her complexity scared him away, or was he avoiding post-coital awkwardness?

Liam needed an answer, so she dragged her mind back to the present. ‘Ash Falconer.’

Liam’s breath hitched, followed by a long, low whistle. ‘Boom, boom.’

Cece stiffened. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Retired Major Ash Falconer is your employer?’

‘He is. What of it?’

Liam tutted. ‘He’s also one of Australia’s most decorated soldiers, recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal, one of the highest awards for bravery in the Australian honours system.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘I was in the military, sis. He was all most soldiers talked about. The commando they idolised and all wanted to be like. The man was and still is a legend in the special forces, a fact Joseph drilled into me for years. He held this man up as an example for me. I’ll send you a link to a Defence page if you don’t believe me.’

‘Do it.’

After a short pause, Liam continued. ‘Sent. Check your text.’

She did. She scrabbled for her phone and hit the link she found in her brother’s incoming message.

It led her to an ADF site, one not indexed by Google. In an instant, his face swum to sight, in full Defence dress uniform capped in a fawn-coloured elite Australian Special Air Service Regiment beret.

The accompanying bio was just as impressive. She read it aloud, her heart thumping.

‘Ash Falconer commanded a Sabre Squadron deployed on counter-terrorist operations. He led a Special Air Service Regiment on operations to East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. During an ambush in Afghanistan, he drew enemy fire on himself several times. So that wounded soldiers could be moved to safety.’

She fell silent until Liam piped up. ‘He got shot. Yet he and his brother Cole kept protecting his troops in the same

unit. Until all of them, but one, was safe, displaying exceptional courage.'

Cece paused for a moment.

'He and his squad are mythical heroes, sis. They now run a legit security firm working for both private and government clientele.'

She sat back into the leather booth, shock coursing through her. 'I'd no idea.'

'Now you know.'

'So why is he listening to my phone calls?'

'Most likely, because he's investigating Joseph and now you, because he might think you're complicit.'

Her heart stopped.

Liam continued, unaware of her rising angst. 'And if he's hearing this, he needs to know that you're not involved with our stepfather's crimes.'

'Damn right, I'm not!'

'Sis, your phone is not the only way they'd listen in. You need to search your house for other wiretaps and mics. Use the encrypted link I sent to you to download the listening app. Sweep your house with it after deleting the rogue work software on your phone. If you find anything, confront him, sis, and ask him some hard questions. I, on the other hand, need to get off this call. In case it's being recorded or they try to triangulate my position.'

Cece was consumed with anger as she realised the full impact of what her brother was sharing.

First, her privacy had been violated.

Second, her job was likely at risk. Third and most infuriating, she was being used to get to the man she loathed with a deep, unswerving hatred.

‘I’ll call you back when I’ve spoken to Ash. Or maybe not spoken to him at all because I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself from attacking the man when I see him,’ she spoke through tight lips.

‘Stay calm. Speak to him. Should it get nasty, let me know, and I’ll come for you. Even though I’m weak as all fuck.’

‘Thanks, honey. I’ll keep you posted.’

Cece ended the call, her hands shaking in outrage.

Taking a deep breath, she turned her phone screen on. She swiped the tabs until she found the Falcon House app. Tapping on it with ferocity, she deleted it, watching it disappear into the nether.

She rose to her feet and charged out of the office block. Flying through the staff entrance and down the drive towards her house.

Her heart pounded in her ears in a crescendo. The tempo increased with each step, matching the loud calls of the cockatoos in the trees above.



Once inside the charming cottage, she downloaded the software from a text message link from Liam. She deployed it, searching every nook and cranny in the house for hidden listening devices.

She found two.

One hidden under a flower pot in the living area and the other behind an innocuous painting in the kitchen dining space.

The discovery threw her into overdrive.

She pulled the offending devices off the power, severing their cords, and stomped on them in the small back courtyard, smashing them into smithereens.

Raging, she rushed inside and threw her and Mason's clothes in their suitcases, wanting to flee Falcon House as fast as possible.

She had no clue where she'd go but would not let herself be used this way. She'd had enough of men manipulating and humiliating her.

She was quitting. Ash Falconer could shove his fake, trust-busting job up his muscled, sexy ass.



‘Mate, you’ve got a problem.’

Ash sat at his desk at Falcon House. Pecking away at his laptop, he analysed a series of resourcing and logistics spreadsheets across all his properties. At the same time, he listened to Saint over Facetime.

‘What gives?’

The Sovereign CEO’s voice was stiff with tension. ‘My team just intercepted a call between Cece and Liam Mirren. The latter being her twin. During the call, the Falcon Work app glitched and beeped, alerting Liam that we were listening in. He made the fact known to Cece, and about ten minutes later, we lost the sound stream from her cottage. She’s on to us.’

Ash levered up straight in his chair. ‘She’s fucking what?’

‘She also suspects you’re the lead on the op. It would be best if you hunted her down stat. What she hasn’t managed to do is discover the hidden encrypted code. The one Jax sneaked in on the back of the FW app. She can’t see it. So, we still have voice access and tracking. You want me to tell you where she is?’

‘Is that even a question?’

‘Kill the snark, Falcon. She’s at her cottage. My take is that she’s about to light out. If she’s guilty, she’ll even run faster. So you’ve got a window. A slim one.’

‘Appreciated.’

Ash hung up the call, his mind and heart racing. He had to motor.

So he did, darting from behind his desk and taking long, urgent strides to the hotel's staff entrance.

The sun shone overhead, unmoved by a band of gathering dark clouds. It gave off a blinding, bright, and harsh light, beating Ash down as he tracked across the hotel property.

The hot wind blowing from the sea didn't help, depositing a fine layer of moisture across his skin.

The crickets, cicadas, and the natural world were eerily silent. Ash flicked his eyes to the sky. A storm was rolling in. He moved faster.

Soon, he found himself at Cottage Number 5. Three steps from the gate, and he was at her front door.

He raised a brow at the banging and slamming inside, punctuated by shouts of frustration. He even made out his name called once, the sheer rage in her voice causing him to step back.

Unable to handle the tension anymore, he banged on the door.

'Who is it?'

She growled the words, and parts of his anatomy shrivelled.

If she understood the extent to which Sovereign had been bugging her comms, then she'd every right to be mad.

*Why though?* Was it the case she'd been caught out at her own game? Or was she innocent and feeling justified in having

her privacy violated?

He wasn't sure which it was, so he ploughed on.

‘Ash.’

A hush fell beyond the closed door.

The sound of stomping feet followed.

The door swung open with force, banging against the jambs.

She stood framed by the entrance, angry, wild-eyed, glorious. Her face was harsh, her brows furrowed, and her lips pursed.

Her dark curls fell over her shoulders, and a simple, loose jumpsuit accentuated her body's curves and honey-coloured skin. She was gorgeous, she was magnificent, and she was hopping mad at him.

His heart stopped for a moment as they glared at each other. He wondered how much she was aware of his involvement in the surveillance.

‘How dare you.’

*Oh, she was clued in all right.*

Her voice was husky, a whisper of rage. Despite the ire contained in it, it sent jolts of desire through Ash's traitorous body.

She leaned into him. A finger pointed at his face, her face in a snarl. ‘I knew it. That you've always had it out for me. Is

this your slimy secret? That you're investigating me? Using me to get to my stepfather?'

Ash closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, the answer was written all over his face.

She raged on, her voice breaking with emotion. 'You've got the nerve. First, you treat me like shit, then sleep with me. Now I find out you're invading my privacy and using me.'

'Wait-,' he interjected.

She cut him off. 'You can burn in hell, Ash Falconer. One hotter than the sun itself. Before you do, tell me - why use me? Why up-end my life so you can get to the one man I can't stand and hate so much? For all the shit he's brought into our lives.'

Her words cut like a knife—every syllable razor-edge.

The words had a scalding effect on Ash, and he jerked at the level of acrimony dripping from her.

As their eyes clashed, his brain latched onto her last sentence. 'You hate him?'

She glared at him like he was losing his marbles. 'I despise Joseph Mirren with all my heart and soul. Yes. I'm human. There's only so much emotional abuse one can take from one man. Before the little respect you have for them turns into rage.'

She stared at him, chest heaving, the finger she still pointed at him trembling.

The air between them crackled with rage, need, irritation and desire.

It mingled into a thick, heavy energy. Above them, the sky roiled, charged with a copper tinge. The squall was about to break.

‘So you and I feel the same about him.’ Ash let his words fall between them. He saw them percolate in her mind as he used the time to think. ‘I was wondering where you stood.’

The niggling suspicion he had that Cece was innocent came roaring to the forefront of his mind. He needed to know more.

She leaned in and whispered, ‘If you think I colluded with him on his crimes, then you’re mistaken and a sucky judge of character. I would never have anything to do with his dark.’

He didn’t make a sound. He studied her in silence. His jade eyes probed her soul, her heart and her intent. Cutting to whether she was telling the truth.

‘Can I come in? I need you to expand further on what you’ve just told me. Maybe we’re on the same team, but we don’t know it.’

She nailed him with a suspicious look. ‘What? You’re giving in just like that? After weeks of treating me like the enemy because I’m his stepdaughter?’

Her mouth was a closed, tight line of fury. Quivering with rage, her eyes were narrow and squinting, her body tense and shaking.

Ash shook his head. 'We need to have it out, Cece. That's obvious. You also don't know how much I want to believe in you. Let me in and tell me what you can about him. Clear up a few inconsistencies for me. If I like what I hear, we'll have something solid to work with. I'll also share why we had to do what we did.'

He noted the wariness in her eye, which he longed to whisk away by any means possible. Whatever it took to undo the dog's breakfast that his probe was turning to. He also wanted to believe her. To make sure she was legit and her story was credible.

'Cece, please.'

'First, before you enter the house, who's we?' She looked around him at the empty gardens beyond. 'If I say the wrong thing, will an army of officers jump out of the trees and arrest me?'

He lifted his hands in mock surrender. 'I'm alone. However, I have a task force working with me to try and take Joseph Mirren down. However, I need to caution you from a legal perspective. Now that you know he's under covert surveillance, you can either work with us or choose not to. Should you make the last choice, I cannot guarantee your freedom or security until the operation is completed.'

Her eyes widened. 'So on top of being listened in on, you're now going to throw me to the dogs.'

'Didn't say that, Cece. It doesn't have to get that serious. Can we talk? Get across each other's truth? It's the only way

we'll know how best to proceed.'

Her chest rose and fell with the emotion she was trying to contain. After a few long moments, she stepped back, stalking inside.

'Mason is at school, so I guess there's no time like the present.'

He walked in after her, into the cottage's living area and stared at the sight of four large suitcases and another on the floor half packed.

He wheeled around and faced her. 'Going somewhere?'

She crossed her arms over her body, defiant. 'Oh yes. I'm done. After we speak, I'm quitting and going back to Sydney. I can't live like this.'

His heart lurched. *No way he'd let her go.*

He tamped the unbidden reaction, stepping over the open bags to perch on a couch overflowing with half-folded clothes. 'Sit down, Cece. Let's talk. You can decide what to do once you're across everything.'

She sat tentative and slow on the edge of a single-seater across from him. 'What do you want to know?'

'First, tell me what you can about your stepfather, and then I'll tell you why we're looking into him.'

Her face tightened with worry. 'Will you use what I share with you against me?'



He shook his head and placed a hand over his chest. ‘I promise, soldiers’ honour, that whatever you tell me will be off the record. I’ll also remind you that we know most of it anyway. What we’re missing is who is complicit and who isn’t. I want to hear it from you, in your words.’



They fell into silence.

All the sound in the room was reduced to the soft rustling of the ceiling fan and the snap of Cece’s fingers as she squeezed her hand into a fist. To the deep inhales and exhales from the man sitting across from her.

The blow of finding out the Australian Defence Force was looking into her still coursed through her. That Ash was the one leading it was even more unnerving.

She flushed, caught in a warp between her embarrassment and shame and his betrayal.

Still reacting to the shock, her body shivered, her muscles tense. She gave him a long look, trying to assess his intentions.

All he returned was a calm, steady gaze. A coiled energy was behind it like he’d be ready to strike a moment’s notice.

He was dangerous. He was potent, and sharing her story with him was unquestionable.

She huffed, giving in to the inevitable.

‘My bio dad was a military soldier and an addict. One night on base, he overdosed on opioids. Joseph was his mate in the army, and he was a legend back then. A decorated war hero and a handsome man with a quick tongue, war stories, and slick style made everyone he met feel special. He was like a rock star to many, including my mum.’

She paused for a moment, turning her gaze to the storm brewing above the ocean.

‘When he appeared on the scene, Liam and I were nine, and he often visited us in our tiny apartment in Surry Hills. He’d whisk us to Bondi Beach and buy us ice cream and sandwiches. Soon after he and Mum married, he took us to a four-bedroom mansion in the Double Bay. It was a shock to us. Used to tiny, shoddy apartments, we now lived in a tree-lined street where houses had pools and fountains. Know what I mean?’

‘I know.’

Cece met Ash’s eyes for a moment before her gaze skittered away.

‘When Joseph came along, he took care of us. Mum didn’t have to work at the hair salon anymore and became a housewife. We soon found that while Joseph never laid a hand on us as our bio dad had, he used emotional abuse.’

She paused, the pain of long-forgotten memories rushing back.

‘He rose up the army ranks, but something changed after Afghanistan. He bought a flashy Mercedes. He brought home lobster and caviar. He got himself the latest, most expensive gadgets. He gave us money, but he never gave us love. We were torn into the smallest infraction, shouted at for the tiniest mistake, told off and humiliated, especially my brother Liam.’

‘Your twin?’

Cece nodded. ‘He struggled in high school with a stepdad who berated him daily. Liam’s misery found company with the wrong friends. They led him into a life of drugs.’

Ash sucked his lips as she ploughed on. ‘Tragic, hey? Joseph made Liam join the army to try and clean him out. He lasted for just six painful years before he quit the service and slid back into addiction. In a strange, misguided effort to help him, Joseph had somehow obtained the purest coke for Liam. Claiming he was an addict anyway, and instead of the low-grade street drugs, he’d keep him supplied with the most pristine snow.’

‘What the hell?’

‘It’s the truth. The result of this was that Liam turned into a drug dealer with a severe cocaine habit. His habit cost him thousands each week. The dealing continued to feed his addiction, which meant his company trended towards the unsavoury in society. Paranoia followed, causing fights and arguments with friends and, worse still, with myself and Mum. It was a downhill spiral that lurched, from Liam begging for

forgiveness to sinking back into the habit he couldn't live without.'

Concern leaked out of Ash's eyes. 'How did you cope with it all?'

'I offered to help Liam many times. He refused all of it, so I had to let him be.'

'How about you, Cece? How did Joseph treat you?'

'Oh, he tried to control when I went out, the friends I made and my boyfriends. He also abused my mother from a financial standpoint and still does to this day. She only leaves the house without his permission. When he travels, he flies off his handle if she doesn't report to him when he demands it. I want to get her out of that situation. I also want Liam to find peace once more. It won't happen until Joseph is behind bars.'

She'd noted how Ash's face hardened as she told her story, how his stance shifted into suppressed anger. A rage reflected in her as well.

'So Joseph forced Liam into dealing?'

'Yes.'

'How about the money you deposited into the bank account for your mother? In cash?'

Her mouth gaped. Shocked at his revelation, she whispered, 'You know about that?'

'We know most of it, yes.'

She sighed. 'It was Liam. He gave me money to put away for my mum's future. In case everything went south. Also, because she has nothing to her name, Joseph owns everything. It's all under his name. We were only trying to help her.'

Ash sagged back in relief. 'Well, that's one good thing.'

She caught onto his reaction. 'You thought I was guilty? Because of the money?'

His nose flared. 'We found it laced with traces of snow, so we knew the cash came from dealing. We didn't know whether it was you or someone else. Now we know.'

He punctured the short silence with a clearing of his throat. 'The baggie? The one that fell from your hand at work?'

She looked shocked. 'Laila's coke pack? I took it from her when I found her snorting in the ladies' toilets.'

Ash pushed his head to the back of the chair, closing his eyes for a moment. 'She was doing drugs in the office?'

'Yup, that and the fact I didn't let her slack off in her job was one reason she tried to set me up with the corporate credit card crap.'

Ash met Cece's gaze, remorse written all over his face. 'This means you're in the clear.'

She rubbed a hand over her cheeks. 'Well, colour me relieved. What about Liam?'

'That remains to be seen. If he was forced or coerced by your stepdad into that world and is willing to speak to us as a

witness, it would go a long way in exonerating him.’

‘I know he didn’t want a life of drug dealing. My stepdad pushed him into it. Taking advantage of his vulnerability as an addict.’

‘I hear you. Do you know more about who your stepfather did business with?’

She shook her head. ‘No. Do you?’

‘I do.’

‘Then tell me. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.’

Ash paused for a beat, running a hand through his hair as he searched for the right words.

After clearing his throat, he spoke. ‘The general is involved with a gang of hardcore Czech criminals. He first met them in Afghanistan and got up to no good subverting Allied efforts on the ground, which the Defence probe focuses on most. A few years ago, the Czech gang Red Adder started operating in Melbourne, getting their drugs through our docks and logistics companies. They spread north and have now infiltrated the local game. They’ve also hired staunch men, hit men, foot soldiers, and dealers. They’ve got a high-tech database of their customers, and their local business guys are running accounts for them. They don’t play. Mess with them, and they’ll wipe you off the fuckin’ Earth. This is why we’ll have to tread with extreme care in this investigation.’

Cece was speechless. She gaped at Ash, her eyes red, wide with disbelief and sorrow.

After a beat, her mouth trembled. ‘No matter how much I hear about this man, he still manages to shock and disgust me.’

At that moment, something shifted between them.

Ash’s eyes flicked over her face, and he softened. ‘I’m so sorry you had to live with him.’

That had the effect of almost breaking the dam she’d been working so hard to hold back. Determined not to weep, she turned from him. Taking deep, ragged breaths to try and maintain some level of dignity and control.

There was a touch on her shoulder, then the heat of his body. He crouched beside her and laid his hand on her back, stroking her with a gentle sweep of his hand.

He didn’t say a word, and she appreciated it, shivering as the heat of his hand touched her. Her arms and legs were covered with goosebumps, her body throbbing.

She wanted to fling herself into his arms, but that was not who they were.

Yet, at that moment, the unseen barrier between them melted. His unexpected compassion pierced her heart, causing her walls to melt.

From outside came a rush of wind. Followed by a wall of water as the storm that had been threatening all day fell.

Thunder was a distant rumble, but the ocean waves outside crashed with enough force to drown out the booming roars.

Cece looked out through wet tears as the curtains flew about to reveal a sky laced with dark clouds and flashes of lightning. Rain lashed the thick branches of trees. The wind whistled, bringing the smell of rich, wet soil.

Ash left her side to shut the open window.

Returning to his seat, crossing one foot over a knee, he took a moment before speaking again. 'For me to rule you out in an official capacity, you'll need to give me a formal report of what we just discussed. It's required to comply with the formal aspects of the Defence contract. I'll also need to corroborate your story with Liam.'

She leaned over for a tissue, wiped her eyes, and blew into it. 'Makes sense. How?'

'Call him back. Then patch me into the call. Tell him everything we just discussed. Then ask him whether he'd be open to speaking with me.'

'Will he get arrested?'

'We'll need to interview him in a closed environment. That doesn't count as an arrest unless ADFIS decides to place charges. But that's a long way away from determination. My job will be to ensure he's safe speaking to us. I'll do everything in my legal power to keep him protected. So will you reach out to him, see if he'll talk to me?'

She studied Ash, wondering whether she could trust him. His gaze was open, calm, and far removed from the ridicule



she'd seen the last few weeks. She weighed her options and soon came to a conclusion.

'I've no choice, do I?'

Ash's jaw was set, and his stance was unwavering. At that moment, she glimpsed how formidable the man before her was. How he'd withstood enemy fire in battle and how he now led an investigation into a man as ruthless as her stepdad.

She reached for her phone on the table beside her, tapping on the number Liam had used to call her. It rang twice before the call was answered.

'What happened?'

Her brother sounded worn out and exhausted. So she gave him a quick rundown of events so far.

'He's with you?'

'Seated before me and Liam, he wants to speak with you.'

'Fuck off, no!'

'We've no choice. At least, I don't. Given how close we are to Joseph, we must cooperate or be taken into custody until it's over.'

'The hell?'

'It's true.'

Liam fell silent, heavy breathing down the line.

'Put him on.' He conceded with a harsh undertone.

'OK.'

Cece turned on the speakerphone and turned the device over to Ash.

Ash placed it on the coffee table before him and bent over it. 'Liam?'

'Sir.'

The designation Liam used startled Cece until she remembered that all service members addressed their superiors formally, even when out of uniform.

'I need to ask you one or two questions, perhaps even more. Your cooperation in this matter would be appreciated. First, though, your sister informs me you're not working for your father any more?'

'No, I am not. I'm hiding from him for a while.'

'Why's that?'

'For reasons I can't speak of now. In case this call is being recorded. Same reason I won't talk to anyone until I'm safe. The general is mixed up with the shadiest underworld folk. Unscrupulous buyers and hitmen who patrol the eastern suburbs on behalf of foreign cartels. They find out I'm speaking to you, and I'll be dead within the hour.'

Ash pursed his lips. 'We'll send someone to fetch you. So we can talk face to face in a secure location.'

'No.'

Ash shook his head. 'Liam, please.'

‘I’m in no state, Sir. I’ve been detoxing. I feel like shit. I have no strength and am not sure when I last ate.’

His voice rose in agitation, and Cece recognised Liam’s telltale signs of a breakdown, so she interjected. ‘I’ll come for you.’

She wasn’t sure why she blurted what she did, but the words were out of her mouth before she could pull back.

Ash looked up sharply at her. ‘You will?’

‘I will, he’s my brother. I have to.’

Liam made grunts of agreement on the other line. ‘You will, sis? Because if you come, then this might work.’

Ash closed his eyes and leaned into the back of the couch he sat on. ‘Logistics.’

Cece’s brow furrowed. ‘Excuse me?’

‘I said I need to figure out how this will work. A moment, both.’

She watched him as he sat, head thrust back, revealing his corded neck and the long line of his throat, which she suddenly wanted to trail her lips along.

He was a stunning man, and she felt an uncontrollable pull toward him once again, drawn to his strength and utter sensuality.

Moments later, he snapped open his eyes and leaned forward. Pulling out a slim line phone from his pocket.

He dialled a number and waited. As soon as it picked up, he launched into conversation.

‘Where’s the Phenom?’

It was clear that the conversations between him and the call recipient were quick and taciturn because the man on the other line didn’t waste a syllable.

‘It’s parked in Sydney.’

Ash glanced at the thick platinum watch on his wrist. ‘Can you get it to Byron, to me, today? Do we have enough time, given it’s mid-morning?’

‘Shouldn’t be a hardship. Rapid deployment is part of the service.’

‘If we liftoff from Ballina by 5, we should be on the ground on your end by 6 or 6.30.’

Sounds good. I’ll get Marco, our pilot, ready to go.’

‘Good. Passenger manifest for pick up will be Cece Mirren and myself. On the way back, add Liam Mirren to the list. Also, I’ll need a tanked car and keys waiting on the other end.’

‘The usual ride?’

‘Please, brother.’

‘This anything to do with -’

‘Yep. I’ll share more when I can.’

‘Done.’

The call was over before it had even begun.

Cece gazed at Ash in stunned silence.

‘We’re going to Sydney? Today?’

He nodded. ‘You volunteered, right? Plus, you’re already packed from the looks of things.’

She glanced at the suitcases on the floor and flushed.

Then she had a wild thought. ‘Mason? What will we do about Mason?’

Ash raised a brow, flicked his eyes away to think, and sliced them back at her. ‘He can stay with my mum at the Farm. She’ll take care of him and Jake. Trust me, they’ll have a great time. She can drop and pick them up tomorrow if we’re not back by then. Simple.’

Cece gave Ash a sceptical look. ‘She’ll be OK taking care of a stranger’s child for almost two days?’

He nodded with a faint smile as if he knew something she didn’t. ‘She’ll be fine. Mason isn’t a stranger - at least not to Jake or myself. Besides, she’ll enjoy it, given she’s always begging me for more Jake time.’

Cece’s eyes skittered as she searched her heart. Was this the right thing to do?

She met Ash’s calm gaze and felt an unnatural peace settle over her. ‘Fine. Only if your mother won’t mind.’

‘Hey, still here.’

Liam, sounding disgruntled, was still on the line.

‘Sorry, man,’ Ash said. ‘I needed to work out how we’re playing this. You heard me speak to my man Saint in Sydney?’

‘Yup.’

‘He’ll get a plane here to pick us up, and we’ll head in this evening. Cece, you have Liam’s address?’

She shook her head. ‘No.’

She gave him a narrowed look and then turned back to her speakerphone. ‘Where would you like us to pick you up, Liam?’

‘My place. Don’t have the energy or balls to venture out.’

‘Got it. Text me the details.’

‘Will do.’

Liam’s voice sounded weaker by the moment, and Ash and Cece shared a concerned glance. ‘Hang tight,’ Cece encouraged. ‘We’ll get in by nightfall.’

‘One more thing,’ Liam called out. ‘I’ve been off the streets for almost a month. It’s been causing some anxiety among my regulars and also, as I said, with Joseph. I noticed a few men casing my apartment entrance and a car parked outside for a few days. Just saying you may need to come in prepared.’

Ash pursed his lips. ‘I’ll get back up.’

‘Sweet. Cya soon.’

Liam left the call, and Cece tapped off. After staring at her phone screen for a beat, she met Ash’s gaze.

He shifted in his seat, a sign Cece was coming to associate with his internal discomfort. He cleared his throat, wanting to say something.

She gave him the space, sitting on her proverbial hands and letting silence weigh between them.

He came correct soon enough, his lips tightening together before he spoke. 'I'd like to apologise for treating you like you were guilty before being proven innocent, Cece. I'm sorry for treating you like shit.'

Ash's words hit her with a jolt.

The fact that the man had the humility to confess his sins against her was telling of his character.

She had no reason to hold a grudge, so she did the only decent thing she knew. 'I forgive you.'

What else could she say? When she examined her heart and mind at that moment, Cece found she meant the words. Something about Ash made it hard for her to stay mad with him.

Perhaps it was how his eyes melted into a gold-green molten pool at her words. His lips turned at the ends, softening his angular, handsome features.

*Oh, how that smile suited him. Almost too much.*

His mouth twitched as he leaned back and crossed a leg over his thick, muscled thigh. 'You still going to quit?'

She met his eyes with defiance. ‘Not sure yet. You’re still on notice.’

‘Fair enough.’ His murmur was deep. ‘But we can’t do this without each other.’

His jade eyes glinted, but she rejected the light in them and raised an eyebrow at his silent insinuation.

While she acknowledged the crazy, wild attraction between them, she knew that nothing would come of it - again. At least not on her watch.

Regardless, she had to face the truth: they would need to work together to continue their journey towards justice.



# Chapter 10



**F**lying private had to be the epitome of luxury travel.

An experience where every touch point was tailored to your desires and where extravagance was the norm.

*Not her norm*, Cece thought, awestruck as Ash led her into the gunmetal grey nine-seater jet waiting for them at Ballina Airport.

‘It’s a Phenom 300,’ Ash said, geeking out for a moment.

‘Please explain?’

His lips twitched. ‘It’s the best light jet you can fly. Even better, its ramp presence is sexy.’

She raised a brow in amusement at his word choice.

He served her with a chin jerk. ‘Y’know, stylish, slick, light and fast.’

‘Amen to that.’

She scanned around her as she settled into the black and walnut two-tone leather, club-style seats. They came with baseball stitching, and each had a fold-out wood-varnished

table. Supple leathers and matched fabrics finished off the exotic wood inlays.

She stretched her feet in a space created with superior comfort and exceptional ergonomics in mind.

Across from her, Ash adjusted his seat to accommodate his length. He sat back, unpacked his laptop, slid on reading glasses and started working.

The conversation they'd just shared was the most chatty he'd been all day.

He was brooding. His melancholy mood hung over him even when he'd accompanied her to pick the boys up from school. He'd let her tell the delighted pair they were spending the night together.

'Really?' This, from an excited Jake.

'Maybe even the following one.' Cece made the statement, flicking a glance to Ash for confirmation. He nodded.

'Yes!'

Jake and Mace said it at the same time, giving each other high fives.

The unexpected sleepover had both boys in paroxysms of delight. They didn't waste a breath before making plans to run riot across the farm.

With his mother's blessing, Ash drove the plotting pair to the sprawling estate. While Cece stayed home, repacking a smaller roll-on suitcase to go.

She called Rachel at work and gave her a vague explanation of her absence. ‘I need to fly to Sydney for personal reasons.’

‘Of course. I hope it goes well.’

Next, she called Denise. Who also wished her the best and promised her work could wait so she could sort her life out.

*The people at Falcon House rocked, Cece thought.*

She’d miss them all if she quit her job.

She sighed, knowing she couldn’t leave only based on Ash’s sins. Walking away from such a great workplace would not be a smart move.

Right now, though, there were more pressing matters to keep her mind occupied.

Like how Sydney and Liam were going to play out.

Ash returned from the farm, still reticent, picking her up from her Falcon House Farm. Cece chose to ignore the perplexing presence of the man beside her.

Instead, she slid into his truck and made zero attempts at conversing as they headed for the airport.

Cece marvelled that she didn’t have to navigate long security lines or weave through busy airport terminals. Instead, a discreet client flight manager called Renee greeted them. She catered to their every need, allowing them to bypass the usual hassles of air travel.

Check-in at the private airport was simple - showing their ID before being led to the runway just ten minutes after they arrived.

And now here they were, rising into the air.

Ash sat across the aisle from her, leaning over his laptop. His face, in profile, was screwed into a frown of concentration as he absorbed the data on his screen.

The glasses, which were a revelation to her, only made him more devastating.

The man was drop-dead gorgeous, no doubt.

*Who else wore sweatpants and a white tee and still looked like a Greek god?*

Both clung to his body and showed the defined musculature of his arms and chest.

The hand that tapped on the laptop mesmerised her. She flushed, recalling what those lean fingers had done to her, how rough they'd been on her hot skin.

She glanced away from him, needing to simmer down.

The cabin, to her relief, was conditioned. Cool, compressed air blew throughout the interior, making every breath crisp and clean. She turned on a vent and pointed it at herself, letting the cold blast chill her desire.

Their unseen pilot, Captain Marco Firelli, introduced himself over the speakers and welcomed them onboard.

When they levelled out, the seat belt signs turned off, and a flight attendant, a lady named Dana, offered a light meal or refreshments.

‘Eat.’

Ash’s command was a growl. He wasn’t a man used to being disobeyed.

Cece mulled his logic and agreed with it. She had no idea when her next meal would be. So she accepted the offer of a sandwich and tea.

Ash’s food arrived, and he tucked into a caramelised medium rare steak with a light salad and a glass of wine.

He caught her gaping at his plate and used his fork to point at it. ‘Want what I’m having?’

‘It’s not that I want it. It’s that I can order it.’

The ends of his lips turned up. ‘The Phenom’s chefs have a knack for creating the best dishes. Restaurant quality, babe.’

*Babe.*

The word was back again. He said it with such intensity and vibrato that she melted—and scrabbled for the air vent again.

When she settled down, she decided to dig for more background on him. ‘Such an enigma.’

‘What is?’

‘You. On the one hand, you’re a plumber, slash farmer, slash hotel owner. On the other, an MI6 slash SAS-type

operative swinging through the skies in a private plane. Who are you?’

His mouth twitched at the playful lilt in her voice. ‘I’m usually good at keeping all aspects of my life separate. Until you. You’re blurring my well-defined edges.’

‘How do you do it all?’

‘I don’t. I just hire the best people like yourself to make it happen.’

‘Now you’re trying too hard to get into my good books.’

They exchanged a smile, the glint in his eye signalling it was not all he wanted to get into.

‘Here’s to you.’ He raised his glass.

She glanced at her fine china cup. ‘Is tea OK for a toast?’

He shook his head. ‘Doesn’t cut it. At least try a whisky from my distillery?’

She raised a brow. ‘Distillery now?’

‘Falcon By The Sea makes some of the best signature tipples on the East Coast.’

‘I must try some then.’

He touched a button, and Dana bustled to help. She soon returned with a tumbler for Cece filled with amber gold nectar.

She tasted it, her eyes widening in delight, every sip a celebration of indulgence. Further enhancing her not-so-humble Wagyu beef steak sandwich. Every bite she took was pure bliss.

Ash reached out his glass, clinked it with hers and returned to his meal.

Dana whisked their food trays away after they were done eating.

Cece took the opportunity to lower her backrest.

She stretched out and relaxed in the generous space as if in the comfort of her home. Sinking further into the lush leather seats, she noticed the soft ambient lighting dim to set the mood for relaxation.

Ash must have sensed her enjoyment. He turned his head from his screen and gave her a half smile before looking at his screen again.

His warming unnerved her.

She knew and could deal with the cool, taciturn, abrupt version of the man.

What she was suss about was a thawing Ash.

He wasn't overdoing it, but still, her hackles were up.

*Who was the true Ash? The real man? Was he the dedicated father with a ready smile and endless patience for his son and friends? The lover who drove her wild? The cool-headed businessman with killer instincts? Or the ruthless soldier with no qualms protecting those in need?*



Ash pulled his eyes away from Cece and tried to focus on the screen swimming before his eyes.

She sighed, stretched out in her seat and settled into a reclined position, head turned away from him.

He leaned back, pretending to work. His thoughts, though, scattered, tangled in all of her.

He felt like shit for not trusting her, for treating her like the enemy.

Regret flooded his entire being.

He knew he'd had to lean on the evidence at the time to make an assessment. It still didn't negate his shame for being such a bastard to her.

He turned his eyes back to her, unable to resist.

He lingered on her profile.  
Drinking in the lush curls that tumbled across her shoulder. On the neck, he'd buried himself in when he'd made love to her.

On her golden skin, her curves, hips, thighs, and legs in faded denim. To her feet in a pair of sneakers, a step down from the heels he loved on her.

Yet the trainers took nothing away from her beauty.

He yearned for a second chance to prove to her just how much he'd be wrong, how he'd come to respect her despite the false evidence against her.

How her sweetness and gentle heart were capturing his.



The image of why he'd fought her so hard came crashing into his mind.

*Slade. Crawling towards him, bleeding out, legs blown, as dust, wind and thirty gun-toting radicals separated them.*

*Followed by a final explosion, flames, searing heat, the roar of engines, and an eventual blackout.*

Almost two decades ago, he'd opened his eyes in a field hospital to find that one of his closest friends had disappeared without a trace.

All because ex-Major General Joseph Mirren ordered a retreat.

This was the real reason Ash had it in for the retired man, why he was so sore and bitter even after fifteen years.

While Ash projected courage and stoicism in his daily life, the ghost of his missing friend haunted him at night.

He'd never accepted that Slade had died.

Not after he'd found out Joseph Mirren made pacts with the Czechs and Afghan warlords. Deals to send his men into ambushes, thinking they were genuine targets on key enemy positions. Mirren had then covered up his crimes in an act of treason.

Ash suspected Slade had uncovered the general's secret while out on patrol. He'd most likely been targeted by the militia on orders from Joseph.

His body had never been recovered.

Ash's hunch that his fellow soldier and best friend was alive only firmed up as time passed. He grew convinced Slade was in the wild, captured and alone.

He'd no proof of it, no factual evidence. Just a gut feeling deep in his bones.

Ash had mired himself in work to deal with his loss over the years.

In the back-breaking labour of remodelling Falcon House, extending the farm and setting up the distillery. The busyness a shield from the pain.

He hid his grief, not behind a torrent of tears, but through his evasion of discussing Slade with his friends.

While scouring the earth and any leads from the general's crimes to try and find his mate.

If he ever faced Joseph Mirren again, he intended to interrogate him. To push him to his knees if need be, to get the answers he needed.

His stepdaughter, though, was now off limits.

Ash's anger against Cece had dissipated earlier that day, replaced with a desire to make up for his actions towards her. To reassure her and reinstate any shred of trust she had for him.

He reached out and lifted a plush blanket from a compartment before him.

Moving, he set it over her with a gentle touch. She'd fallen asleep and didn't stir.

He spent a few seconds gazing at her face before settling back down.

His internal gears shifted, analysing how best to un-fuck the damage and pain he'd caused her.



The jet descended, the change in air pressure and speed waking Cece.

She set aside the blanket someone had laid over her and sat up to look out of the window. The skies were clear. As the plane flew in from the north, she got a fantastic panorama of Sydney from the air.

The harbour, with its dozens of inlets, was magnificent. The views over the metro skyline, the iconic Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge, breathtaking.

They set off in her a pang of nostalgia for the windy city.

She remembered her summer walks through Hyde Park to the Art Gallery and Royal Botanical Gardens, where she'd spent many happy Saturdays wandering its lush pathways with the smell of jasmine in the air. She'd always end her escapes with an ice cream from the gelato stands close to Circular Quay.

Her life here as a single woman had been the best of times.

As a young mum, however, being alone and afraid with a young child had made it the worst of times.

Those days were behind her now, and she now had a new home in which to make happier memories. Or so she hoped.

She turned, and her eyes met a heated jade gaze.

‘We’re landing soon.’

‘I gathered as much.’

She sat up as the pilots made a smooth and uneventful touchdown.

Ash rose to his feet, letting Cece disembark first.

He had their bags in hand in moments and led her into a waiting late-model, black Range Rover SUV parked by the tarmac.

As the airport valet packed their bags inside the rear cabin, Ash got behind the wheel and turned to Cece. ‘Got that address for your brother?’

She nodded.

‘Punch it in.’

He indicated she input it into the car’s InControl screen, which she did.

Their journey unfolded on LCD as Ash eased the SUV away from the airport.

Ash raced along the highway towards Liam's Coogee address.

He drove with one hand. He used the other to tap on the InControl screen of the SUV, now connected to his phone.

The call was picked up.

'Saint, buddy, on our way to Coogee. Are you fellas able to give me some backup?'

'When do you need it?'

He checked the dash clock. 'In twenty. Max half an hour.'

'Sure.' The deep voice washed through the speakerphone, reverberating in the air. 'I'll swing in from Bondi now. Send me the address.'

'Will do. We might have company.'

'All good. I'll bring Tiny with me. Nothing we can't handle.'

Ash chuckled. 'And bring some lead. I travelled clean. See you soon.'

Cece shot the man beside her a panicked look as the connection ended.

Ash flicked her a glance. 'Chill. We've got this.'

'I hadn't counted on violence.'

'Purely precautionary, babe.'

Her eyes widened at the use of the endearment. She gave him another glance, wanting to probe his use of it.

He'd already turned his chiselled profile away from her. His eyes were hidden behind the sunglasses he'd donned to help keep out the bright sun lowering itself in the sky.

She let it slide, sensing this was not the time for delicate conversations.

Twenty minutes later, Ash approached the address.

It was set in a row of tiny workman's townhouses clustered together on the humbler end of the trendy beachside suburb.

He circled the block—parking behind some cars on the opposite side of the street. Tall palm trees and tall, spiky plants lined the road.

Ash killed the engine. 'This is it.'

He texted a short message a moment later.

A few minutes later, a reply pinged back.

'Saint will be here soon. Gives us time to see what we're dealing with.'

Cece studied at the house corresponding to the address Liam gave her. It was close enough for her to make out its details.

The facade of the brown townhouse was tired, the paint peeling off in sheets. The garden was overrun with weeds, and a single chair on the patio lay on its side. From the look of the place, it had seen better days.

The sun had another hour or so to go before it set, but already, lights streamed from inside houses further down and

across the street.

A late model SUV pulled up at the corner. Cece saw a silhouette step out and melt into the shadows.

Moments later, a soft knock sounded on her window, and she almost jumped out of her skin.

‘It’s just Saint. Roll down, babe.’

She obeyed using the electric button.

The tinted glass descended. To reveal a devastatingly handsome part Maori man with a shaven head and a guarded look on his chiselled face.

He wore a tight black tee and pants, his massive arms covered in tribal tattoos.

‘Got company.’ The rumble of his voice reverberated through the car.

He jerked his chin at a blue sedan a few cars away at a diagonal. ‘Across the street. Amateurs because they have a lens aimed at Liam’s location, but they’re fast asleep behind the wheel.’

Ash took note. ‘Keep an eye on them; if they get jumpy, let me know.’

Saint inclined his head in understanding, lifting his arm to hand over a small duffel bag. Ash reached across Cece for it. He brushed her chest with his arm as he did, sending a jolt through her. As he withdrew, his eyes sliced to her, and she met them before turning away.

‘Stay safe.’ The elusive man melted back into the darkness.

Ash took the bag, placing it on the console between them. He reached in and took out two guns.

One he tucked into a holster, also found in Saint’s bag of goodies.

He strapped on the gun sleeve and slid the weapon onto the back of his waist, which stayed hidden under his jacket. He slipped the second compact weapon into the side of one boot.

Cece stared wide-eyed until he was done. ‘Where’s mine?’

He smirked. ‘Come with me.’

He climbed out of the car, and she followed suit.

The car doors locked behind them with a soft click.

They moved as quietly as they could along the path to the townhouse’s front door.

Cece was overcome with nerves, and she flattened an errant strand of hair that had escaped the messy bun she’d attempted.

Once at the door, she braced herself, threw her shoulders back and raised a hand to the beaten wood surface.

Ash was behind Cece, providing her with cover.

‘Keep the knock soft, announce yourself, keeping your voice low.’

He’d dipped his head, and his breath fell on her shoulder as he spoke. She shivered and did as he’d instructed.



A shuffle of feet came from inside.

Followed by a whisper. 'That you, sis?'

'Yes, let us in.'

A series of door locks, bolts and chains rattled, and the door slid open a tiny crack.

An eye peeked out, and then the entryway widened.

Ash growled from behind her. 'Get inside. Quick.'

He surged forward, almost pushing Cece along as the body inside fled to make way for their entry.

The door thudded shut behind them, aided by Ash's boot.

Cece found herself standing in a decrepit living area.

On the far wall, a flat-screen TV hung at an off-angle. The place was a mess. The floral sofa and chairs were old, worn and frayed. Scattered on them were a few cushions that collapsed on themselves.

The floors were bare of carpet, and the hardwood planks were pitted with scuff stains, gouges, and burn marks.

The walls were rough, white painted plaster covered in dirty fingermarks and scratches. Windows were cracked and broken, with only a few pieces of cardboard covering the frames.

A rush of water whooshed from an unseen leaking pipe. The slow drip kept rhythm with her heart and that of a far-off tick and rattle of a struggling heater.

The shuffle of someone moving towards them broke the trance.

A thin, taller male version of herself.

He was long and thin, almost emaciated. He wore a shirt that was too big and hung off his shoulders and torso like a smock. Similarly, his jeans were oversized, hanging off his thin legs like rags. His head was shaved in untidy strokes.

His face was thinner, pale skin and dark eye rings, more bruised than Cece had ever seen. He had a smattering of freckles across his nose, more than she had. His hair was greasy, stringy and tangled.

Cece's brother had seen better days. He'd lost weight and become skinnier since she'd last seen him. His eyes were scrunched up as if it took an effort to focus. His nose was oily, and his lips were cracked.

Nevertheless, she rushed forward and embraced him.

They pulled back from each other as Cece smiled. 'I missed you, buddy.'

'Missed you too, sis. You doing good?'

She shook her head. 'I'm OK. You?'

He gazed down at her through bloodshot eyes and gave her a half smile. 'Peachy. On top of the world.'

His voice was weak, laboured.

The two siblings stared at each other, not noticing Ash casing the tiny house.

She probed further. ‘Really, though?’

‘Besides feeling like shit and hiding from the general’s collectors, I’m fine.’

Ash paused his reccie, raising an eyebrow. ‘We saw them. Why are they hanging around?’

Liam rubbed the back of his head, fingers tangling into his greasy hair. ‘I have some Ks on me that I should have shifted by now. I’ve also missed handing over my takings for four weeks, and the general’s getting impatient. He’s been blowing up my phone, but I’ve ignored his calls and texts. So he’s sent his goons - they’re the ones who’ve been casing the place for days now. If they find out I’ve got guests, they might think I’m handing over the product to you, and shit may go down.’

Ash pursed his lips. ‘You two get settled in while I check out the house. And be ready to move fast if we need to.’

The Mirren siblings nodded.

Liam extended a hand to welcome Cece to the sofa. ‘Sit.’

The air was stifling hot, stale and stagnant, and the couch under her jeans was stiff and scratchy.

She started with a touch to his arm. ‘How’s the detox?’

‘It ain’t fun. I’m through the worst, which is good.’

Cece pulled her brother’s hand into hers. ‘Don’t underplay your experience, Liam. What you’ve attempted is so brave.’

Liam launched into his detox ordeal, highlighting what must have been a gruelling experience. Cece listened, her heart

breaking for her twin.

Ash descended the stairs after clearing the first floor. 'You two need more time?'

The siblings glanced at each other.

'We can catch up later,' Cece suggested. 'For now, Ash, you take over.'

She sat back against the couch as the tall, rugged man nodded, his eyes cagey as he studied Liam.

He strode towards them and sat across the edge of the broken chair. 'I need to know how much you're willing to help our investigation.'

Liam nodded. 'I've had time to think about it, Sir, and I'm all in. Only if I get a good deal, though.'

'You will. I'll take care of you.'

'No custody or prison time.'

Ash paused for a beat, then nodded. 'Shouldn't be a hardship.'

'A hundred per cent freedom and immunity?'

'I'll make sure Defence can barrack for that.'

Liam nodded his approval. 'Ask me anything. I'll tell you.'

'Let's start with how he works.'

Cece's brother sneered. 'He keeps it tight. Flies in Ks from the Ghan on military transports and diplomatic bags. He's got men he's paid off at key points of entry - docks mostly. He's

also got protection from some of the higher-ups at some airports. He works with cells, most ex-soldiers who've served with him. Each comprises four or five people who work within the circle they trust. This keeps everything on a need-to-know basis. They take delivery at the airports and distribute to the dealer network.'

'Is he the man at the top? In Australia?'

Liam shook his head. 'He's a middleman. Red Adder has a local guy who keeps an eye on him. He's hinted to me that this guy and a local financier are above him.'

'So he's talked to you about the game?'

'Sometimes, when he comes to deliver.'

Ash's brow rose. 'Deliver?'

Liam pursed his lips. 'I'm his stepson, and also, because of my Eastern suburb connections, he sees me as a prime dealer. He likes to drop off the purest coke to me personally. My deliveries are to some of the wealthiest people in Sydney. From tech CEOs to judges and sports stars. So my product needs to be the highest quality and clean.'

'You have any here?'

Liam pointed to the dining area. 'I have what I haven't sold. It's what those dudes outside want from me.'

'Can I see it?'

Liam limped to the adjacent room, where a cupboard stood. He flung the doors open to reveal two safes inside,

stacked on each other.

Ash was hot on his heels, as was Cece, curious to see what her brother had to share.

He fiddled with the dials of the top safe, and the door swung open.

Liam reached in and pulled out a metal tray containing a sizeable block of a white substance.

Withdrawing, he set it on the dining table.

Ash whistled under his breath. 'That what I think it is?'

'That's a three-kilo crack brick. I've got three of them. Street value is in the hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions. It's 80% pure too. You know from its pungent smell and pearl or fish scale sheen. Plus, it flakes to a sharp point when it breaks apart. All signs of the good shit.'

'This is the purest you can get?'

Liam nodded. 'It's why we call it snow. Some people try to fake it with crushed-up Panadol and hairspray, which gives a similar look. But I don't play that way. Neither do I cut it with fentanyl. Or other shit like that. I keep it real, and that's why my customers keep returning. But no more; I'm out of the game now.'

Ash gazed at the brick with fascination. 'How'd you get word to your customers?'

'Phone, secret apps and socials. We make a quick reel and send it to Snap, IG, Wickr and Signal, clouding the real

product. Let my people know we've got a fresh, pure batch.'

Ash glanced up at Liam. 'Did you say the general delivered this?'

'Yup'.

'Have any proof of this?'

Liam smirked. 'At first, he did sweeps throughout the house when he started delivering to me. To make sure I had no recording or listening devices. After a year, his security got sloppy. So I set up a teddy bear cam the last two times and got some excellent footage.'

Ash's eyes lit up. 'For real?'

Liam reached back to the safe behind him. Moments later, he handed Ash a small package. 'On this drive.'

Ash's eyes narrowed. 'A bit convenient that you recorded him and just happened to have the footage handy.'

'Pure coincidence. I had no idea of the investigation and your involvement, Sir. Not until Cece said as much. I was planning to use the footage as leverage. To get out of the game and out of the general's control. But I realised that if he ices rogue cartels and even bikies at the drop of a hat, he'll have no qualms about having me done in. So I was holding onto it til I figured something out.'

Ash jerked his chin to the block of white snow. 'He ever share where he sources cocaine of this quality?'

‘All I know is that his trips to the Middle East are suss. I believe his main contact, the importer, is based in Afghanistan. But they meet up in Dubai or Abu Dhabi to make deals.’

Just then, Ash’s phone vibrated. He slid it out of his back pocket and tapped the screen. ‘Saint, what’s happening?’

His face tightened as he listened to his backup on the other line.

‘Outside, lurking?’

Ash glanced at Liam and addressed him, his voice urgent. ‘Looks like we need to haul ass. Now. You got a second exit?’

Liam pointed outside to his backyard. ‘Alley gate.’

Ash went back to his call. ‘Any chance you can get to the back street? I’ll have Cece and Liam meet you. Now. I’ll take care of the visitors if they come to the door and join you when it’s safe.’

He tapped off, his face grim. ‘We have to get out of here.’

The siblings nodded, exchanging glances.

Ash moved to the front door, slipping his phone and the drive with the incriminating evidence into his back pocket. ‘Liam, you need to grab everything of value, including those Ks. Plus, your phone and laptop and get to the alley. You can’t leave anything incriminating behind. Cece, please help him. Move. Fast.’



# Chapter 11



**T**he siblings took off.

Liam nabbed a canvas bag from his pantry, cleared the safe and stuffed the bricks of coke, his devices and wads of money into it.

After some frantic whispered directions from Liam, Cece ran upstairs. She raked through his cupboards and threw his clothes in a duffel carry-all.

Downstairs, Ash stalked to the windows and peeked under the shade.

Two men stood in the path leading to the house, peering up and down the street. He studied their approach.

They moved back to back, giving the other cover.

Their hands were angled to the ground and extended. Ash cursed under his breath when he spotted handguns in their hands.

Withdrawing his Glock, he inched towards the door.

Ash took position behind, ready to push his weight against it if needed. He didn't have long to wait.

Voices muttered. He couldn't make out what they were saying but could imagine their debate.

Decision made, they announced themselves with a frightful banging on the cheap plywood.

After a beat came another round of banging, accompanied by shouts of Liam's name.

Ash decided to play with the irate visitors. He lowered his voice to disguise it. 'Who is it?'

'We're after Liam. Where the heck is he?'

The stranger's voice had traces of a Slavic accent.

'Not here. What you after?'

'He owes us cash.'

So these were the general's goons coming to collect. 'Told you he's not here.'

After a short pause came a loud thump on the door. The uninvited guests were nothing if not insistent.

Ash leaned back to look at the hinges of the door and the piss-poor bolt and latch. They wouldn't hold.

So he stepped behind the door and raised his weapon, readying himself.

In seconds, the lock caved to the repeated battering. Ash jammed his thigh and boot against the lower half of the door and braced himself.

A litany of frustrated curses followed.

Then, a snub-nosed barrel inched through the open crack.

The weapon spat out. Sending bullets flying through the house just as Cece and Liam rushed down the stairs.

The staircase was behind the front door.

Ash waved a frantic hand, so the pair skirted his position, flying past him towards the back of the house.

Taking Liam's haul with them.

Once he confirmed they were clear, Ash turned his attention back to the invaders.

A hand extended further into the house.

One of the assailants growled. 'Let us the fuck in, Liam, or I swear we'll kill you.'

They let loose another two shots, which went wild. One of them shattered the television. The other crashed through the kitchen window.

Ash was done. He pulled back, took careful aim and squeezed his trigger.

His weapon whispered, and a cry ensued as the rogue's gun flew. A spray of crimson arced into the air as the invader withdrew their injured hand.

A thud followed as the man fell back into his friend, screeching in agony.

Seconds later, a barrage of bullets carpeted the doorway, and Ash ducked away from the live fire.

Not before he got hit with a sting against his lower left arm.

He'd been grazed. He ignored his broken skin as a second body tried to insert itself into a small crack of the now-sagging door. Ash threw himself against it.

His weight plus the door's slammed against the protruding hand. With a cry, the new assailant's weapon fell to the floor, and they, too, fell back, cursing.

Ash moved fast. He stuck his gun into the small space between the destroyed door and peered at the pair.

Both shouted at the top of their voices as they lurched down the pathway.

'Bludgers,' he whispered to himself.

'Fuck!'irate, one tried to rush the house again, but Ash aimed above his head and squeezed again.

The bullet whizzed above the man's head, just missing his cranium.

The man jerked in fright, realising the shot had been a warning.

Ash's sniper skills were on point due to his annual maintenance.

He grinned as the pair woke up to the fact they were up against a crack shot and took off in a stumble down the path.

A wash of headlights flooded the front path as a European model SUV roared up. Both men bundled in before the vehicle

screached off.

Ash moved away from the door and took a cautious step outside. The street was quiet, but it wouldn't last long.

Soon, every nosey neighbour in close vicinity would be swarming about.

He went back inside, not in the mood to be ID'd or blasted on social media.

Jamming the couch against the listing door, he retreated, grimacing at the broken windows and shattered TV screen.

He loped out the rear of the house, locked the back door and proceeded to the alleyway.

Where Saint's SUV idled.

Behind it was the Range he'd driven to the spot.

At the wheel, he caught a glimpse of Tiny Tim, another of Sovereign's Sydney-based crew. Ash acknowledged him with a chin lift, which the driver returned.

'All good? Heard some fireworks,' Saint murmured, sucking on a match stick. This was his MO, which he swore kept him from a previous smoking habit.

Ash huffed as he tucked his weapon away, sliding it into the holster behind his waist. 'Sent them packing with a few shots. We need to let the local command know so they don't get complaints from the neighbours.'

'On it. You're wounded,' Saint added, nodding to Ash's forearm.

He glanced down at the slash across his skin. ‘Got clipped with some lead.’

Saint peered at it. ‘Looks shallow, but you seem weak. Shall we swing by emergency?’

Ash narrowed his eyes at him.

Saint grinned, jazzed at his attempt to poke the bear. ‘Just checking, brother. Don’t need you bleeding out on me. Get in. I’ve got a first aid kit in the car. Maybe Cece can help you with it while I get us out of here.’

Ash nodded and opened the back door. To a pale-faced Cece and Liam, the latter slumped against the leather, looking wiped out.

‘How are we doing?’

Cece shook her head. ‘Liam’s almost out of it. Still in shock. We’re both reacting from that near miss.’

Ash’s heart lurched at the vulnerability in her eyes. ‘I wouldn’t have let anything happen to you.’

She nodded, licking her lips. ‘I know.’

Ash turned to her brother. ‘Liam, please scoot to the front. I need Cece’s help.’

While Saint swung behind the wheel of his SUV, Liam eased out of the back and into the front passenger seat.

Ash took his place. Seated and buckled in, he and Cece’s eyes met as untapped feelings jacked between them.

Saint opened the glove compartment and tossed a red box into the backseat. Ash caught it with one hand.

‘What happened?’ Cece said, staring at his arm.

‘Collateral damage. It’s superficial, but I’ll need your help tying a bandage around it.

‘Of course.’

Saint flicked a glance over his shoulder. ‘Anyone else want anything more?’

‘Liam needs fluids, food and downtime,’ Cece announced.

Saint reached into the same compartment. He pulled out a bottle of water, which he handed over to the man by his side. Liam nabbed the water and unscrewed the top, drinking in gulps.

Saint slid the car into drive, and they crawled away from the alley. He accelerated away once in the street to lose any unwanted tail.

Cece worked fast to wrap Ash’s arm.

First, she cleaned it out with a disinfected wet wipe.

She removed a cloth bandage from its plastic cover and wound it over his wound. He reacted to her warm hands and silken touch as she worked.

She glanced up at him, and they stared at each other before she finished securing the bandage.

He gave her a slight lift of his lips. ‘Thank you.’

Zippering the first aid kit, he tossed it in the console between the driver and the backseat.

‘Where are you taking us?’ Cece said, her voice soft and uncertain.

‘A Sovereign safe house, the most secure place for you right now,’ the burly Maori man called out from the front.

Ash heard Cece sigh, and he glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

Emotion washed over him as he saw her lean back and close her eyes. As if shutting out the tempest of the day.

Conflicted, he swung his eyes back to the front of the car, wanting to reach out for her and wrap his arms around her. *If only.*



Outside, dusk was settling over a bustling city. As the SUV headed towards Bondi, Sydney’s colour-changing sky went from rosy pinks to warm orange shades. The sunset was a near picture-perfect panorama that cast wild-hued light over its skyscrapers.

Soon, they pulled up to the front of a modern multi-level building.

Ash gave Liam and Cece a low-down. ‘This is where my brother has his Falcon & Eagle offices. It’s also HQ for Sovereign Allied, located in the basement and ground levels.’



They gazed up at the looming tower.

‘Above that are two or three apartments assigned to Sovereign Allied. The uppermost floors are dedicated to Falcon & Eagles offices. However, the rooftop is its most famous feature, The Beach Room, one of Sydney’s most popular bars.’

Given the dual role of the building, it had two entrances. The main one was a glitzy entrance with elevators that whooshed guests straight to the rooftop bar.

A second less obvious entryway led to private elevators, offices, and apartments. Ash guided the siblings towards it after they unfolded from the car.

The discreet entrance was set behind a glass door.

The hallway beyond was carpeted a deep royal blue and lined with potted palms. Its walls showcased a unique art collection.

It led to an expansive reception where Ash swiped his key card at a touchscreen monitor and stalked to the elevators, which opened with a chime.

He ushered Cece and Liam inside. Saint followed behind, and Ash filed in after him. The doors whisper-closed as the elevator started its ascent.

After a quiet ride, the elevator pinged. Its doors swished open to let them out on Level 9.

They turned a corner and walked down the hallway to an unmarked door. Ash unlocked and powered inside.

The interior of the apartment they walked into featured a sunken living room. With glass walls, sliding doors leading to the balcony, and a magnificent view of Bondi.

The warm, off-white interior featured a long, dark wood bar with a mirrored liquor cabinet dominating one end. Packed with bottles of the best drop and rows of crystal glasses.

The living room invited relaxation in contemporary leather, light fabrics and wood.

‘Your new pad for the next few days,’ Saint announced.

Liam inclined his head. ‘Thanks, man.’

‘Looks like you’re about to fall asleep on your feet.’

‘I am.’

‘Not on our watch,’ Ash murmured. ‘Saint, please show Liam his room?’

Liam lifted a hand and extended the canvas bag in his possession. ‘Before I crash, what are we doing with this?’

‘I’ll take it.’ Ash nabbed the goods. ‘Saint can store it in Sovereign’s safe room until we decide what to do with it.’

Saint jerked his chin and led Liam to a room just off the living area, leaving Ash and Cece alone.

Ash turned to her. ‘Will this do?’

Cece nodded. ‘It’s a palace. But you could give me a cot in the middle of a hovel, and I’d be fine.’

‘That tired?’

She nodded. ‘What’s going to happen to Liam? Where do we go from here?’

‘I think you and I agree he needs some rest. After that, I’ll meet with our federal contact to decide what happens next. But please don’t worry, Cece. I’ll take care of you both.’

She reached out and touched his arm, the one free of a bandage. ‘Thank you, Ash, for all this and for getting us out in one piece.’

He eyed her. ‘Not a hardship,’ feeling the temperature rise from their shared connection.

Cece took a deep breath. ‘I think I need to settle down, I mean in, settle in.’

Ash’s mouth quirked. ‘Agreed. Find something to calm you down after the shot to your nerves today.’

‘Got a book I can read.’

She nabbed a paperback from her handbag, and his brows shot up when he caught sight of it.

Its cover featured a half-naked man, and the title was just as seductive.

‘What’s that?’

‘A throbbing manhood.’

He bucked, not quite sure what she’d said. ‘A what?’

‘A steamy romance book. Packed with sex, intrigue, feels - and throbbing manhoods.’

Ash tipped his head back and burst into a throaty laugh that went on for ages before he sobered up.

Cece waited with a half smile on her face.

‘Damn woman, you got me. Looking so ever loving pleased with yourself.’

His eyes turned molten, and he leaned in to whisper. ‘You want a throbbing manhood; you know where to get one.’

It was her turn to burst out into a chuckle.

Unbidden, their eyes met in a clash of heat, and they swayed toward each other.

It wasn’t until Saint walked back into the room and cleared his throat that they stepped back.

Saint stared at them, eyes glinting. ‘Cece, the fridge is stocked. We’ve even got cold beers and a bottle of wine chilling for you. We always do,’ he added at her surprised ‘oh’.

‘You’ll find some milk and bread. If you want a full meal, use this QR code,’ Saint said.

He pointed to a brochure on a stand on the dining table. ‘Put in your order, and you’ll get delivery in about 30 minutes from the Beach Room’s kitchens. It’s part of the service we offer.’

‘Fancy,’ Cece muttered.

‘Matter of fact, Ash suggested it a year ago. He thinks we need to keep up to Falcon House standards.’

‘So you should,’ muttered Ash.

He met Cece’s gaze once more, nodded at her and prowled to the entrance. ‘If you need anything, and I mean anything at all, I’m just next door.’

He paused at the doorway as Saint pushed past him after serving Cece with a wave. ‘Keep a close eye on Liam. A detox, even in the tail end, can be nasty. Monitor his fluid intake. Call me if he gets unruly, sweaty, overly anxious or dizzy.’

‘Will do. I appreciate everything. Please get some rest as well.’

Her expression was so beguiling that Ash wanted to charge back in and take her into his arms.

Yet somehow, he sensed that would push her away. Given the vast ocean of trust that they still had to traverse with each other.

So, instead, he served her a salute and eased out, letting the thick, heavy door shut behind him.



‘What the fugly fuck was that?’

Ash twisted to find Saint leaning against the wall outside.

He grimaced at his friend and moved towards the next door, muttering. 'Don't know what you mean.'

Saint stepped before him, pushing open the door Ash had just tapped a card to open. 'You know. You. Her. The 'next level' tension.'

Ash huffed as he made his way into his new digs. 'Let's say I gave her a hard time before discovering her innocence in all this mess.'

'A hard time, huh?'

Ash gave Saint a side jab. 'Let it go, brother.'

'She's sweet.'

'That she is.'

'On you.'

'Hell nah. She hates my guts.'

Saint huffed, twirling the matchstick between his lips. 'You recall how you thought I was the best warrant officer? And still do? Because of my uncanny gut feelings and nose for the truth? I sense what stirs between you two is flaming. She sees through your mask. Through to the red hot passionate man we all know you are.'

During his military service, Saint proved himself a legendary warrant officer.

His uncanny spider sense for danger and cool-headedness meant he was the guy people wanted in their foxhole.

Because if one was in a fistfight and all else was equal, he was the *'get shit done'* guy who would win.

He had the will and the ability to cut through BS.

The long-range vision to see danger before it hit.

The split-second decision-making needed to hit first and keep hitting you until the threat diffused.

That was why Ash and Cole fought to get Saint off drugs after his first tour. Also, the reason Ash appointed him his 2IC on his squad while on active duty.

Right now, though, that ability to see through bullshit was getting on Ash's nerves.

'Brother,' he warned.

'Haven't seen you rip into laughter for a while. She makes you happy.'

Ash's eyes widened in realisation. 'I'll give you that. She's funny as hell. A whip-smart and badass lady with a kickass A-game.'

'So she's game-changing? For you?'

Ash sucked his teeth. 'Not there yet, brother, let it go.'

'I can tell my time is up.' Saint raised his hands in casual surrender, then leaned against the jamb of Ash's open doorway. 'I say we call it a night. Catch up tomorrow with Cole and Kris on how to handle Liam.'

'Good plan. Take the blocks of snow, cash and Liam's drives. Place it in the secure room under lock and key.'

‘Done. Later.’

The bald man took the canvas bag, draped it over his shoulder and walked away, light on his feet, silent as a cat.

Ash called out after him. ‘Sweet dreams, sunshine. I hope I haunt them.’

Saint gave him a raised finger as he stalked away.

‘Now you’re giving me the silent treatment? About damn time.’

Smirking, Ash didn’t wait for Saint’s response. He just let the door thud to a close.

He stalked inside, throwing his duffel bag onto the bed of the one-bedroom apartment and kicking off his shoes.

Ash made a quick phone call to check in on Jake and Mace.

He chatted with the kids and his mum for a while. After a few minutes, Mason announced that Cece was calling him and left.

‘They doing all right?’ Ash asked Rose.

His mother nodded, lowering her voice out of Jake’s earshot. ‘They’re pretty great kids, and Mason is super well-behaved. He’s nailed his please and thank you and has been helping with chores. Jake’s having an awesome time too.’

‘Thanks, Mum, for helping out.’

‘Anytime. How are you?’



‘I’m OK. It got dicey a few hours ago, but we made it out safe.’

‘Good, please keep it that way.’

For years, Rose’s stance on her sons, tour after tour, was one of maintaining a brave face. Most times, she reined in her fear. She’d only let her tears flow after Cole and himself had been injured in their last stint in theatre.

Ash knew how much his mother carried her family in her heart, and he cherished her for it.

‘We will. Tell the boys we’ll be home soon.’

‘Will do. I love you, son.’

‘Love you too, mum.’

Ash tapped off the call and attempted some admin on his laptop, but his mind drifted. Restless, he stepped away from his screen, placed his weapons in the room safe and stripped off his clothes.

Heading to the frosted glass confines of the shower, he flipped on the overhead rainwater head.

A drenching of cool water cascaded over him, hitting his skin with icy needles. It did nothing to alleviate the thoughts that threatened to overwhelm him.

*Cece.*

He’d been fighting off his need for her for days. Being close to her all day today only sent him into overdrive.

It still cut him up at how shitty he'd been to her, yet she'd taken the time earlier to make him laugh, clean his wound, and share her care.

Overwhelmed, he slumped onto the floor, water sheeting over, as his body, mind, and soul yearned so much for what was so near, yet so far.

*Damn, he was a wreck for her.*

# Chapter 12



**L**iam spent most of the next day in bed, deep asleep.

Cece only managed to feed him tea, water and some crackers before he succumbed to oblivion again.

It was clear the detox and the emotional roller coasters he'd been on for years were taking a toll on him.

She let him sleep and wandered the empty apartment for a bit before settling down on her laptop. After all, it was a working day.

By mid-afternoon, though, she was climbing walls and needing fresh air. So she reached for her phone and made a reluctant call.

'Cece.'

Why was this man's voice so lush? So deep, so '*after midnight*'?

Someone in authority needed to raise an ordinance disallowing him to be so potent at this time of day.

His crackled reverb broke through her daydream. ‘Babe, what do you need?’

Again, with the *babe*. It gave her delicious jolts every time he said it.

Yet she still didn’t know whether it was unconscious or deliberate. Right now, she didn’t have the guts to find out.

‘I’m done with work for the day. Liam is still a goner, and I need some fresh air. Any chance I can take a walk along the beach?’

Ash sucked his teeth in dissent. ‘Not without company, given what happened last night.’

Cece sighed.

‘Then whom shall I ask to please walk with me?’

Ash took a beat to reply. ‘Yours truly.’

A jolt arced through her. ‘Why you?’

‘Because we have no Cece walking companions on our roster today. Call back in a week, and we’ll see how best to accommodate you.’

‘Fuck off.’ Her curse was weak, trying her best to hide her amusement.

‘Careful, Cece. We ended up a hot mess the last time we discussed the word.

‘Truth be told, you ended up *in* my hot mess.’

Ash gave a bark of laughter, and for a moment, they snorted like school kids on an old-school party line.

She kept going. ‘Figures. I’m not just a hot mess. I’m a spicy disaster.’

‘I second the spicy, reject the mess bit.’ He growled the words at her, and she reacted.

For a moment, all she could hear was the sound of their breathing.

Cece cut through the thick tension first. ‘So, are you going to walk me or not, Mr Falconer?’

‘Add pushy to that list,’ he murmured. ‘What time?’

‘In half an hour.’

‘It’s a plan.’

He arrived on time, wearing ass-sculpting shorts, a long-sleeved cardigan and runners - a fitness guru’s dream. With a sinister twist, given the bulge of a hidden gun holster at his waist.

She was in jogging shorts and a tee, her feet in the sneakers she’d worn from Byron.

She also collected her phone and a sweatshirt in case it cooled down. Then they headed off.

Ash loped beside her, quiet, giving her the occasional side glance, giving nothing away.

All the way down the elevator, through the elegant lobby and into the street, Cece sensed the energy brimming through his eyes and took deep breaths to centre herself.

She didn't have the head-space for a complicated relationship with her boss. No matter how much her body reacted to him or wanted a repeat of their previous passion.

They crossed an art-lined esplanade and skirted hip boutiques packed with stylish shopping, heading instead for Bondi's eponymous shoreline.

The beach, a pilgrimage destination for sun-loving surfers, tourists and backpackers, was less packed than Cece had seen it in times past.

It was early evening, and the sun was still in the sky.

A few joggers went past them along the boardwalk. In the far distance, a crowd of fitness freaks flexed at the outdoor gym while surfers hosed down under outdoor showers.

The slight breeze lifted Cece's hair, and she welcomed the cool wind that shifted the dark tendrils of curls on her forehead.

Her eyes relaxed at the stunning scenery as they walked along the crescent shoreline.

'I remember being here on New Year's Day a few years ago with a few friends,' she remarked. 'The place heaved, I think the estimate was over 20,000 people. The lifeguards were hectic off their feet. It was hot, too - over 40 degrees. We were baking.'

Ash huffed as he sidestepped a charging jogger. 'Tourist much? Because every sensible local in Sydney would have

been hanging out behind closed doors at home. Where air-conditioning is worshipped like royalty.'

Cece burst out laughing at the apt picture he painted.

Ash grinned at her. 'No beach for me on an ultra hot day. I'm hugging the inside of the fridge - I don't do well in extreme heat. Feels like I'm about to melt.'

'I hear you. So far, Byron is so much more pleasant.'

'More temperate, babe. Which is why my ass is parked up there.'

As they strolled, their bodies touched, moving in an effortless synergy.

'Did you know the name 'Bondi' comes from the Aboriginal word for 'water breaking over rocks'?'

Cece gazed at Ash, surprised. 'I had no idea.'

'Others say this beach is the location of a famous fight where warriors used 'boondi' sticks to challenge each other.'

'Someone's a history buff.'

'Signs of an early onset existentialist crisis,' Ash said, pursing his lips.

When she laughed, he countered. 'Nah, babe, just a personal need to know where we've come from to figure out where we're headed.'

'On that note, where are we headed?'

'We could swing to Tamarama if you're up for the walk. It's a stunning track.'

She cocked her head and gave the idea some thought. 'Haven't been to Glamarama in ages. Let's do it. Liam ain't waking up for a few hours, and he knows to call me if he needs me.'

They made their way towards the south end of the beach, past the infamous Icebergs pool. Where a path led to a waterfront walking track along rock overhangs.

Cece paused, taking in the sweeping views of North and South Bondi, taking pleasure at the rolling waves crashing against far-off clifftops.

Ash pointed out an ancient rock engraving next to the walk.

'It's an Aboriginal depiction of a whale or a shark, no-one's quite sure. It has gills, so perhaps it's more likely to be a sea ray or a basking shark.'

Cece leaned in for a good look. 'Beautiful. Sacred.'

They shared a small smile before they loped along the path that swept around Mackenzies Bay.

As they walked, Cece engaged in a lively debate with Ash over what sacred meant and the rights of Australia's original peoples. He surprised her with his concise insights and thoughts on equality and justice for the First Nations.

She got a taste of his keen mind and a wry sense of humour in conversations, her respect for him growing despite her earlier misgivings.



Her mind buzzed when he played the advocate and challenged her beliefs before switching tracks and sharing insightful discourses.

A half-hour later, still lost in conversation, they drew close to the headland near the famous Tamarama SLSC clubhouse.

‘Thirsty?’ Ash raised a brow in question.

Cece shot him a quick grin. ‘Panting. Why?’

‘Follow me.’

Her eyes widened as Ash led her down a cul-de-sac avenue towards a cantilevered building with stunning views of the beach and cliffs.

He smiled at her as he slid a hand onto her back to guide her inside the impressive entrance above, emblazoned with the establishment’s sign.

*The Smoke Room.*

Awestruck, she whirled around. ‘Isn’t this the city’s hottest and most exclusive night venue?’

‘One of them.’

Ash led the way under the archway.

They walked into an elegant lobby with luxurious decor, including chandeliers, velvet upholstery, and marble floors.

It was an early summer night, and the place was quiet—only a few patrons nestled amongst the cocooned booths and exclusive tables.

They headed to the reception desk, where a towering bodyguard greeted them with a smile.

‘Ash?’

‘Gunny.’

The two men embraced in a man hug.

Ash turned to Cece. ‘Babe, meet Gunny. He’s on our team at Sovereign and oversees guest services here.’

When Cece raised a brow, the man laughed. ‘I’m a glorified security guard.’

‘Love to meet you.’

The russet-haired, bulky man nodded at her. ‘Pleased to meet you, too. You up for a drink or coffee?’

‘Whatever the lady desires.’

Cece blinked as both men turned to her. ‘I’ll start with lemon lime bitters, please.’

Ash produced a slim black plastic card. ‘I need a beer. Maybe some nibbles, too. Haven’t eaten all day.’

‘Don’t need it. This is home, brother,’ Gunny growled, waving away the card. ‘Follow me,’ he said, leading them up a tier of stairs into a setting that had Cece’s eyes widening.

The area was lush and intimate, with private booths.

It overlooked an amphitheatre-style area with three tiers that encircled a central stage and dance floor.

Each level had a different vibe: two distinct bars, a lively area for mingling in large booths while listening to vinyl, an exclusive dining zone, and the venue's main attraction - the whisky lounge.

The dance floor at the centre was quiet. Yet, Cece imagined the place in a few hours - a DJ platform soaring over the space, the state-of-the-art speakers pulsating with the latest chart-toppers. The floor, glowing with a kaleidoscope of lights perfect for dancing the night away.

'I'll have Tiff come straight away with those drinks,' their burly guide murmured. 'Meantime, get stuck into the menus.'

They settled into their private booth, Ash seated across from Cece. He leaned back and stretched, lifting his tee to reveal his taut tummy underneath.

Her mouth watered, and she tore her eyes away. Unwilling to be caught crushing on him.

Seated in the dining section at a velvet-lined booth, Cece felt out of place in her jogging gear.

Then she spotted couples and small groups of people nearby similarly attired. In shorts and tanks to help keep them cool from the heat.

After all, this was a beach bar steeped in Bondi's relaxed vibe.

She turned her eyes to the wall-to-wall glass alongside the oceanside vista.

It gave expansive views of an undulating deep blue sea with crashing waves. Above which, a waning sunset cast shards of gold and amber across the sky and beach.

‘Stunning, huh?’

She turned to see Ash gazing at her.

‘Not bad,’ she said. ‘I’ve always loved the East Coast. Seeing this makes me fall in love with our stunning Australian scenery even more. I can never have enough.’

‘I know what you mean. Every time I fly into Sydney, I can’t wait to see the Harbour Bridge, the Opera House, the sea and the beaches. Hands down, it’s the most beautiful view on the planet. Used to give me tears when I came in from my tours.’

Cece turned her full attention to him. ‘Must have been quite a homecoming.’

‘Still gets me when I hear, *I still call Australia home.*’ Ash was referencing the country’s non-official anthem. ‘They used to play it on some of our military flights. You’d see grown men and badass female soldiers wiping their eyes as we landed. I lost it every time.’

She smiled at his revelation. ‘Can’t imagine Ash Falconer in tears.’

‘Believe it. I’ve never subbed to the ‘grown men don’t cry’ nonsense. Dad and Mum didn’t bring us up that way. So while I might look like a mean ass mutha, I’m a soft touch through and through.’

Cece caught the genuine softness in his eyes and felt a flutter. This Ash was a whole new paradigm. One, she was still feeling her way around.

Just then, a young server rocked up with their first orders. 'Hi, both. My name is Tiff.'

She was blonde, bright and chirpy, and Cece warmed to her.

Tiffany gave them a rundown of the bar's offerings, including an overview of The Smoke Room's famed beverage program. It centred on more than 300 types of whisky displayed on the luxurious walls throughout the stunning bar.

'You can order single and blended malts and Scotches,' she said. 'We also have regular cocktails and natural tonics for the abstaining punters, including herb infusions, sparkling fruit sodas and spice-infused tea bases.'

'Later,' Ash said, raising his beer. 'I'll keep to this for now. Bring on the chow, though.'

Cece scanned the menu before confirming she, too, would stick to a plain old lemon and lime bitters.

'Not going to try the largest Scotch collection in Sydney?' Ash teased.

'Maybe another day,' Cece told him, not ready to be soused around him. She was a lightweight when it came to spirits, and the last thing she ended was Ash thinking she was a lush.

When Tiff left with their food orders, Cece fell back into the textured upholstery and scanned around, mesmerised by the place. ‘So how does one score a black card to this place?’

‘By virtue of knowing the owner. Rather intimately.’

Cece’s eyes widened, and Ash laughed. ‘My brother Cole. This is one of his newer ventures - it’s only a few months old.’

‘You Falconers are an impressive bunch.’

Ash shook his head. ‘We weren’t always. Both of us were runts at school. We didn’t get as tall as we are now until the end of high school. We had to find other ways to stand out, using our brains and working hard at sports and school. The discipline has paid off, though.’

‘I’ll say. Can’t see you as a runt, though.’

He laughed. ‘I was tiny, babe, the shortest in my class for years.’

‘I just can’t see it.’

‘I can. It’s why I always push myself hard, as does Cole.’

‘Tell me more about your family.’

Ash’s eyes lit up as he shared about the Falconers and their farming background.

He then opened up about his close bond with his brother. ‘Because we got bullied in school for our height, we always vowed to have each other’s back. We learnt martial arts, socked a few of our bullies in fights, and after that, they left us

alone. At 16 and 15, we both shot up to over six feet. Left them all in the dust.’

‘What got you into the forces?’

‘I was idealistic, naive and itching to leave home. I wanted to travel the world and save it at the same time, so Dad suggested the military. Cole didn’t want to be without me, so he joined as soon as possible, a year after me.’

‘How was it?’

Ash’s face fell for a moment. ‘Intense. I witnessed some of the ugliest scenes ever: women, children, and entire villages destroyed. But it was also where I forged some of my closest relationships. And goofed off with men and women one day who sacrificed their lives the next for peace. The best of times, the worst of times.’

She leaned in, intrigued. ‘And Sovereign? How did that come about?’

‘After our service, the six Sabre Squad commandos I led banded together to back our various business concerns. Supporting each other as only soldiers who’d survived the worst together.’

‘Nice,’ Cece said.

‘Even better, our notoriety in the special forces translated into government and private contracts. Our services were in high demand. We formed the firm to help manage the number of projects we got inundated with. But we still live our separate lives.’

Cece cocked her head. ‘Doing what if you don’t mind me asking?’

He gave her a chin lift. ‘I do my thing in Byron Bay. At the same time, I work with my 2IC, Reg, running security for the actors and celebrities who’ve flooded the town in recent years. Cole’s empire of bars and restaurants feeds Sovereign with a steady stream of high-end clients. Kamila was the first female commando in the 2nd SAS Regiment alongside Cole and me. She also became a legendary senior medic in my platoon. She now owns a successful physiotherapy clinic on the North Shore.’

‘Amazing.’

‘It is. Kris followed his passion for mechanical engineering by establishing a classic car restoration shop. He’s a kickass mechanic and a rev head with brains. Last but not least, Saint, warrant officer extraordinaire, is the face of Sovereign as its CEO.’

‘I sense a story. With Saint.’

‘Believe it, woman. Because he ain’t one.’

He grinned as Cece broke out into more laughter.



Ash paused for a beat. ‘Enough about me. Tell me about yourself. First, your heritage? It’s been on my mind.’



She smiled. ‘Well, my mum is Afro-Spanish. I’m named after her grandmother, Cecilia Pinilla. Mum met my bio dad when she came on holiday to Australia over forty years ago. He was a local Sydney-sider, born and bred. When he passed, Mum married Joseph.’

Their food and drinks arrived, and they spent a few minutes rearranging the table before diving into the delicious bites.

Cece shared about growing up in the northwest suburbs of Sydney. ‘Life at home with Joseph was horrible.’

Memories flooded her mind as she spoke. ‘Joseph wanted to become a brigadier but believed that certain people in the military were jealous of his success and blocking his promotion. He needed more money to entertain those in power so he could advance.’

‘Is that when the crime began?’

Cece shrugged as she took a sip of her drink. ‘Joseph’s behaviour was suspicious. He carried guns, flaunted large sums of money and filled the garage with antique sports cars. Strange people visited our house at all hours. He would take Liam and me to the city with a brown paper lunch bag filled with hundreds of thousands of dollars, which he would deposit with shady individuals.’

‘So he put you in danger?’

‘All the time. He also got more sketchy with us. Anger, rage, abuse. You name it. It got worse over the years. Perhaps

because of the pressures of the drug trade. He got more violent with us, especially with Liam.'

'Fuck, babe. What did you do?'

'I was the only one strong enough to push back against his toxic control. So I fought for them both, which made me hate him even more. So much that I almost offed him once.'

Ash's eyes narrowed over the lip of his beer bottle. 'Go on.'

She winced at the memory yet powered on. 'One night, I found him fallen asleep watching TV. Something came over me, and I got into the kitchen, took a knife and crept back.'

Ash's whistle cut through the air.

Undeterred, Cece continued. 'I was about to stab him, but sense came over me, and I stopped. I hid the knife and went to bed. The next day, he gave me a look like he knew what I'd done. He added a long wink like he'd seen me. That's when I realised that if I'd made a go of it, he'd have probably twisted that knife from my hand and plunged it into me.'

Ash sat up straight, brow furrowed. 'Woman, what were you thinking?'

'Trust me, I asked myself the same question. He'd have killed me or, worse still, made me pay with a life in jail. I left home soon after.'

Ash shook his head, mind still blown. 'What happened next?'

‘I couch surfed at a friend’s place, bar tended and devoted my life to having fun. Liam couldn’t escape, and Joseph forced him to join the army where he could keep a closer eye on him. I met and married my then-boyfriend, Nik. We had Mason, but one day, my husband disappeared to Auckland and never returned. So, I did a business degree while still bartending. I’d leave Mace with my mum to babysit during class and work shifts. When I graduated, I found work in the same hotel I’d been a bar server. Only this time, I got a gig with the events team and worked my way up. The rest, you know.’

Ash raised an eyebrow.

Cece freaked out for a moment, thinking that she’d overshared.

He took his time, his jade eyes fixed on her. ‘You’re one badass woman.’

She flushed, part relieved at his reaction. ‘I just did what I had to.’

‘Which was beyond amazing. He’s a cold fucking bastard.’

Cece’s eyes widened at his words. Ash took a pull on his beer, his body taut with tension. She realised then who he was referring to.

‘He is.’

‘We’ll nail him, Cece.’

She leaned in. ‘But when you do, promise you won’t put Liam in harm’s way to get what you need. He’s cooperating,

so don't let anything happen to him. Promise me.'

Ash met her gaze. 'I promise. The general is the only one we're after.'

His eyes were glacial, but for once, relief flooded her, knowing his rage wasn't directed at her.

'Does this mean now that you know all my shit, you don't hate me?'

He gave her a look over his beer bottle. Then he chugged it all down his throat. He placed the bottle back on the table. 'No. Cece. Far from it.'

Somehow, the heat in his eyes set her heart rate flying, so she focused instead of swallowing another gulp of her bitters.

'Your ex, he history?'

Cece's breath stilled at his words, her eyes skittering to his.

'Niko?'

Ash nodded. 'Mason's father, right?'

Cece nodded. 'He's been long gone. Don't know where he is or what he's doing.'

Ash jerked his chin, but his eyes were contemplative. 'No other man on the scene?'

Cece slow-blinked at him. 'No, why?'

His mouth twisted, and then he turned away from her, raising a finger to summon a server.

'Another beer, please,' he said to Tiffany when she arrived.

The server nodded and smiled, taking off with a wave.

Cece sat, looking down at her drink and wondering why about Ash's obscure question. Without thinking, she blurted one at him. 'How about you? Got a woman on the scene?'

His lips twitched as he leaned back. 'Nope.'

'Why?'

'Can't seem to find my type.'

'What is your type? A hottie with endless waves of beautiful beach hair and a perfect body?'

He huffed. 'Is that what you think I like? A woman packed with lip filler, Botox, surgeries, and plastic enhancements?'

He paused for a second, his jade eyes fixed on her before he continued. 'I don't need the perverse and perceived social clout of landing someone like that. Or having a woman do the same for me, chasing me because she wants to socially climb on my achievements.'

Her eyes widened as he continued, speaking with a deep reverb as his eyes tracked over her body. 'Cece, I like a real woman. A self-realised individual who lives outside the bounds of the toxic culture of TMZ and our lord and saviour social media mills.'

He paused to share her smile. 'I have my preferences, and I know I'm attracted to a woman as far from the airbrushed clones in the media as possible. One who is herself, confident and always has my back. Natural and real through and through. Freckles, dimples, dancing eyes, a sweet smile,

birthmarks, nerdy glasses, funny laugh, that little belly pouch. Give me all of that.'

His eyes fell to her lips, which she was biting. 'Someone strong, sassy with plenty of heart and balls to live by her own rules. Loyal too, because I don't touch cheaters.'

'Why's that? Apart from the obvious?'

Ash's face tightened with emotion. 'The not-so-obvious reason is my ex, Jake's mum. She played behind my back. She ended up with her old high school boyfriend. Who happened to be a mate growing up. She was and remains a manipulative, money-hungry joy sucker who left me for her then wealthier car salesman lover when I had only coins in my back pocket. She now hates that I've made bank. She also rejected Jake because she couldn't handle his energy.'

'That sucks.'

'It does.'

'Did you ever fight for her? For the relationship?'

Ash huffed as he took the beer Tiff had brought over. When she left, he continued. 'Her new man made it hard to even come near her. When a man steals your wife, there's no better revenge than to let him keep her. They deserve each other. I focused on custody of my son, and I got it.'

Cece raised her glass to him. 'Good for you.'

He saluted back, then lifted his head and took a gulp. He had a strong neck, his muscles rippling as he drank.

His jaw was prominent, too, one she'd become intimate with when they had their passionate one-time fling. The memory of that day sent a thrill through her body.

Ash must have caught on to where her mind was playing because he met her gaze again and held it until she couldn't handle it. So she glanced away, her cheeks heating up.

'What's your type?' His baritone crackled, sending jolts through her.

She met his eyes and took a breath. 'Someone I can be real with. Who shares a sacredness with me. Who never exposes our trust, who never seeks the limelight for its own sake. Who rocks a dad bod and makes me laugh. Who lets me fly and helps me grow in my ability to them as much as I love myself.'

He raised his beer in a toast. 'May you find what you wish for.'

'You too.'

They fell into a silence punctuated by the music playing in the speakers overhead. Ash pulled out his phone and tapped into it for a few moments.

Cece wanted to fill the silence but couldn't think of anything. She resorted to swirling the end of her straw around her lips.

Until she caught Ash staring at her, and she flushed, letting the offending item fall to the table.

'You done?'

His rasp was abrupt, impatient.

She nabbed the last fries in the bowl before her. 'I am now.'

'Let's roll.'

He got up and left the table so fast her head spun.

Her eyes tracked him, making for the bar's entrance. She took off behind him, trying to keep up with his long stride. He paused at reception and leaned in to speak with Gunny. Who nodded, leaned back and tossed Ash a bundle of car keys.

Ash caught them in one hand, nodded his thanks and kept moving.

To the front of the establishment, now flush with lilac and purple light from the dying sun.

He headed towards a dark SUV in the parking lot. Unlocking it with the key fob, he stepped to the passenger seat, yanked the door open and jerked his chin at Cece.

'We're not walking back?'

He shook her head, his eyes narrow with impatience. 'Too slow. Get in.'

She blinked, then moved.

Into the luxury leather interior, wide-eyed as he shut the door on her. He moved around the vehicle and slid into the driver's seat.

With a touch of a button, he fired up the car. Their automated belts rolled into place, and the car roared out of the



Smoke Room's gates.

She glanced at him and ventured. 'Why are we racing back?'

'I'm in the mood to explore what sacred means,' he drawled.

She jolted as her body quivered. Unable to tear her eyes away from his profile.

He kept his pair to the road, his face set like marble. The only movement was the tic along his jaw as he wove in and out of evening traffic.

His essence was menacing, dominating the space between them. He drove with skill, putting the pedal to the metal with practised coolness.

Yet she sensed a tension rising inside him. Evidenced by the soft curses under his breath as he cut past laggards and slow movers.

Being in his close company these past few days had been an off-the-charts experience - scary, challenging and tumultuous. She still couldn't believe how they'd got here and didn't trust his recent bait and switch.

Cece knew that somehow her life journey was shifting and charging fast in a direction she'd no idea of.

She hoped she'd have enough grip for the entire ride.



The car raced into the Falcon and Eagle's lot, screeching into the underground parking.

Moments later, Cece was outside the SUV. The fob locked the car up, and Ash, silent and brooding, led Cece with his hand on her back toward the lifts.

It arrived, whooshing open, announcing itself with a soft ping.

Once inside, the closed and the silence within enveloped them. The heat of his fingers burnt into her back as the floor numbers on the lift display glowed and tracked higher.

His breath wafting past her hair, and she could almost hear the beat of his strong heart pounding against the muscled chest to her right.

He smelt all man and musk, and she bit her lip to stop moaning.

Her pussy was mush by now.

*She'd never been so wet.*

The doors slid open, and with a gentle push of his hand, Ash propelled her forward.

They moved fast through the empty corridor, but she slowed as they came to the apartment she and Liam shared.

'I had a great time -,' she started to say.

Until he compelled her past her door.

Confused, she tried to twist around, but Ash's massive body was like a freight train. She was helpless against its muscled power. 'Where are we going?' she whispered.

'Not a word, babe.'

In that instant, she remembered his command from the last time she'd heard it.

'Oh.'

'I said, not a syllable.'

She clapped her hand to her mouth as he stopped at an apartment door next to hers.

He pulled a key card from his wallet and swiped it at the secure lock. It beeped green, and he slammed a hand on the thick wood surface, levering it open.

He stepped forward, his chest flush against her back, speaking into her ear. 'Babe, this is your chance. You don't want this, you shake your head, and I'll let you leave, no hard feelings. You nod, and we're in sacred mode. Your choice. Now.'

The words were husky, so deep, so low, she almost missed some of them. Their resonance flooded her mind, soaking her panties and weakening her knees.

She fell back against his chest. Nodding.

His arms snagged her around the waist and lifted her. Two steps, and they were inside. Another twelve, into a vast

primary bedroom. Ash walked them to the bed.

Sinking a knee into the surface, he laid her down.

‘Off.’

‘What?’

‘Take it all off.’

‘But -.’

‘Didn’t we agree, no words?’

*Damn, he was pushy. Overbearing. A hard ass.*

One she couldn’t wait to have her hands on.

She sat up and pulled off her tee as he removed his. His jade eyes glittered as she slid off her shorts.

‘Everything, babe.’

His voice was a rough caress that had the hairs on her skin standing up.

She did as he said, tossing aside her sports bra and underwear.

Toeing off her sneakers and socks as he pulled his off, too, throwing them into the corner of the room.

When she looked up, he stood before her like Michelangelo’s David, his muscles defined and thick, his cock proud and jutting.

‘This dad bod enough for you?’ he rasped.

She stared at his chest, heaving, muscled, straining with need. ‘It’s everything and more. One pack and all.’

With a smirk, he bent towards her as she scooted to the bedhead. Still, he advanced, and her breath hitched as his hands hit her thighs and pulled them apart.

He levered between them and, using one hand to balance, reached for her hair, twisting his fingers into it. Then his face lowered, and he captured her mouth in a searing kiss that lit her up.

Their lips parted, and their tongues met, clashed, danced, sucked, pulled. She flamed, gasped and reached up to sink it into his hair. Willing him even closer than he was. Wanting him inside her. Now.

His hand moved. To her left tit, and he tweaked her pebbled, rigid peak. He squeezed hard, and she retaliated by lowering her hands to reach for the heated rod throbbing between them.

On contact, he hissed and snapped his head back, breaking their lip-locked connection. His eyes shut as she palmed him, stroked and wrecked him.

With a growl, he took control, pulling away from her before lowering his lips to her nipple. He sucked her in, lashing her taut skin with his tongue while his other hand stroked past her tummy and to her wet.

Cece pushed into the heat of his tongue, the delicious rub of thumb on her clit and the slide of his finger inside her. Her fingers tightened around his scalp through his thick hair as she moaned, lost to rapture. She crushed herself against his body, his mouth, his hand.

Ash continued to suck on her now engorged nipple, sending sparks of pleasure through Cece. He moved his lips to her other mound while his fingers replaced his mouth this time, pinching and twisting until a rush of pleasure raced through her. Her back arched, and her hips surged and rose in response.

She muffled her screams as he drew her nipple into his mouth as his tongue jabbed at the peak, sucking it in with passionate fierceness. Ash's teeth grazed Cece's skin, not hard enough to break the skin, but rough and needy, sending a jolt of electricity through her, straight to her pussy. Her head swam.

He pulled away. His fingers went to her lower lips, probing the wetness beneath. Cece groaned and bucked as his fingers slipped deeper between the folds of her pussy, stroking her slick flesh. She was dying for him to do more, so she thrust against his body, twisted against him.

His fingers circled her clit and then moved lower. Two of his fingers plunged inside her, and she raised her hips to meet the thrust. She ground against him, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Her orgasm started to build, and she wound her arms around his neck, pulling him down to kiss. Her tongue stroked his, and then she bit his lip hard.

He withdrew with a grin. 'Pushing me now, are you?'

She teased out her tongue and licked her lips, her eyes goading him.

Their shared gaze was so heated her entire body flushed.

‘Ready, babe?’

She swirled her hips in response, and his eyes narrowed, brimming with fire.

‘I want you to look at me when I make you come,’ he growled as his hands gripped Cece’s hips, the muscles in his arms straining. ‘I want to see your eyes when I take you.’

He started to move against her, his hips pushing against her. His eyes burned into hers as if he was looking into her soul.

He rubbed the head of his cock against her mound, and her body quivered in response to his touch. Her pussy, wet with need and anticipation, ached to be filled.

Ash pulled her legs over his shoulders and pushed her into her folds. Cece groaned as his hands grabbed her ass. He pulled her into him as he thrust in and out, pumping his cock deep inside her.

She stared into his eyes as he fucked her, the intensity blocking everything else out but Ash and herself, his hands on her body and his cock moving, heating, ravaging deep inside her.

Her head spun, her eyes locked on him. It was just the two of them, and Cece’s soul had never flown higher.

He moved faster, deeper, and with every thrust, his fingers dug deeper into her skin. The jolts of pleasure continued to build in speed and intensity, and she could feel herself getting closer to the edge.

Her orgasm began to build inside her, her body quivering around Ash's cock. He thrust into her, faster and faster, her body matching his movements. She careened to the edge of ecstasy, and there was no way to stop it.

With a burst of stars and light, she exploded. The orgasm crashed over her, and Cece screamed out Ash's name.

He fucked her harder, his fingers digging into her skin until she couldn't take it anymore. He gave one final thrust, and his cock pulsed inside her as he groaned, his head falling back in ecstasy.

They stayed that way for a few moments. Then Ash bent over Cece. Her arms crossed his neck, and she pulled him down to kiss her.

Their lips met in a sultry yet gentle meld, nipping and sucking at each other.

Cece's heart soared with emotion.

*Happiness.*

The same light shone in his eyes when they parted, a smouldering heat that promised so much more.

She ran her fingers through his hair and twisted her hips against him. He was still semi-hard, and he took a sharp breath. She smiled as he panted against her lips, and he jolted his cock inside her.

'Still coming?'

'A little,' he confessed.



She clenched around him, and he hissed. ‘Me too, babe.’

They rocked against each other until the delicious sensations faded.

He kissed her forehead. ‘Enough sacredness for you?’

‘More than enough. Beyond.’

‘You’re welcome.’

She huffed against his lips.

Ash slowly pulled out of her, letting her legs fall from his shoulders.

She lay on the bed, tingling as he stalked to the bathroom.

Her eyes ran over his stunning body, dark golden skin, and sculpted ass. He was magnificent.

Ash returned with a warm cloth. He cleaned her, then himself, and tossed it into a washing basket.

Then he returned to bed and wound himself around her. His hands traced the curves of her body.

She thought of something and sat up. ‘Liam?’

Ash’s hand cupped her breast, his thumb stroking, sending shards of sensation through her. ‘Relax. Remember the text I sent at the Smoke Room? I organised for dinner to be sent to your apartment. He’s doing just fine.’

Cece twisted around to look at him, her eyes taking in his nude beauty, chiselled jawline, rippling chest and thick thighs covered in short, soft, dark hair.

She trailed a finger down his chest. ‘Thank you.’

‘My absolute pleasure.’

She smiled and lay back down and stretched against him. His arm went over, and he gave her an unexpected kiss to her temple. Cece had never felt so safe and secure in that moment, and she purred.

His chest rumbled in response, their limbs entangled even closer as the first shards of moonlight fell over their raw, naked embrace.



Hours later, Cece turned in bed and floated from deep slumber into a halfway state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep.

Something niggled at the back of her mind.

*They hadn't used protection.*

It was a fleeting thought that came to her like a dream tendril in the middle of the night.

It flitted into her mind as quickly as it scattered into thin air.

She snuggled closer to Ash's muscled heat as his arms pulled her closer, falling back into the embrace of sweet, sweet sleep.

# Chapter 13



**A**sh woke, stretching panther-like, eyes still shut, body slack.

Until his hand touched warm, velvet satin.

He pulled an eye open and found himself gazing at beauty.

She lay with one hand under her cheek, her hair spilling over the pillow.

He drank the curve of her breast, her tummy's soft mound, and those gorgeous dimpled thighs.

His cock thickened, thinking about how her lush and intoxicating body turned him into a ravenous beast.

They'd made love twice more that night.

The last time was at 4 a.m. as the moon waned over a dark, turbulent seascape beyond the expansive glass windows.

The sex, unhurried, passionate and heartfelt, blew his mind.

He'd buried his face in her neck, obsessed with her scent, especially where her neck met her jawline near her ear.

He didn't know whether it was pheromones, but Cece smelled terrific all over, and the crux of her nape was intoxicating, obsessing.

A rush of need consumed him, and he wanted the night to repeat so he'd lose himself in her unceasing pleasure over and over again.

Crossing his hands under his head, he stared at her, lost in thought, taking in her essence.

It felt good and proper like she belonged in his arms for life.

Because underneath his hardcore desire for her were the growing tendrils of emotion and care.

He sliced his eyes to her, lost in sleep. He jolted, realising that she was becoming the one person he wanted to wake up to every morning.

Like a siren song, she drew him in with her golden eyes, joy, and unashamed passion for him.

*Cece Mirren was intoxicating, and he was love drunk on her.*

The thought unnerved him just as his tummy growled.

Parking his feelings, he left the bed as gently as possible. He snagged a tee and shorts, then moved to the living room, shutting the connecting bedroom door.

Using the QR code, he ordered breakfast for two.

He opened his laptop and scrolled through his messages and email.

Consulting his calendar for the day, he found that in about two hours, Cole, Kris, Saint and himself had a briefing with his Defence contact.

There was one single agenda item: The Mirrens. To be precise, Liam and what he had to share about Joseph.

What would happen next to Cece's brother was in the hands of ADFIS.

Worried about their play, Ash closed his laptop with a sigh. His eyes flicked to the sea, where Bondi's famous surf was rolling under a clear blue sky.

A chime at the door indicated breakfast was ready.

He stalked the door and opened it to see a covered food cart and the grinning visage of Saint Tahana.

'Room service,' the man said. 'For two, I believe.'

'Your uncanny bloodhound sense? Or were you stalking my doorway til I left?'

'Nothing quite so sinister. I was on my way to the office when the server rolled up. I offered to save them the trouble of dealing with your fugly face.'

'Fuck off.'

Saint sniggered and jerked his chin to the tray where two coffee cups sat. 'Seems she doesn't hate you after all.'

Ash tugged the food cart inside, inserted himself between it and Saint and snarled. ‘Stay off my back, I’m warning you. When your turn comes to have a real woman you like in your life, trust me, I’ll be your biggest ball buster, my friend.’

Saint grinned. ‘Bring it, buddy. Hold up. Like? Huh?’

Ash stepped back stone-faced and let the door close in his mate’s face.

‘See you soon, lover,’ Saint called as his smug mug disappeared from view.

Ash’s lips twitched, part amused, part irritated.

Ravenous, he uncovered the food cart. He downed a thick, rich macchiato. Then, he ploughed through his order of eggs and avocado on toast and polished off a fruit plate.

Sated, he headed to the bathroom, past a still-sleeping Cece. He smiled as he glanced at her curled up around a pillow. Oblivious to the world.

Even after he showered and changed, she still hadn’t moved.

He scribbled a note on a notepad, propped it against the covered food tray and exited the apartment.

Minutes later, he was in a lift whisking him to his brother’s HQ.

He walked out at the Falcon & Eagle office level and nodded to the receptionist, who gaped at him.

‘Here for Cole.’

She nodded, eyes fluttering as his muscled frame powered past her.

He strolled through the light and airy layout, stopping at the open doorway into a modern office with views for days.

Inside, one man sat behind an extensive desk.

He was tall, lean and muscled with dark brown lustrous hair. He rocked a tailored suit and white starched shirt.

His face was manscaped, with a groomed moustache, beard, and chiselled jaw underneath. He had thick brows above unusual blue, cerulean eyes. He was ruggedly handsome and resembled Ash.

On the surface, Cole Falconer was far opposite of his big brother Ash. His sartorial style meant he favoured razor-sharp jackets and slim fitted lines to Ash's badass sweats and jeans for that jolt of VIP energy.

He was the more outgoing of the two, the charmer, talker and social bee, to Ash's sometimes taciturn, quiet nature.

Underneath the designer threads, though, was a fierce, loyal streak, first to his brother, then to his family and Sovereign crew.

He glanced up as Ash placed both hands apart, leaning against the door jamb.

Love for his sibling spilled out of his eyes.

Ash gave him a chin lift and a similar unabashed wash of emotion.

‘Finally,’ Cole drawled. ‘Heard you were busy all night and was a possible no-show this morning.’

Ash’s lip curled. ‘Damn, Tahana.’

A chuckle came from behind him. ‘Don’t take my name in vain, brother, especially when I’m behind you.’

Ash growled at the imposing part Maori man now prowling into the office behind him, clutching a to-go coffee cup.

‘Don’t listen to a word he says,’ Ash warned his sibling.

The man inside rounded his desk and gave Ash a long hug. ‘It’s OK, big bro, let it all out. I got you.’

The three men laughed as Ash pulled back. ‘Cole, Saint is rubbing off on you way too much.’

‘True. I need new friends,’ Cole moaned. ‘Maybe even a woman, so I can be like you when I grow up.’

‘Yo!’

The three men turned as a fourth man stalked into the room.

He was tall, with dark and silver hair in a bun and a rogue pirate-like essence about him.

‘Kris!’

Ash was elated as he wrapped the man in his arms, thumping his back.

It was the Sovereign way, where affection and care were shared freely, given the horrors they’d witnessed together and



the ingrained knowledge that tomorrow was no promise.

‘Been a minute, Tanner. How’s it going?’

‘Life is sweet. How’s the 70?’

‘It rocks brother, I love that ride.’

Kris’s body shop, Tanner Engineering, had modded up Ash’s rig a year ago. Transforming his brand new Land Cruiser 70 Series stock truck into an off-roading beast. The Double Cab Chassis build came with lifted suspension, upgraded shocks and BFG KM3 off-road tires for improved off-road grip. It was Ash’s pride and joy.

The dark and silver-haired man grinned. ‘You should; the shop just won another best rig modifier award, our twelfth down-under.’

‘Congratulations.’ Ash saluted.

After a few more pleasantries amongst the four men, he interjected. ‘We’ve got our meet in three. Boardroom?’

Cole nodded. ‘Let’s roll.’

‘Who are we seeing again?’ Saint said as the four men marched out of Cole’s office.

Ash pushed a door open. ‘Senior Inspector Terry Kitt, our main contact.’

They filed into the large boardroom and settled in. Cole fussed around with the controls of the wide-screen TV.

In minutes, they dialled into a secure-link video call.

A man soon appeared onscreen. Ash's brows rose because the person was not the one he'd been expecting.

'Gentlemen,' the man said in greeting.

'Sir,' all four men replied.

Ash raised a finger, concern snaking through him. 'Senior Inspector Owens, where's S.I. Kitt?'

'He's away, overseas. As his second in charge, I'm taking charge of the case indefinitely.'

Ash bit back a retort. He didn't like Owens.

He studied the man he thought of as arrogant, meddlesome and impractical. Dressed in full uniform, the man had an imperious stare.

He was thin-haired, lumpy and aged in his early to mid-fifties. He had muddy brown eyes, bushy brows, a broken nose, a weak jawline and an equally weak command style.

On the other hand, His superior, Senior Inspector Kitt, was one of the most experienced personnel in ADFIS.

S.I. Kitt was heading the inquiry into ex-Major General Mirren. He was a sensible yet firm leader with an easy, understanding nature. Qualities that appealed to Ash and the Sovereign team.

So far, the S.I. Kitt had given the operation his personal attention. Until now.

Ash's heart sank.

*Owens was going to fuck this up.* He just knew it. The man was notorious for overreach and seeking clout whenever he could.

He sensed Saint, Kris, and Cole thought it, too. Given the narrowed glances they sliced at him and the tensing of their bodies.

Owens cut into Ash's thoughts, glaring at him. 'Where are we up to?'

Ash had no choice but to give the man an update of sorts.

He covered how they'd found Liam and how he worked for the general as a dealer.

He held back the discovery of the drugs and the USB with the videos of Joseph's drug deliveries. He needed them for leverage in case Owen fucked this up.

He also didn't trust the man and preferred handing the hard evidence only to S.I. Kitt.

'I need to speak with Liam,' S.I. Owens clipped.

'You'll get my report after I question him. That's what I agreed with your boss.'

'He's not here and handed over the op to me. I want Liam Mirren in ADFIS hands. Now.'

Ash stopped cold. 'What do you mean? Sir?'

Owens' lips curled. 'I mean that my people will be taking him into custody. Somewhere discreet where they can have a

conversation with him. Before what he knows becomes public and hurts the case.'

'Sir, I believe I was to question him -,' Ash said.

The S.I. interjected. 'Is he with you right now?'

Ash's jaw ticked. 'He's in the building.'

S.I. Owens twisted around and spoke to someone off-screen.

'My people are walking into the building now to pick him up.'

Ash started, sitting up in his chair. 'Your what?'

'My MPs have been parked across the road for a day waiting for you to bring Liam in. When you requested a meeting in Sydney, we concluded you'd be coming in with the goods. I planted my men at Falcon & Eagle, waiting for your return.'

Ash half stood, eyes blazing. 'You had no -'

Owens gave a mirthless laugh as he interjected. 'Falconer, we've been prepping for this for a long time. Desperate for any incriminating evidence on the general. We had you do the leg work because our arms are stretched. But now that you have what we need, you'll need to step aside.'

The Sovereign team exchanged glances.

Saint nodded, his face grim, indicating he thought they best comply. Ash took his cue, knowing he'd no recourse. At least not yet.

Ash turned to the Senior Inspector. 'I'll meet them in reception and bring him to them.'

'No. They'll meet you on the floor that he's in. Please pass that on to me now.'

Ash took a breath. 'Level 9.'

'Thank you. My man, Inspector Raine, will introduce himself. You'll need to show him to the location and let him take over.'

Ash's nostrils flared with frustration. 'Note, he's with his sister, so tell your men to tread with care.'

'You can tell them yourself.'

Ash gritted his teeth. 'Is that all, sir?'

'For now.'

The screen flickered to black as S.I. Owens ended the call.

'Crap!'

Ash kicked the chair away from under him and sprinted for the door. Cole, Kris and Saint followed.

They raced down the hallway to the surprised glances of the Falcon & Eagle staff.

At the elevators, Ash jabbed at the lift button, cursing. 'I thought we had the lead on this. Kitt said as much. Now, this tosser Owens is going to mess this up. Liam is not in a state to be questioned. And we need to keep him on our side because he is already willing to witness. Being taken into custody will

make him think he's being arrested. He won't trust me anymore, let alone Owens, to speak with him. Dammit.'

'We need Kitt across this asap,' Ash said grim-faced.

Saint nodded. 'I'll get my assistant on it to try and get a hold of him. As soon as Kitt finds out, he'll go ballistic on Owens for fucking you up, Ash.'

Ash sucked his teeth in annoyance. 'If Owens thinks I'm going down without a fight, he can kiss my brave ass.'

The elevator arrived, and the Sovereign men strode in. Ash glowered at the lift display as it sunk lower to Level 9.

They exited and walked straight into a group of four uniformed MPs and a senior with cool eyes.

'Sir,' he called out.

Ash jerked his head. 'Raine.'

The two men faced off, and from the corner of his eye, the MPs gave each other skittish glances. Ash Falconer was a revered and awarded soldier with legendary status in the military. Pissing him off would not be a good look for Raine.

The Inspector fell in first. 'Sir, not the way I'da gone about it, but I have my orders. Where's Liam Mirren?'

Ash sucked his lips in annoyance. 'Not the way I'da run this either,' his only concession to his outrage. 'Follow me.'

He turned on his heel and headed down the hallway towards the Mirren's temporary residence. He paused at the

door. 'Be careful now. He's staying here with his sister, also a civvie, so you've got to go in lightly.'

'Noted.'

Inspector Raine gave a chin lift to the MP's leader, who raised a hand and banged on the thick wood frame.

'Liam Mirren, please answer the door.'

The voice was loud and booming, not light at all, and Ash winced.

No answer came for a moment, so the MP banged again.

Inspector Raine turned to Ash. 'It's key card controlled. Got master access?'

'I can get the master card,' Saint offered with some reluctance.

'Please do so. Sir.'

Before Saint could leave, the apartment door opened with a thunk.

Revealing Liam in pyjamas, looking pained, thin and twisted like a corkscrew. He reeked of body odour from sweating too much during recovery.

His dark, shadowed eyes tracked across the men crowded in the corridor. A whistle sounded under his breath. 'Whisky, tango foxtrot?'

His voice was hoarse from coughing during withdrawal.

Inspector Raine raised the document in his hand. 'Ex-Corporal Liam Mirren, my name is Garrett Raine. I'm with the

Australian Defence Force's Joint Military Police Unit. I'm taking you into temporary detention as part of an ongoing investigation.'

Liam's eyes widened. 'Fuck off.' His enraged eyes lifted to where Ash stood. 'Sir, you reassured Cece and me that you'd be the only one I'd speak to.'

Ash's face fell with remorse. 'I did.'

Liam leaned in, his face suffused with redness. 'Then what the hell happened?'

'It's a misunderstanding, mate,' Ash rasped. 'The problem is that someone new has taken over for now. I'll be reaching out to my contact to lodge a formal protest. However, for now, our hands are tied.'

'You mean mine are.'

Inspector Raine interrupted. 'It doesn't have to be like that, Liam. Come quietly with us, and we won't have to cuff you.'

'Leave me the hell alone!' the thin man lunged back and tried to slam the heavy door. The thick shoulder of an MP stopped its progress.

Ash shook his head, balling his fists. 'Liam! Don't make it hard on yourself.'

'Like you care!' The man shot the words back as he struggled with the two MPs who were now on him. They pulled him from the confines of the apartment and wrestled him against the wall.



Cole, Saint and Ash cursed as Liam continued to fight until a pair of cuffs clapped over his hands to his front.

Just then, the door to the next apartment flew open, and Cece appeared.

Ash sighed, bracing himself.

Dressed in her shorts and tee from yesterday, barefoot, her curls swinging free. Eyes flaming. While still being heart-stompingly beautiful. ‘What the hell is going on?’

Her hands crossed over her chest as she studied the scene before her. Credit to her, she didn’t turn into a screaming harpy. Instead, she kept her calm.

‘Ash, speak to me.’

He closed his eyes for a moment, then turned to face her. ‘Cece, higher-ups in the Australian Defence Force’s Joint Military Police Unit have taken over the investigation. They insist on questioning Liam as a matter of urgency. He needs to go with them. There’s nothing we can do to stop this.’

She took a sharp breath, lifting her hands to indicate her confusion. ‘You said this wasn’t going to be the case.’ Her voice fell further. ‘You promised.’

Her soft rebuke hit him square in his solar plexus. He bit his lip, vexed he’d failed her yet again. ‘I know. I had no idea this would happen. My hands are tied.’

‘Is that right?’ Cece’s voice was arctic, cutting, without mercy.

He raised a brow at her, then shook his head in frustration, not at her, but at the situation.

Her cold gaze sliced away from him and to her brother, who was gazing stonily at the wall. ‘Liam. You OK with this?’

He met her scrutiny with an incandescent rage. ‘Hell, I’m not. But do I have a choice?’

She turned back to Ash. ‘You get him back, do you hear?’

She spoke with such authority that he almost saluted her.

‘Hear.’

He nodded to Inspector Raine. ‘Tell Owens this was not the agreed protocol and that I’ll be in touch with S.I. Kitt.’

The MP shrugged. ‘Your call, Sir. Can anyone grab the man some shoes, a jacket and some clothes?’

‘I’ll do it,’ Cece said, shouldering past Ash, her energy vibrating with anger.

She cursed under her breath, the sound amplified in the secluded hallway, a visceral reaction laced with hurt.

Yet she knew better than to fight a military police order.

She powered into the apartment and further toward Liam’s bedroom—the men who remained stood around stiff and awkward until she emerged.

The MPs uncuffed her brother, and the group looked away as she helped Liam dress, whispering to him as she did.

Ash didn’t catch everything she said, but he caught wind of reassurances that he’d be OK. Expressed with such

compassion and care, he tore his eyes from the pair.

His heart and soul surged with guilt, and he caught Cole's eye and shook his head in regret.



Once dressed, the MPs led Liam away.

Cece tried to take a step after him for a final hug. Ash shot out a hand to stay her.

She shook him off, turning her back on him, wishing never to speak with Ash Falconer again.

When Liam and the MPs disappeared into the lift well, she whirled around and back into the apartment.

Ash followed.

A whisper came from him, keeping his companions at bay. Saint and the two other men she didn't know.

One was a tall, devastatingly handsome man who resembled Ash. The other could have been a rock star god. At this point, she didn't give a damn. *They could all go to hell.*

She said as much as she rounded on Ash after he closed the door behind them.

'Tell me you'd no idea this was going to happen.'

'No clue, babe, I-'

He didn't get to finish. 'Don't call me babe! Don't call me anything because you'll be nothing to me unless you bring Liam back.'

He flinched as though she'd ripped into him with a knife.

His face shuttered, and the jade of his eyes churned with a storm that threatened to slam into her heart if she got too close.

She ignored the warning of turbulence ahead. 'You. Will. Bring. Him. Back. Otherwise, I'll tear your world down. Including ripping this investigation to shreds.'

He winced, the impact of her words visible on his face. 'You've every right to be angry, Cece. I am, too, because I got overruled. Please believe me.'

She studied his face for a moment, her energy dropping a level. 'You should have seen this coming or at least warned us. Instead, you gave Liam assurances that now hold no water.'

'I'm sorry.'

They fell into silence.

Cece stared at Ash, hoping the heat in her eyes would implode him from within. He met her glare with a steady one until she capitulated. She peeled her eyes from him. 'Damn, I hate-'

'You hate me.'

Cece's jaw set even harder at his words. Her cheeks were red and flushed with rage, her expression defiant and ready for

a war, lips tight and thin. Her fists clenched at her sides, and her brows furrowed in frustration.

‘I’m not saying I hate you. I’m saying that you are the bane of my existence right now. What I loathe is that my stepfather is the reason this is happening. He’s the one they need to arrest now, not Liam.’

Ash plunged a hand through his hair, pacing the room. ‘Just to reiterate, he’s not under arrest, Cece. He’s a key witness, so ADFIS needs to understand how much he’s across Joseph’s affairs. So they can form a case to arrest your stepfather.’

Cece swung back to him. ‘How long will that take?’

She saw Ash wince and ploughed on. ‘Days? Weeks? Months?’

He shrugged. ‘I can’t say. I don’t know.’

She hissed under her breath. ‘Fuck. This is all so wrong.’

A chasm grew between them, filled with their frustration and vengeful thoughts.

After a beat, Ash took a sharp breath and whirled to face her. ‘What if I told you there is a way to get Liam out sooner?’

‘I wouldn’t know whether to believe you or trust you.’

He jerked. ‘I deserved that.’

‘You did.’

‘Give me a few days. I’ve got a play I can work with.’

‘Whatever it takes.’

The hush bloomed even more, filled with silent accusations, broken promises and betrayal.

Cece stirred from a rush of exhaustion and emotional overload. 'I want to return home. Back to Mason and a routine. Meantime, you fix this, Ash.'

He sighed with heaviness. 'I get it. I'll have the plane ready for you later today.'

'Great,' she said with coldness, walking away from him towards the bedroom she'd occupied alongside Liam.

The heat of his eyes burned her back, and she dampened the need for him that surged through her.

She would not entertain her feelings for him until she had her brother with her, safe and sound.

She was not going to waste any more time in Ash's presence. Even at the cost of her desire for his infuriating, smexy, gorgeousness in and out of the sheets.

His gravelled voice stopped her in her tracks. 'I'll drop your handbag back to you.'

She swivelled and faced him, not quite looking him in the eye. Not wanting to confront the reason they were in his suite in the first place. 'Thank you.'

She took a step into the bedroom and closed the door.



Her small suitcase took less than fifteen minutes to pack.

Mid-packing, a chime sounded from the front door. When she opened it, her bag was hanging off the knob. No one else was present in the empty corridor.

She nabbed it and retreated to safety.

Soon after, ready to leave and anxious, she sat at the apartment's dining table. Her hands wrapped around a cup of warm, soothing tea, and she watched the steam curl and swirl into the air.

Her reflection in the bar mirror showed an ashen face. Her eyes were heavy and red from the tears that had run down her face while she'd folded her clothes into her carry-all.

Her whole body still trembled, her heart drumming in her chest.

She was wracked with guilt at leading her brother into a trap. And that Ash had been the one to set it.

Cece beat herself up, remembering that she'd been conflicted about Ash and his intentions all along.

She should have listened to her gut, to her doubts about him.

She groaned, her thoughts jumping everywhere, her soul shattered. Convinced he'd sold Liam down the river.

For a fleeting moment, she tasted him on her tongue, a tantalising forest fresh tang she'd memorised during their

night together. A savouring of forbidden passion that had never been so desirable.

She shuddered, remembering the heat of his skin. The way he moaned into her mouth when she'd sucked on his tongue. How hard and fast he'd ridden her, with driven fury.

She almost choked on her tea as her mouth filled with the bitter acid of betrayal. *She was so over falling for him, so over being played.*

Her phone vibrated. She picked it up and studied the text message on her screen with a sigh.

***Ash: The plane will be ready in half an hour. I'll drive you to the airport myself.***

She typed back a furious response.

***Cece: No. I can take a taxi.***

***Ash: We have security concerns in Sydney, so stay put until I come for you.***

***Cece: Fine.***

She sighed.

Minutes went by—finally, a knock—firm, insistent and impatient.

She nabbed her rolling carry-all and slung her bag across her body.

Cece opened the door, not meeting Ash's eyes.

He flicked his over her and gauged her mood, jaw clenching as he stalked off.



She was glad he didn't offer to take her bag. She'd have snarled at him.

Soon, they were in the parking garage by the Range, which Ash unlocked.

He turned and gestured for her to place her bags into the back. She did so as he headed for the driver's door, then sidled into the passenger seat as the sports engine purred to life.

They didn't exchange a single word.

The car pulled away from its parking spot and out of the building.

They eased into the busy traffic below a bright and sunny sky.

The air was clear, not a hint of smog. The only sounds were the engine's growl, the rushing wind through her open window and her erratic breathing.

The silence was stifling. She flicked her eyes at him, her expression still holding onto the unfairness of Liam's arrest.

He must have sensed her heated perusal.

'Reg, my Sovereign 2IC in Byron will meet you at the other end. And take you home. He'll also keep you and Mace safe for me.'

'Thank you.'

Their breathing mingled in with the radio playing over the speakers and the rustle of his shirt as he touched the car's controls.

They arrived at the private airport and swung towards the familiar arrivals lounge.

The car came to a smooth stop, and Ash flung his seat belt off, leaving the vehicle.

She followed, closing the door behind her as a hot breeze hit her legs.

He nabbed her bag and placed it on the ground while a valet rushed to help.

Their eyes met, his filled with uncertainty, her's brimming with fraught tension.

Cece's eyes drifted past him, focusing on anything but him, while a small host of emotions played out in her eyes. They flickered from him to the plane, to the plane's valet beside them, to the horizon.

He hesitated for a beat. 'Not sure if this means anything, but I'm sorry about this morning, and I promise to fix this.'

'OK.' Her voice was a whisper in the wind.

'I'll see you soon.'

She started a little at his words, gave him a tight nod, and stepped away towards the plane, where the valet ushered her inside and to her seat.

She settled in and steeled herself to look outside.

There was no one where Ash had been standing.

He was gone.

The plane taxied down the runway and darted into the air. The ground fell away in a stunning view of the airport and the city beyond.

Cece scanned the empty cabin and was hit with a rush of loneliness and need. For her brother, the man and the heart she'd left behind.

# Chapter 14



**B**ondi's answer to luxury rooftop bar escapism was The Beach Room—an elegant beach-inspired setting in 360-degree glass.

Here, guests ascended to the skies above the famous sandy shores to enjoy made-to-order cocktails, lush spirits and top-end entertainment.

The seaside gem offered uninterrupted sky views as punters drank and ate.

Surrounded by views of glistening water to the East and the city skyline in the distance, it glowed in gold as the sun went down.

At night, it was an illuminated wonderland. During the day, guests could play in the massive rooftop pool next to the outdoor bar or indulge in a cheeky daytime cocktail inside.

Ash was oblivious to the stunning setting as he stalked through the bar towards a private corner booth.

Inside, Saint sat slumped in a seat with Cole and Kris across from him. All three men shared grim expressions.

As Ash approached, Cole lifted a hand, signalling him over.

He fell onto the booth seat beside Saint.

‘What a cluster-fuck.’

‘You don’t say.’ Saint sliced Ash with a probing look. ‘She OK?’

‘Nah, man, she’s ropeable. She not only hates me now, she probably distrusts me and never wants to see my mug ever again.’

‘Sucks, man,’ his brother called out.

Ash sat forward, running his hands through his hair. ‘I need to fix this for her but also Liam. He doesn’t deserve this. He’s not the enemy. His stepfather is.’

Cole grimaced. ‘Do we know where they took him?’

‘Probably an ADFIS facility or safe house. Where doesn’t matter. We just need to bust him out. With Kitt’s help.’

Ash leaned back and slid his phone from his back pocket. He swept through his contacts and found a number that he tapped on. He placed the call on speaker as they waited.

‘You have reached the voicemail of Senior Inspector Kitt. Please leave a detailed message -’

The men groaned at the automated words.

‘Damn.’

Ash fell back against the back of the couch, his forehead creased. ‘Had a thought. Still have those Ks, Saint?’

‘Liam’s snow?’

‘Yup.’

‘Think we can use it as a trap?’

Saint quirked a brow. ‘For the general?’

‘He’s looking for it. He seems desperate for it. Given the texts that he’s left Liam and the goons, he’s sent after him. Let’s use the product as leverage.’

‘OK,’ Cole drew out the word. ‘What are you thinking exactly?’

‘We go to Owens. Tell him if he gives Liam back and lets him walk, we’ll get him the general. And deliver him to his door.’

The four men shared a long gaze, and then Saint nodded. ‘Let’s do this.’

Ash made a call, placing the phone on speaker.

Someone picked the line, announcing herself as Senior Inspector Owens’s assistant.

‘I need to speak with the Inspector. Now. It’s urgent.’

‘May I ask who is calling?’

‘Major Ash Falconer.’

A sharp intake of breath. His name had the desired effect. It seems he still had some pull in the armed forces.

‘I’ll put you on straight away.’

Seconds later, Owens' voice sounded out loud and irritated. 'What do you want, Major?'

Ash launched straight into it. 'What if I handed Joseph Mirren to you?'

Owens inhaled in a rattle. 'What's the quid pro quo?'

'Who said anything about a quid pro quo?'

'I always expect one.'

Ash nodded, pursing his lips. 'Then you have your answer.'

'As I thought. What is it?'

'Liam won't give you much in an interrogation. However, we have it on good authority that his stepfather is after him. For a cache of drugs that Liam hid from Mirren, who entrusted it to him for obvious purposes. However, when Liam left dealing and went MIA, the general panicked. He's sent men to hunt his son down. If you hand over Liam, I could persuade him to lead us to his old man.'

'Why wouldn't I try the same?'

'Is Liam talking? He singing like a bird?'

Silence.

Ash gave a grim smile. 'He's not cooperating, is he? But I know he'll work with me. He trusts me. And we also need the general to believe him. You take this on yourself, and Liam could fuck it up for you.'

'Why?'

‘It’s not rocket science, Sir. Out of spite for snatching him against our agreement. You won’t get much out of him, and your play will fail. You want that on your record?’

He could almost hear Owen’s inner mental cogs spinning. ‘No,’ came the reluctant reply.

‘What do you say?’

A long pause followed, punctuated by a separate muffled conversation on Owen’s side. Finally, the man came back on the line.

‘Falconer, we’ll hand him back.’

Ash gave a silent fist pump. At the same time, Saint, Kris and Cole exchanged nods of triumph.

Outplayed, Owens cleared his throat. ‘How long will this take? Senior Inspector Kitt will be back in three weeks from his overseas tour. I need this wrapped up before then.’

*So the man wanted to chalk up a win for himself,* Ash thought. True to his character every step of the way.

‘I’ll take a few weeks to organise, but we can’t have any interference,’ Ash cautioned. ‘You need to trust us in entirety. Like your boss did. We’ve done this for many years, and you can be confident we won’t mess it up.’

‘Better not. Your neck will be on the line.’

Ash doubted that. Instead, it’d be Owens in the lurch, as Ash had the respect of senior Defence officials and didn’t need to prove anything to anyone.



‘We’ll make it work. Sovereign always comes through.’

Owens sniffed, unconvinced. ‘Hmmm. I’ll get Raine to reach out to you.’

The line went dead, and Ash ensured the call ended before he leaned back on the couch with a whoop. ‘Game, set, match.’

‘Still got it, Falcon,’ Kris grinned.

Cole rose to his feet with a laugh. ‘He always had it.’

He stalked to the empty bar and pulled out a bottle of amber liquid and four glasses, which he thumped on the table and poured.

‘To lashing Owens ass.’

Ash huffed, tipping back the fiery liquid down his throat. ‘Delicious. So it should be. It’s our 2017 batch.’

Saint savoured the tippie. ‘Not bad.’

‘Got a new macadamia liquor for you.’ Ash nailed his brother with a look. ‘I’ll have a batch sent up next week. It’s sublime.’

‘Bring it on. I want the Beach Room, Smoke Room and Toby’s to have the widest and most reckless selection of whiskies and liqueurs.’

‘How’s it all going?’

Cole ran The Falcon & Eagle empire with his best friend David Webb, also a member of the Sovereign crew. Almost a decade ago, Cole established the now-famous Northern

Suburbs pub, Toby's Place, in honour of his close friend and fellow soldier he'd lost in Afghanistan.

He sold the pub and took the proceeds to renovate a Potts Point speakeasy. He called it Toby's, and the place soon earned a reputation for being one of the hardest velvet ropes to slink past due to its strictly enforced door policy. Months later, he opened *The Beach Room*, now one of the Eastern Suburbs's most famed bars.

He went on to set up *The Smoke Room*, a watering hole so exclusive it was only accessible by a password at the door or black card membership.

Followed by *The Smokin' Yacht*, a floating saloon in Sydney Harbour. Amid it all, he, his business partner Dave and Ash launched the wildly popular Smoky Toby whisky brand.

'Good, Busy. When he's not saving the planet, Saint works nights with me, and we're flat out on weekends.'

The bald headed man in question nodded. 'True. Haven't been this busy in years.'

'Good problem to have.' Ash rose to his feet. 'Dinner tonight? Hopefully, Raine will have got in touch by then, and I'll have a plan to share with you both.'

All three men grunted in agreement.

Ash nodded. 'Sweet. Later. I need to check in on Jake and -'

'Cece,' Saint added.

Ash's face fell. 'Her too.'

With a wave of his hand, he stalked to the lifts.



Before he got to the doors, Ash heard his name called out.

He swivelled around to find Cole bearing down on him.

'Hey dude, you OK?'

In the face of his brother's concern, Ash's bravado dropped.

His raw frustration showed on his face, and he didn't care.

Cole was the one person who knew Ash's deepest, darkest secrets and had always had his back. The human before him was his keeper, and he could be as honest as possible with him.

Cole caught his unguarded emotion, stalked forward and wrapped his arms around his older brother.

They stood there in the shadowed corridor for a moment.

'Listen,' Cole rumbled into his ear. 'You're incredible. You're dealing with a serious and shitty situation. But for as long as I can remember, no matter how much life knocks the wind out of you, you've always fought back, risen up, dusted yourself off with grit and got on with life. I've admired your

ability to do that for a long time and learned to do it through you.'

Ash pulled back, his face twisted. 'Fuck it's hard.'

'The op or the woman?'

'Both are kicking my ass.'

'You're gone for her?'

Ash pursed his lips, running his tongue over his mouth. 'I'm roadkill.'

Cole chuckled. 'Knowing you, you'll devise a harebrained plan to win her back. From what I saw earlier today, she's got sass and strength. You wouldn't want anything less.'

'True.'

'You'll make it happen.'

Ash gave Cole another hug. 'Is that your blessing?'

'Maybe. I'm a commitment-phobe, so don't take any relationship advice from me.'

'What happened to Flávia?'

Ash was referring to Cole's stunning on-and-off international model girlfriend.

'We're a mess. More off than on.'

Ash's brow rose. 'And Bella? My adorable niece?'

Cole's eyes gleamed. 'Light of my life. She's doing great.'

The brothers shared a long look until Ash broke the silence. 'Thanks, little bro, for the gee-up. You, too, are

amazing, smart and strong as fuck, and I'm proud to be your blood.'

'Stop it with the fanboy moment. Go get 'em champ.'

Cole took off as Ash watched him with a half smile, thinking how much he freakin' loved his sartorial, wise-ass kid brother. Now one of the city's most influential players.

*Who knew two runts like them would have made it in this big, bad, messed-up world?*



Ash made his way down to Level 9, back into his suite.

Inside, he made two calls. The first to his mother. She reassured him that all was well. And that Jake was loving life, as usual.

'He and Mace are outside playing in the pool. It was a hot day today.'

'Mum, please have Mace ready and packed. His mum is flying in as we speak, and she'll race straight to you to pick him up.'

His mum paused. 'Is this *her*?'

He took a beat to reply. 'Yeah. And she's coming in hot.'

'She's angry?'

'Steaming.'

‘Mad at you?’

He sighed. ‘Partly.’

‘Something you did to her?’

‘I didn’t stop someone with something to prove. And they made a regretful move, which her brother is now caught up in.’

Rose tinkled. ‘I have no idea what you’re saying, my gorgeous son. All I can do is gauge her mood and see if I can help.’

‘You know I can’t say more. But do what you can, and I’ll pay you back in -.’

‘In your endless devotion. It’s all I need. I got you, honey.’

‘You’re the best. Give Jake my love. I’ll call back later this evening to chat with him.’

He rang off, then glanced at his watch and the screen again. Cece would be landing in Byron right about now.

He found Reg’s number and called it.

His 2IC picked up in seconds. ‘Boss.’

‘Has she landed?’

‘I see the Phenom taxiing in. I used real-time flight tracking to monitor its arrival. It’s on time, no delays.’

‘Good. Please get her to the farm to pick her son up, then bring her back to Falcon House when she’s ready. As soon as you can, put one of the crew on her in an unmarked car out of view. All day and night until I get back.’

‘Got it, boss.’

Ash ended the call. He leaned back in his chair and breathed in deep.

Closing his eyes, he let go of what was out of his control.



As soon as the plane came to a stop, she was on her feet.

Cece nabbed her bag and rushed for the exit, her mind on one thing alone. Getting home to Mason.

She stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine.

‘This way, please.’

Cece gave a friendly nod to the valet, who’d appeared with her luggage and was now trundling it towards a dark SUV where a man stood.

He had the same military air as Ash, a thick, muscular build with striking Asian features. His expression was hidden behind dark glasses.

‘Miss Mirren?’

‘That’s me.’

‘I’m Reg Akimoto. Ash’s 2IC.’

She met his gaze with a shy smile, overwhelmed by the reach of the Sovereign team. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘I’ll be taking you wherever you need today.’

‘My son first. Please.’

‘Falcon Farm it is.’

‘Thank you.’

He led her to the back passenger seat and opened the door, delivering her into air-conditioning and butter-soft leather bliss. Her bags also found their way into the back of the vehicle, and they were off.

Reg turned on a soft jazz album as they drove through Byron’s enchanting surroundings. He was a quiet driver. A fact Cece appreciated as she lost herself in the gentle purr of the supercharged engine, the soothing hum of nature outside, and the simplicity of being present.

Speeding down the highway, she took in the lush greenery, pristine beaches, and secluded beauty spots hugged by the rhythmic waves of the ocean, a world away from chaos.

A wave of peace washed over her. As if the place was a solace and sanctuary from the emotional roller coaster she’d endured in the last few days.

It felt like home, which was uncanny given she’d only lived in Byron for under three months.

She took the drive time to continue processing her feelings from the last few days.

Guilt rushed her, alongside a fear of what would happen to Liam.



She'd also tried to wade through her anger at Ash for letting the MPs take him away. Knowing he was the only one who could turn this fuck-up around.

The clench of his jaw and the withheld rage during the faux arrest convinced her he was just committed to getting Liam back. She just hoped Ash got to him before any irreversible damage was done.

'We're here.'

The SUV turned off the highway and pulled into a long driveway.

One that had Cece catching her breath as they drove along a treelined avenue.

In the gaps amongst the branches and leaves, she spotted a sprawling orchard and stunning gardens overflowing with natural trees and flowers.

Followed by glimpses of a genuine Queenslander-style home, then another gleaming white in the sun. In the distance was an extensive barn with a double-story office building attached.

The SUV stopped at the centre of the property, in front of a prestige homestead with sweeping views over the Byron and Ballina hinterland.

Its wrap-around verandah was dreamy. In an instant, Cece imagined herself sitting on one of its chaise lounges, sipping a cocktail as the sun set over the ranges. It was heaven.

As she stepped out of the car, the front door of the magnificent home opened. An explosion of legs, arms and shouts thundered in her direction.

Seconds later, she had her arms around Mason, his gangly arms clinging to her so tight she fought to breathe. They swayed together as she ruffled his hair and spoke sweet nothings into his ear.

‘Missed you, mum,’ he announced, pulling back to give her a shaky smile.

She wiped away the wetness under his eye, doing the same to her own. ‘Missed you too, handsome.’

‘Welcome to Falcon Farm.’

Cece glanced up to see an elegant woman walking down the steps and towards her, eyes filled with life and twinkling with cheer. She recognised her as the same woman she’d seen occasionally picking up Jake from school.

‘I’m Rose. Ash’s mother.’

‘Of course. Hi. I’m Cece, Mason’s mum.’

Cece darted towards her, sticking out her hand.

Rose gave her a slight shake of her head and opened her arms. ‘If I’ve been looking after your gorgeous son for three days, I deserve a hug.’

To her surprise, Cece found herself folding into the embrace. She wasn’t a hugger of strangers, but something about this woman let her guard down.

The pair parted with smiles.

‘Has he been doing fine?’ Cece was anxious about the response, knowing phone reports sometimes differed from reality.

‘He’s been a dream. He’s helped cook, clean up, made his bed in the morning and even got me a cup of tea. His manners are rubbing off on Jake, too, who’s now making his bed.’

As she spoke, the boy in question came barrelling down the stairs with a grin. ‘Cece! Hi!’

‘Hi, gorgeous.’

He, too, kept coming and wrapped his arms around her.

Nonplussed, she pulled him close until he darted away with his customary laugh. Jake’s smile was so full of joy that Cece’s heart stopped as she recognised Ash in the gangly boyishness of his son.

Both boys launched into updates on all their recent adventures, talking over the other in excitement to share their escapades.

Cece smiled, lost in their tales until a gruff cough came from behind.

She whirled around. ‘Reg, I’m so sorry.’

‘Nothing to apologise for,’ the man murmured. ‘Just wondering whether you still need that ride into town.’

‘Oh my, I forgot for a moment.’

She turned to Rose. 'Thank you so much for taking care of Mace.'

'My pleasure.'

'I hate to rush, but we should get out of your hair.'

Her son ploughed into the conversation. 'Mum, do we have to go?'

Mason sounded so wistful that Cece sighed. 'I don't think -'

'Why don't you stay for an early dinner?' Rose said. 'That way, the boys can say their goodbyes without rushing. You also won't need then to get home and scramble for dinner.'

'But Reg?'

'I'll then drive you back to Falcon House.' Rose's words were kind, but her eyes firm. She wasn't a woman used to being told no.

Cece hesitated until Rose touched her arm. 'I've got way too much chicken pie and salad for Jake, Kit and I. There's more than enough to go around.'

Cece relented. 'Sounds good,' she said, not wanting to turn down Ash's mum and curious about the woman who'd raised him.

She whirled to where Reg was unloading her bags and smiled at him. 'Thank you for the lift.'

He jerked his chin at her and carried her luggage to the wrap-around verandah.

‘They’ll be fine here, honey,’ Rose told him. ‘How is the family?’

Cece stepped aside as the two caught up while her gaze lingered on Jake and Mason racing each other over the front lawn.

It was an idyllic, stunning view, and she relaxed even more.

‘Miss Mirren, I’ll see you around.’

Cece waved to the taciturn man, who vanished into the confines of the dark SUV.

Rose joined her and linked her arm with hers as they tracked him drive away.

‘Come inside. Have a drink. We’ll set up for dinner and be done and dusted before you know it.’

Resistance seemed futile when it came to Rose’s innate charm. Which matched her natural elegance, from the clear pores of her alabaster smooth skin to her effortless style.

Cece studied her as they walked along.

Rose stood about 5’8’ and was long limbed. She was elegantly dressed in a bright purple long-sleeved silk tunic.

She had Ash’s dark brown hair, which was short, layered and flecked with silver.

Her pixie haircut framed her oval face and petite features. Her slim nose was adorned with a tiny diamond stud.

Her eyes were a startling hue of jade with a bright sparkle that so resembled Ash's that Cece shivered.

Rose gave Cece a reassuring smile as she guided her into the provincial-style residence.

The house was impeccable, elegant, and furnished in light creams and gold accents, yet it still had a lived-in look. An abandoned magazine on the sofa, the part Lego build on the floor, and a knitting basket left midway through a purl stitch.

Cece's nose lifted at the delicious smells wafting through the house. Rose led her into a custom-designed kitchen featuring state-of-the-art appliances.

Outside the glass sliding doors was an external kitchen and seating area with glorious views of a sizeable pool, a burbling spa, and a pretty pool house surrounded by landscaped gardens.

Cece took it all in, biting her lip to stop gaping. 'Your home is amazing.'

'Thank you. What would you like to drink? A red, perhaps.' Rose gestured at a copper and brass drinks cabinet. 'I also have white wine in the bar fridge if you wish.'

Cece thought a little. 'I'd love a glass of white.'

'It's a Pinot Grigio,' Rose called out as she bustled to the cool room. 'Why don't you sit on the verandah? I'll bring it by.'

'Sounds perfect,' Cece replied, easing her way to the inviting outdoor scene.

She wandered towards the edge of the white railing overlooking the gardens and pool. Admiring the view, she sighed.

‘Such a beautiful setting,’ Cece exhaled.

‘It sure is.’

Cece turned around to face Rose, who was toting two glasses while she continued speaking. ‘What a treat to be spending time with you. I was looking forward to meeting the executive kicking off the wedding portfolio at Falcon House. And Mason’s mum, of course.’

Cece smiled at the older woman. ‘I appreciate everything you’ve done. I’ve never left Mason with anyone other than a sitter for an evening. So it was generous that you stepped in without even meeting me.’

‘Ash vouched for you. That’s all I needed. And caring for your boy was my pleasure,’ Rose replied before she handed Cece a long-stemmed glass. ‘It brought back memories of raising Ash and Cole. They were a trip!’

Cece lifted a brow. ‘Were they now?’

‘Oh, the things those two didn’t get up to!’ Rose exclaimed as she settled into her seat. ‘From sneaking out of the house for parties to getting into fights with each other and their schoolmates. But they always had an unmatched protective streak between them.’

Cece nodded. ‘I can see that.’

‘They even got into trouble with the cops once or twice,’ Rose chuckled. ‘But they turned out alright, joining the military and making me and their dad very proud. And I have no doubt Mason will, too.’

Cece couldn’t help but imagine the two brothers growing up together, causing chaos while being loyal to the core. It made her smile, and then her face tightened. ‘I wonder about Mace and all the discovery he has yet to do, not all of it legal.’

Rose touched her arm. ‘Don’t worry, dear. You’ll get the hang of it. You’re doing an awesome job as it is given how zero trouble and all joy he’s been to have around.’

Cece smiled gratefully at Rose and sipped, enjoying the crisp, fruity flavour. ‘Tell me more about Falcon House. I’m sorry, I don’t know the history.’

‘That’s fine, hon,’ Rose said with a smile. ‘It was a long-owned family home that Kit and I renovated and turned into a B&B. The boys were young then; I think Ash was eleven. Rose continued. ‘We ran the hotel for another twenty odd years before Ash came back from service, took over and revamped the place with Cole. They both turned it into what it is today.’

‘Impressive.’

‘I’m proud of the garden most of all,’ Rose continued as her eyes trailed over the Hinterland view. ‘I planted and maintained myself for years. Now Ash has gardeners do it.’



‘They’re gorgeous. The Conservatory is especially stunning.’

Rose served Cece with a smug grin. ‘I designed it. I made a few rough sketches on paper, and Kit brought it to life.’

Cece smiled, impressed. ‘Maybe I’ll run some ideas past you for our planned wedding decor and set-ups.’

Rose shot her a look of delighted surprise. ‘I’d like that. I try not to pry into Ash’s work. Maybe this will allow me to be involved without being in his face too much.’

‘Done. I’ll drink to that.’

The women clinked glasses and shared a smile.

Rose’s face softened further as she leaned into Cece. ‘How did this week go?’

Cece’s face fell. ‘It was intense.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘Ash kept us safe, though.’

‘He is good at that.’

‘We disagreed on how he handled my brother, but I’m letting Ash deal with it.’

Her candid sharing with Rose surprised her, and she suspected the woman had a way of soothing souls, so they revealed their deepest, darkest secrets to her. Cece also sensed that the older woman saw past bullshit and appreciated honesty.

‘We’re in an uneasy truce. I’m not even certain we’re talking.’ Cece wasn’t sure why she added the last sentence.

Ash’s mother gave her a soft, non-judgemental look. ‘He’s giving you space. You need it. To work through what you experienced. Knowing Ash, he’ll move heaven and earth for the desired result. So trust him. But if you need to vent, I’m here.’

Cece cocked her head to the side. ‘You’ve done this ‘talk someone off the ledge’ thing before, haven’t you?’

‘I’m the Mum of two men who’ve fought in some of the most bloody campaigns in recent times. I’m pretty good at calling it like it is, being the bearer of bad news and knowing when to panic. This is not it.’

‘True.’ Cece nodded, taking in the woman’s wisdom.

The conversation shifted as they exchanged stories about the boys. She couldn’t help but feel grateful for the warmth and kindness Rose was showing her.

As they sipped and chatted, Cece’s stress fell away. The anxiety of the past few days dissipated in the warm glow of the sunset and Rose’s company.

She learned Rose was a whizz in the kitchen, willing to try new recipes once. She loved sports, music, reading, theatre and travel. The latest dream destination on her list was India, and she’d booked tickets for an end-of-the-year trip.

Most of all, Rose loved life and was passionate about family. ‘I firmly believe in shared connections and values that

I try to instil in my sons and grandson.’

When the sky turned a deep shade of purple, and the stars began to twinkle, Rose suggested they start prepping dinner.

Cece offered to set the table while Rose called the boys to wash their hands.

Kit, Ash’s father, soon wandered in.

He was a handsome man, with Ash’s height and wry smile. He sported silver hair cropped short, and a longer beard adorned his chin and cheeks.

He looked like a movie star from the golden age of cinema. His every movement was precise and calculated but, at the same time, graceful.

He greeted Cece, his hands calloused and rough, his grip gentle and welcoming.

‘You’ve had quite a week, I hear.’

‘I have.’

‘Yet you survived, Ash.’

‘That remains to be seen,’ Cece murmured.

His parents laughed, exchanging glances that foretold of a long private discussion later.

‘Regardless, welcome to my home,’ he called out to the two boys, who jumped on him, chattering, laughing as they wrestled him to the ground.

Kit’s robust laugh filled the room as the two women watched on, amused.

‘He’s going to break something.’ Rose rolled her eyes as her husband went to town with both boys on the rug. ‘He loves it though. Makes him feel young again.’

Soon, the food was served.

Cece couldn’t believe the spread in front of her.

Kit served her a succulent chicken pie with a golden crust, creamy filling and crispy edges, just as she liked it.

Rose added a medley of roasted vegetables and a bowl of fragrant white coconut rice. Accompanied by a fresh salad tossed in a tangy lemon dressing.

The aroma of the food wafted up, enveloping her senses and making her mouth water. She dug in, suddenly starving.

Cece couldn’t help but notice how Ash’s family interacted around the table.

They were close-knit, and it showed in how they teased each other, laughed together and shared food off each other’s plates.

It was different to her life experience. Cece masked a shiver as she remembered silent dinners, the lack of conversation and the worst punishments for the slightest infractions.

Cece forced herself into the present, which was far more enchanting.

She took a bite of the perfectly cooked chicken and savoured the flavours that burst into her mouth.

The wine that Rose chose to pair with the meal was exquisite, and she couldn't help but compliment her on it.

'This Semillon is amazing, Rose, fantastic pick.' Cece meant every word as she sighed at the ambrosia she was enjoying.

'I'm glad you like it,' Rose replied with a smile. 'It's a fascinating variety from the Hunter Valley, the beating heart of Australian Semillon production. It's long-lived and light-bodied, and we've one too many cases of it.'

As they ate, Kit regaled them with tales of his brief time in the military and the adventures he experienced before returning to farming.

'It was a different time back then.' Kit gave a wistful smile. 'But I wouldn't have traded it for the world. I must have talked it up so much that Ash had to try the service himself.'

Kit paused mid-sentence. 'Speaking of talking up, Cece. Ash speaks well of you.'

A flush rose to her cheeks. 'He does?'

'Indeed. He says you're among the most talented event managers he's ever worked with.'

Cece blanched. 'That means a lot coming from him.'

'It does.' Rose's words were heartfelt, and Cece's heart lurched.

Especially when she caught Mason's delighted face. He was eating this up. Not just the fare, but the love.

With a wistful pang, she wondered whether he was missing out on the big family warmth that the Falconers shared.

Her thoughts were swept away with the arrival of Rose's famous baked cinnamon and apple pie with a side of ice cream.

Both boys were over the moon and hovered the sweet treat as the adults chatted.

After dinner, Rose drove Cece and Mason home.

As they wound down the hinterland roads, Mason falling asleep in the back, Cece repeated her appreciation. 'Rose, I can't thank you enough for your hospitality.'

The older woman smiled. 'Think nothing of it. You've been such a revelation and Mason such a breath of fresh air.'

The kind words gave Cece a lift all the way to her cottage at Falcon House.

They said their goodbyes to Rose and waved as she drove away.

A late summer dusk hovered in the sky as they trundled their bags inside. They'd made it home before 8:30 p.m.

The house smelt musty, so Cece opened the windows and left the front door angled open while Mason showered and brushed his teeth.

As she tucked him into bed, he gave her a sleepy kiss and made a bold announcement. 'I think the Falconers should be our new fam, mum.'

Cece felt her heart jolt as she smoothed back his hair. 'Why d'you say so?'

'Because they fit us like a glove. His dad and you are perfect together, Jake and I rock, and even grandma would be Rose's BFF.'

With those prosaic words, he turned to his side and snuggled into his pillow.

She huffed in surprise and kissed him before turning down the lights and closing his door.

Leaning against it, she let her head fall back and closed her eyes. 'Out of the mouth of babes,' she whispered.

She let herself indulge in the picture that Mason's words evoked.

Her body tingled and electrified as she remembered Ash's hands on her, his mouth pressed to hers, the heat of his length.

She let out a frustrated, silent scream and pushed off, memories of Liam being marched away replacing her momentary lapse of weakness.

A sound cut through her thoughts. Her phone buzzed from the kitchen table where she'd left it.

Rushing, she leaned over it and sucked in a breath at the sight of the caller ID.

She stared at it for a moment, wondering whether to take it.

'Don't be a wuss,' she scolded herself.

Tapping the phone, she answered the call.

No one spoke for the first few moments.

‘You weren’t going to pick up, were you?’

His crackled drawl reverberated through the room.

‘I was contemplating the idea.’

‘What changed your mind?’

‘It’s like a loose tooth Falconer. The sooner you pull it out, the faster the ache goes away.’

‘And I’m the ache?’

‘In my core. All day, every day.’

She threw the words back, flushing when she registered her unintended meaning. Ash also got the memo because a distinct snigger came through the line.

‘Don’t say it,’ he warned. ‘I know you’re thinking it.’

She sucked her teeth. ‘Ash, sometimes the amount of self-control it takes not to say what’s on my mind when I’m with you is so immense that I need a nap afterwards.’

He let a laugh rip, and she found herself muffling a chuckle in reaction to him.

*Damn, he was so appealing when he let loose. And their banter was something she was beginning to live for.*

He calmed his baritone chuckle. ‘I take it you made it through the Rose and Kit gauntlet.’



‘I did. They’re why I’m speaking to you with some semblance of control.’

Rose’s attitude and words had helped calm Cece’s fears. If she had complete confidence in her son, Cece, too, owed him the benefit of the doubt.

This she didn’t share with him. Instead, she told him about her night with his parents. ‘They’re beautiful, Ash. You’re very blessed to have them both. And Jake, he’s such a cool kid. You’re doing something well.’

Ash paused for a slight beat as he absorbed her words. ‘I must be, though some days I have doubts,’ he agreed, his voice softening. ‘Mace go OK with them?’

She almost let slip what her son told her, but this was not the time nor place.

What hit her, though, was how easy the conversation between them was.

It was like he was a partner asking after their children. She felt a stab of need, not just for Ash, but for the life he represented.

With a shake of her curls, she pushed away the thought of the unlikely scenario.

Whatever they were, they were not in a committed relationship, and she had no expectations they’d ever be. They lived a world apart, and as she reminded herself as often as possible, he was her freakin’ boss.

So she changed the subject. ‘Anything further on Liam?’

Ash paused for a beat. ‘Rest assured of some developments in a positive direction. But nothing I can share right now.’

His voice was more raw than usual, and Cece heard his exhaustion for the first time in their call. ‘Where is he?’

‘He’s safe, and I hope to see him soon.’

‘Please let him know I love him and can’t wait to see him.’

‘I will.’

‘So what happens now?’

‘We wait. I’ll keep you posted and check in with you every day. If that’s fine with you.’

‘It is.’

They fell into silence as Cece stood looking out to a dark sea and quarter moon, his breathing in her ear, a longing in her heart.

‘I’ll let you fly,’ he paused. ‘Babe.’

She melted at the word. Even though logic screamed at her to pull back, to guard her heart, that ship had long sailed. ‘Goodnight, handsome.’

He chuckled. She sensed part in relief and part in triumph.

‘You’re still on probation, Falconer,’ she warned. ‘Don’t get too cocky.’

‘Me? Never.’

‘I’d beg to differ.’ She made sure to lace her voice with faux innocence.

‘Goodnight, beautiful.’

‘Goodnight, cocky.’

He huffed as he tapped off the call, cutting off her laugh.

Because Cece was beginning to enjoy her and Ash’s swordplay way too much.

She went to bed smiling and offered a little prayer for her brother as she slid between the sheets and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.



Now that she’d simmered down, hearing her voice, how husky and sweet she’d sounded filled Ash with new fire and energy.

He owed her the best of his efforts in getting Liam back.

‘Ready, man?’

Saint emerged from the low-lit gas station with two water bottles and a handful of snacks and crisps.

‘Salt and vinegar?’ Ash called out.

‘Nah, brother, hot chilli all the way, artisan baked. So the heat level will blow your mind - and keep you awake.’

‘You’re a sadist.’

Hangry and tired, Ash groaned, easing off the bench he'd been sitting on to make the call and loped towards Saint's SUV.

They pulled out of the lay-by and raced into the night.

They'd already driven for hours into the wilds of the state's North West Slopes. Heading to the location where they'd been advised, Liam would be waiting.

He'd taken the opportunity at their only pit stop in a lonely roadside lay-by to call Cece.

It took another hour and fifteen minutes before they walked through the doors of the unremarkable building—smack bang in an equally nondescript facility far from civilisation.

The car park they'd left their vehicle in was deserted.

Ash guessed a vast underground parking lot lay hidden from view to account for all the uniformed staff milling inside the doors this late at night.

'How else would they get from wherever they lived to the isolated facility in the middle of the sticks?'

He whispered this to Saint, who shrugged.

His bald companion then cocked a brow as the reception adjutant, a few years out of his teens, stared at him with detachment. The young soldier pointed to the waiting lounge.

'Please sit, Majors. I'll let you know when the Inspector will be ready to meet with you.'

Both men walked over and fell into chairs designed for utmost torture. With straight backs and no armrests, made of plastic with zero cushioning or ergonomics.

Saint glanced at Ash. ‘Wonder what Kitt told Owens to get him moving so fast.’

‘He probably stated that he doesn’t take to fuck ups or efforts to crawl up his ass by stepping all over you.’

‘Which just proves the toes you step on today may be connected to the ass you have to kiss tomorrow.’

‘You are ever and always prosaic,’ Ash murmured.

Still, Saint’s words were tinged in truth.

Earlier, S.I. Owens had hemmed and hawed on when they could pick Liam up until Ash received a call from S.I. Kitt.

The man apologised for being caught up in an overseas joint military exercise. After listening to Ash’s concise issue breakdown, he promised to look into it as a matter of urgency.

In less than an hour, Owens sent a message with a time and coordinates for the handover.

His message sounded terse and no wonder.

Kitt was known to be affable until he wasn’t. Usually, when ops went off track due to poor decision-making from the officer in charge.

In this case, Owens.

Ash imagined the reaming Owens had been given, and the thought gave him a grim amount of satisfaction.

Twenty minutes went by.

Officers in various ranks walked through the waiting area, a few raising eyebrows at the sight of Ash and Saint.

Their legends still abounded in these hallways. The two men nodded to those who managed to ID them and, in turn, received a slew of salutes.

Finally, the junior adjutant marched up to them. ‘Senior Inspector Owens will see you now.’

Saint and Ash followed the officer through meandering corridors to a drab office in the far corner of the building.

Owens was sitting behind a desk near the window. The view outside was of a dark, shadowed wildness—part desert, part scrub and not a building or town in sight.

Two grey chairs covered with plastic pushed up against the wall.

The walls were off-white, with photos of Owens in full military garb and at ADFIS ceremonies. His desk was accosted by the weight of clipboards and piles of paperwork. The air from the aircon, even this late at night, blew at refrigeration levels.

Owens didn’t look up as they sauntered in.

Instead, he tapped away at his laptop for a few more minutes. Saint and Ash exchanged an amused glance. It took another minute before he deigned to acknowledge them. He nodded to the two men, giving them a cold once over.

‘You’re here for the prisoner.’

‘Witness.’

Owens was acting like a peeved loser and doing his level best to comply with his boss’ orders with malicious intent.

Ash didn’t let him get any satisfaction from his dick swinging. ‘Owens cut out the shit. Where is he?’

‘He’s already turned it for the night. So why don’t I offer you some hospitality and have you stay here overnight on our dime? You can bust him out in the morning.’

Ash sighed. There was some practical sense in what Owens was proposing. Even if they walked out with Liam now, there was nowhere nearby to hole up for the night. So he glanced at Saint, who shrugged, then turned to the S.I.

‘Fine. Show us where we can kip and then have him ready at 6 a.m.’

Owen’s lip curled. ‘I wish I took orders from you, Major Falconer. He’ll be ready when I say he is.’

Ash used his trump card. ‘I’ll mention that to Kitt when I speak with him later this evening.’

Owens blanched. ‘There’s no need to kiss ass.’

Ash twitched his lips but didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. Only one of the three men in the room had played the one-man-up game and lost.

‘I’ll get the guards to have him ready for you at 6,’ Owens said between clenched teeth.

He made a call, summoning back his assisting officer, then dismissed the pair with a careless wave. Ash and Saint gave the man a sarcastic salute and swivelled away from his presence.

‘This way.’

The officer led Ash and Saint to a sleeping wing on the far side of the building.

He put them in a drab room with two utilitarian cots, each covered in a scratchy blanket. The mattress was thin, the sheets threadbare, and the pillows lumpy.

A single window dominated one wall, and in it, a single sheet of frosted glass. A lamp bolted to the floor delivered a fraction of soft, bright light.

Ash sat on the cot and swung his feet onto the horizontal surface, letting himself fall back. He stared at the blank olive green and white walls.

Saint settled into his cot, sighing. ‘So what are we doing with Liam after tomorrow?’

Ash turned to face his friend. ‘I’ve been thinking. First, take him to Sydney for the day, and we get a crack at understanding what he knows. Like we’d always planned.’

‘Re-establish trust,’ Saint added.

‘That too. Once we have what we need, I’ll fly with him to Byron the following morning. The farm is the best place for him to hide away, where I can keep an eye on him until we have a solid plan. It’s ideal if he’s still detoxing. Next, we lure



Mirren to visit his son and daughter while also picking up those K's.'

'I love the traps you set, Falconer. A spider spinning his web for the unwary fly.'

'You better believe it. This time, though, I need to catch the right fly.'

# Chapter 15



Cece jerked awake to the sound of her alarm going off beside her.

Minutes later, she was up, dressed in her workout gear and heading downstairs.

While her cup of English tea steeped, she wandered to her verandah.

She turned on her iPad, read her emails, and answered any urgent ones.

As soon as her tea was kickass strong, she sipped and read the news, letting her eyes linger over the sun rising over the ocean.

She launched into a quick yoga session just as Mason wandered out to make his toast, mumbling at her. Her son was not a morning person. Not in the least.

Half awake and bleary, he slow-blinked as she switched up her quiet yoga moment, turning on Beyonce's 'Formation' track on her iPad and twirling around the room. 'Mum, your dancing is weird.'

‘Weird, yes. Necessary? Abso-freakin-lutely. Puts you and me in an awesome mood and state of mind. ‘Sides I slay.’

‘True.’ He took round bites of his toast, his eyes crinkling at the corners with humour.

This was their weekday routine, and it worked wonders for Cece’s psyche. Especially now that she was still a tad anxious about Liam.

Two days had lapsed since speaking with Ash. He’d yet to share any news.

She supposed he was busy with the intricacies of freeing her brother. Or at least she hoped he was.

She wound down her dancing. ‘Enough fun times. Now get ready for school, and I’ll dress for work.’

They zipped around each other to put their breakfast dishes away. After bickering with affection in the bathroom, they dressed and raced out of the house.

Cece’s first stop was Byron Public, where Mason soon disappeared into the clutches of his handball and soccer-mad friends.

She got back to Falcon House just in time to make the 9 a.m. daily meeting.

Denise led the stand-up with department heads and key staff to discuss bookings, recent reviews, socials and events for the day.

Wrapped up with exec check, Cece went back to her desk.

At around lunchtime, she was chugging a protein shake and headed towards the stock room to check on a delivery of decorations when her phone buzzed.

*Ash.*

She jolted at the sight of his name and answered, almost dropping her device. ‘Hey.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Straight to the chase. I’m fine and dandy, Ash. Thanks for asking.’

‘Babe. I need to know where you are.’

She took a beat at the stern inflection in his voice. ‘At work. Why?’

‘Reg will be with you in five. Drop everything, get in the car with him, please. He’ll bring you to me.’

‘Where are you?’

‘See you soon.’

‘Is Liam -?’

The line dropped, and she gave a tiny, frustrated scream.

‘All good?’

Cece flicked her eyes up to see Rachel studying her with concern from her desk.

She shook her head. ‘Just our ever-confusing boss.’

‘Denise?’

‘Oh no, Ash.’

Rachel's eyes widened further. 'You work with Ash?'

Cece realised a direct professional relationship with Ash was extraordinary. Rachel had zero context, and giving any would not be advisable.

So she shook her head and made light of her slip-up. 'It's just something we're working on. Don't worry about it.'

'You sure you're fine? You seem flustered.'

'All good, Rach.' Cece hurried away. 'Sorry, I've got to dash, I've been summoned.'

Rachel cocked her head and shrugged, unconvinced.

Cece didn't catch her consternation because she was flying.

First to her desk, where she grabbed her bag, then towards reception. Where Reg was already waiting, to her surprise.

He gave her a tight nod and stalked outside without a word.

He moved to his SUV and opened the door for her, still silent.

'Where are we going?'

Reg slid into the front seat, and she buckled in, waiting for a reply. 'We'll be there soon,' was all he proffered.

Cece accepted defeat and laid her head back on the seat rest.

She turned her head to look at the scenery flashing past. A few minutes later, she sat up, realising they were heading

towards Ballina Airport. Her heart rate picked up.

Soon, they were pulling into the private landing strip, where taxiing to a stop was a now familiar jet.

Her heart leapt. She scrambled for the door and was out before Reg reached her. Then she was running.

Towards the sleek machine that was at a standstill. She stopped a few metres away, nibbling on her fingers as the steps unfurled from the open doorway.

First through the gap was the same attendant, Dana, who'd served her the last time she'd flown in the Phenom. She gave Cece a friendly smile as she descended, which Cece echoed, but her attention fell elsewhere.

On the silhouette easing out of the doorway. Tall, muscled, broad-shouldered.

She stared at him as he halted midway down the stairs and gave her a look. His jade eyes pierced hers, and he lifted a hand, beckoning her over.

She rushed up, coming face to face with him.

He took a step down so they were level. His skin was grey, his eyes bloodshot.

Yet, his eyes held a glint. He gave her a faint smile, a gentle touch of her waist and jerked his head towards the jet's interior.

She didn't need any further urging. She squeezed his hand and took off up the steps.

Inside, she turned into the cabin and, lying fast asleep on one of the luxe leather recliners, was her brother. His body stretched out, so vulnerable.

He'd lost so much weight, and his tall body emaciated. She thought he was skinnier than when she'd seen him in Sydney, if that were at all possible in the few days they'd been apart.

She placed a hand over her mouth, tears pricking her eyes. Moving forward, she crouched beside him, placing a hand on him, not quite believing her eyes.

A gentle cough sounded, and she angled her eyes to see Ash towering over her.

'How?' she managed to whisper.

He placed one arm against the cabin's textured mahogany wall and put his head against it, closing his eyes for a second. Weariness oozed out of him. 'Long story. It was epic, and not all in a good way. Let's get him safe, then maybe I'll share.'

She nodded, reaching her hand to shake Liam awake.

He was slow to rouse, but when he opened his eyes, they fell on her. 'Sis?'

'I'm here.'

'Where is here?'

'Byron Bay. Let's get you home.'

Ash eased into the small space between the chairs. 'Cece, about that. We need to keep Liam at Falcon Farm. He'll be safer with Reg and Diesel. He can also rest well in one of the

villas. It'll also be easier to manage from a security perspective.'

Cece gazed into Ash's eyes for a moment. 'You're sure? That's over and above -'

'It's what I'd do for any of my men. Not a trial, babe.'

She nodded, moved by his generosity. 'Makes sense. Is that OK with you, Li'?'

Her brother's hooded eyes dropped even further. 'Whatever, sis. Your call.'

She stood to her feet. 'Let's do it.'

Ash moved. 'I'll help him off.'

Cece side-stepped out of his way and exited the plane, waiting at ground level as Ash helped Liam negotiate the steps.

Once his feet touched the ground, Liam shrugged off any aid and walked unassisted to the waiting SUV.

They all bundled inside, luggage and all and headed towards Bangalow.



As Reg parked, the sun dipped in the sky, casting a golden glow on the estate.



Instead of heading to Rose and Kit's, he'd turned left a little early on the private road. Into a horseshoe driveway, coming to a stop before a stunning structure.

Cece slid out, shielding her eyes against the dazzling light and catching her first close glimpse of Ash's home.

Ash extended his arm toward the house. 'Welcome to my bolthole.'

The four-bedroom, original Queenslander mansion was majestic. Its white timber walls contrasted beautifully with the lush greenery surrounding it. A wisteria bush climbed up the front of the home, and the wrap-around verandah with wicker chairs and potted plants was an invitation to indulge.

'Breathtaking.' Cece stood still, taking in its elegant facade.

Her brother exited the car with Reg's help and went to the steps leading to the house.

Ash jerked his chin at both of them. 'I'll show you around.'

Cece and Liam followed behind him as they entered the spacious entrance to a light-filled living area.

Cece's eyes widened with curiosity, noting the seamless blend of old and new features - sleek couches, vintage armchairs, and modern appliances.

At the same time, high ceilings and polished wooden floors added a touch of elegance.

She was unable to contain her admiration. ‘Your home is beautiful, Ash.’

He gave her a soft smile, pleased by her reaction. ‘Can’t take credit for the decor - that’s all due to Mum. Like the main house, it’s been in my family for generations. We’ve tried to preserve its history while making it comfortable for Jake and myself.’

Just then, Liam stumbled on the edge of a rug.

Cece took her brother’s arm. ‘You OK?’

‘Feeling beat.’

‘Hey man, why don’t you chill for a few in the front guest room,’ Ash told her brother, leading him to a cozy yet modern bedroom. ‘I’ll take you to your villa when my mother returns from picking the boys up from school. She has the master keys for the place.’

Liam nodded, his body and eyes drooping as he settled onto the bed. ‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘Hungry?’ Ash asked the weary-looking man.

‘Nah, ate well on the plane. Just need a kip.’

‘Fair enough, it’s been a crazy few days.’

Ash backed out to the corridor where Cece was waiting.

‘I can’t thank you enough for this,’ she told him as he shut the door.

‘All good.’

‘I want to hear more about how you managed it.’

His eyes met hers in a clash of jade hues. ‘Follow me.’

He guided her through the house, each room they passed more enchanting than the last. When they entered the contemporary kitchen, Cece’s breath stuck in her throat.

It was every food lover’s dream. From the marble island and bench tops, the double-bowl copper sink, concrete floors, stylish grey cabinets, stainless steel appliances and exposed beams.

Outside, a swimming pool-length spa shimmered an invitation. A heated jacuzzi beckoned on the extended undercover deck, promising relaxation under the sun or stars.

Cece was unable to tear her eyes away. ‘Is this where you spend most of your time off?’

‘Only when I have good company,’ Ash teased, his eyes twinkling. A flutter mushroomed inside her, and she turned away, trying to hide the blush that crept up her cheeks.

‘Hungry?’

Cece checked herself. ‘I could eat.’

He rummaged around in the fridge, pulling out cheese, olives, dips, olive oil, balsamic vinegar and a medley of vegetables.

She reached for a board, and they worked together on sharing a platter. Cece added thick chunks of the crusty baguette from the bread box. Ash retrieved a bottle of white wine from the fridge and raised a brow.

She nodded her approval, and he poured out a glass.

He nabbed a beer for himself, and they took their bounty onto the deck, seating themselves on the wood-carved table.

Ash angled his bottle. 'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

They toasted the moment and sipped, in between enjoying the simple yet flavoursome feast.

When she'd had her fill, Cece sat back and sighed. 'Thank you. I needed that.'

Ash gave her a slight smile, leaning back, his eyes shadowed, readying himself to share.

She picked up on his mood as their eyes clashed. 'First, how did you find Liam?'

'Took a long drive to bumfuck where he was being held. Hardly slept before we retrieved him, drove him back to Sydney and spent the last day picking the meat out of his witness bones. He shared enough to put the wheels of justice in motion.'

'He has bruises. Did they hurt him?'

Ash pursed his lips. 'They roughed him up in interrogation, but he took it like a champ. Still, it was uncalled for. I've informed the lead on the investigation, and they're looking into disciplinary action for S.I. Owens.'

'Who's he again?'

Ash pinched his nose, indicating his frustration. ‘The flippin’ sap who tried to power play with Liam. Treating him like a prisoner and not a witness.’

‘What happens now?’

‘We’re working on having Joseph incriminate himself. With Liam’s help. I’ll share more when I have a plan in place.’

His face looked so drawn with weariness and lack of sleep that Cece’s heart lurched with compassion for him. She let the matter drop.

Casting eyes across the green gardens, she glimpsed Rose’s house between the trees.

‘Your mother is so lovely. What’s it like living so close to her?’

Ash gazed at her across the top of his beer bottle. ‘She’s fantastic with Jake and an even better cook, bringing over meals when I can’t get to it myself.’

‘That’s super sweet of her.’

‘That said, Rose has an active and independent life. She’s got a book club and a knitting crew and runs our Farm Shop in Bangalow. She travels and has a massive group of friends she entertains. So trust me, sometimes I have to beg her for some attention.’

Cece smiled, imagining Rose in her element. ‘You’re lucky.’

She said it without any envy. Ash deserved awesome parents. Everyone did, but she was coming to realise that he'd a special dose of good fortune.

Just then, a car pulled up in the driveway.

Moments later, Ash's mother, Rose, emerged with Mason and Jake, who rushed in for hugs, chattering about their day at school.

'Hey, gorgeous, I missed you!' Cece embraced her son. 'How was your day?'

'Awesome! We had art class today, and I made a painting for our new room!'

Mason held up a colourful canvas that featured stick figures of their little family.

Cece hugged him again. 'Well done. Looks like you've got some chops in the art department.'

Ash ruffled Jake's hair. 'What did you make today, buddy?'

'Uh, I kinda spilled paint all over my art,' Jake admitted, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment as he produced an abstract piece. 'It was still fun, though!'

'Sounds like we've got ourselves two budding artists,' Cece mused, her heart swelling with pride and affection. She glanced at Ash, catching the tender smile that graced his lips as his eyes tracked their sons' interaction.

Cece turned to Ash's mother with genuine gratitude. 'Bless you for picking them up, Rose.'

The older woman waved it off, her jade eyes crinkling with amusement. 'Of course, dear. It's lovely having more kids around the house.' Her eyes strayed to the villa next door. 'Is Liam here?'

Ash jerked his chin towards the inside of his house. 'He is. Resting in my guest room until he gets master access from you to the villa.'

Rose's voice dropped even lower with concern. 'How's he doing?'

'He's got some recovery to do, but he's here, thanks to Ash.' Cece's voice choked with emotion.

She blinked them away, missing Ash's loaded glance at his mother.

'Come on, let's get these young artists freshened up.' Rose ushered Mason and Jake inside. 'You two, cleaning time!'

The trio disappeared into the house.

Cece turned to face Ash again, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. 'I appreciate this, really I do.' Her voice broke with emotion.

He studied her. 'It's the least I can do given my fuck ups.'

Their eyes locked until Cece tore hers away.

Ash did no such thing. His eyes lingered, and unable to help it, she slid her attention back to him.

He gave her a faint smile, which she mirrored. Then his hand reached for hers across the table.

‘Peace?’

She nodded. ‘For now.’

A silence fell between them.

Cece dragged her eyes from his, wondering what was next for them. Liam was safe. So, there was no excuse for the walls she’d built between Ash and herself.

Apart from the fact that he could rip her heart into pieces.

He was not just a sensual sexual partner.

He had the power to blow up her world and wreck her to the core if they didn’t work out what they wanted.

The thought almost made her leap to her feet and flee into the thickets of gum trees she was training her eyes on.

Yet his heated, narrow gaze, now fixed on her, nailed her to her seat.

Unable to resist him, she swung her head. Their eyes clashed, and she inhaled, the emotion and energy ramping up between them. She wanted to push him, to force a response from him. To find out where he stood on *whateverthefuck* they were.

But she sat on her hands, bit her lip and waited.

He spoke after a beat, his crackled, rough baritone loaded with emotion that set her aflame.



‘I’m so sorry, Cece, for how I treated you at the start. And for not fighting Owens harder so Liam wasn’t get taken away.’ He paused for a beat, his breathing ragged. ‘I don’t know why you put up with me when I can’t say I deserve us.’

She widened her eyes. ‘Us?’

He stared into her eyes. ‘Isn’t there is an us?’

His voice broke with such a vulnerable twist that her heart lurched.

‘Do you want an ‘us’ babe? Because I do.’

There it was.

The moment’s poignancy hit her, and she closed her eyes to savour it.

‘Cece.’

She pulled back and met his scrutiny, searching his depths for truth.

She found it in his intense expression, in the feeling pouring from his every pore. ‘Yes. Ash, I do want us.’

The relief in his eyes was palpable. He reached out a muscled hand and wound it around her waist, pulling her closer to him.

With a swing of his arms, she landed on his lap.

Where she buried her head in his neck, breathing in his essence.

His lips trailed her temple, and his chest rumbled. ‘Even after everything I’ve done to you?’

She stroked his cheek and jaw. ‘What’s passion without the flames and ice?’

He shook his head, his lip curled with past regret. ‘It kills me that I was so cold to you when you’re worth so much more than that.’

‘Babe.’ She kissed him on the corner of his mouth, moved by his words. ‘You acted on what you knew at the time. It sucked balls, but I’m enough woman to forgive you.’

He pulled back. ‘That’s just it. I should have done better. The thing is, I’ve always sucked at relationships and women. Fuck, I’m divorced. Talk about failing at love.’

She stared at him, surprised at his confession. ‘You’re not a failure, honey.’

‘Feels like it sometimes. I’ve fucked up and fallen short more than a few times. I’ve lost men I care so deeply about. I’ve had to lock myself in my room or the bathroom multiple times and cry as silently as possible. What’s made me feel better is Jake telling me he loves me. When he hands me a drawing of us and says, I’m the best dad in the world, unprompted. Do I believe that? Not all the time. Maybe only half the time. I’m in my head wondering, is there anything I can do to be a better dad? To be a better leader? The same comes to you. Lately, I’ve been asking myself whether you deserve me as your man and lover.’

She shook her head, rejecting what he was saying about himself. ‘Ash, look at the results. I can tell you try so hard, hon, with Jake especially. You’re his world and his safe place.

He knows how much you bust your ass for him and how much you care. That's all that matters. You do the same for your staff and your men. It's undeniable.'

'Will that be enough for you?'

'It already is.'

He stopped for a beat, using a thumb to rub her lower lip. 'Fuck, I've so much to learn from you. Cece, if you teach me, I know I could be a better man.'

She reached for his face, cradling it in her hand. 'You already are a better man. Because your values are solid and your choices come from good intention.'

'Great ideas, poor execution?' he huffed.

She laughed. 'Something like that.'

'I may still fuck up, babe.'

'As long as you try your level best to fix it. Not wreck it.'

He nodded. 'I promise. Now, you promise me one thing.'

Her heart pounded. 'What's that?'

'That this isn't just a temporary truce. We can make something real and lasting out of this crazy situation.'

She paused as she mulled his words and the future he hinted at. 'I'll give it a red hot go if you will. However, I'll need time to ease Mason into it.'

'Thank you, babe.'

He held her gaze for a long moment, letting their new beginning settle over them. ‘Stay for dinner?’

She nodded. ‘I can’t leave until I know Liam is settled in.’

‘Of course.’

They sat for a while, arms wrapped around each other. Ash nuzzled her neck, sagging against her in relief.

Beyond, the late afternoon sun glowed over the orchards, bathing the lush fields in golden light.



The sound of voices roused them. They pulled away with some reluctance to clear their plates just as the boys burst onto the scene in their swimsuits.

Cece couldn’t help but smile as her son chased Jake into the water, their laughter infectious.

The impromptu late lunch turned into afternoon tea as Rose brought cake and tea from her kitchen. The boys played in the pool while Cece kicked off her shoes and sat on the water’s edge, overflowing with contentment.

At one point, Ash dove in with the boys, and she slapped on her sunglasses to watch. Her eyes admired his muscled and powerful form as he horsed around with the boys.

He emerged in time to get the barbecue going for an early dinner.

Cece pitched in, slicing vegetables for grilling.

Soon, the scent of roasting garlic and sizzling meat filled the air, promising a delicious feast.

‘Hey everyone.’

Cece, Rose and Ash turned to see Liam emerge from the house, looking more rested.

‘Uncle Liam!’

Mason clambered out of the pool and barrelled towards his uncle.

‘Hey, big guy,’ Liam called out, extending his arms to catch his nephew as he ran towards him. The boy’s eyes sparkled with excitement, and Cece was wracked with regret for all their years apart.

Mason wrapped his arms around Liam’s waist. ‘You’re here!’

‘Sure am, buddy.’ Liam ruffled Mason’s hair affectionately. ‘I plan on making up for lost time.’

Mason beamed at him, and Cece knew that Liam reconnecting with family was his best decision.

The sound of Kit arriving drew everyone’s attention. Soon, the older man’s hugs and cheerful greetings enveloped them.

When Cece introduced Liam to Kit, she found Ash staring at her with longing, tempered by a hint of soft need.

She gave him a smile, which he repaid with a slight upturn to his sensuous lips.

Like they'd done with Cece and Mason, Ash's parents welcomed Liam with open arms. Their warmth and acceptance melted away any lingering awkwardness.

Liam, too, seemed to enjoy the interactions between Ash and his family.

As the meal was plated, Kit and Rose regaled everyone with stories from their younger years. Mason listened wide-eyed while Jake interjected with excited questions.

'Hey, can someone help?' Ash called out, juggling a stack of toasted buns and condiments.

'Got it.' Cece stepped forward to ease some of the load from his arms.

Their fingers brushed, sending a spark of electricity up her arm. She glanced up at him, meeting his steady eyes, and her heart skipped a beat.

'Thank you, babe.' His gruff voice was delicious.

'Anytime.'

They exchanged a tender smile before she set the plates around the table.

'Alright, everyone,' Ash announced. 'Let's get this party started.'

Settling into their seats, Cece studied Ash, observing how he interacted with his loved ones.

He ruffled Jake's hair when the boy showed off a drawing and listened as Rose told of her concerns about an upcoming doctor's appointment.

Despite his gruffness and their recent fallout, she was witnessing the kind and caring man he was - not only to his family. Also, to hers.

They dug into plates piled high with juicy burgers, crisp salads, and buttery corn on the cob.

While they ate, Kit waxed lyrical about his love for riding motorcycles and entering several cross-country racing championships.

'Did you ever win, Grandpa?' Jake's eyes shone with admiration.

Kit grinned. 'Sure did, but don't go getting any ideas, young man. The sport is dangerous.'

'Aw, Dad, let the kid dream a little.' Ash teased, chucking a napkin at his father. Jake giggled, and their genuine affection charmed Cece.

Mason chirped in. 'I'd like to ride a motorcycle.'

'You need to learn how to do it safely.' Jake made the sage and grown-up statement with a solemn face. 'It's best if you start with an ATV, which Dad allows me to ride.'

'Ooh! Can I, mum, can I?'

Cece's eyes met Ash's. 'I believe in raising boys who are wild at heart. I don't see why not if he has good supervision.'

Ash gave her a weighted look. I couldn't agree more. I'll supervise.'

Jake nodded. 'Dad's the best teacher. I can help, too.'

Mason's eyes widened. 'Mum?'

She nodded as he whooped. 'Can we try the ATV tomorrow?'

'It's school tomorrow.' Cece cautioned him with a wag of her finger. 'We can try for the weekend.'

Liam grinned. 'Maybe Uncle Liam can get lessons too from Jake.'

'Sure thing!' Jake wriggled with pride, beaming.

Ash and Cece shared a stolen glance across the table, their amusement undeniable.

Throughout it all, Cece noted how Ash radiated a quiet strength that anchored the entire family.

His love for them was evident in every touch, every word.

It tugged at something deep within Cece, filling her with a warmth she hadn't felt in years.

'Can I have another burger, Dad?' Jake lifted a plate already wiped clean.

'Of course, buddy.' Ash flipped one onto the boy's plate. 'You've got a bottomless pit of a stomach, just like your old man.'

Jake grinned at him, and Cece couldn't help but smile, seeing how much Ash cared for his son.



The sun dipped, casting the sky in shades of pink and orange as Cece's heart overflowed with yearning for him.

Yet a tinge of worry lingered.

Their connection was going in a whole new direction. One deeper, more meaningful. Cece knew if she let Ash make love to her again, she'd fall into a chasm she'd never escape or recover from.



Later that evening, Ash and Cece waved at Liam as he disappeared inside his new temporary home, set in thick bushland further along the Falconer's private road.

Ash had just given Liam a tour of the two-bedroom villa, the latter jazzed with excitement at the lovely new digs.

When his door closed, Cece sighed in relief.

Even though he was still exhausted and wired, Liam was showing signs of coming to some form of peace about his past and future.

It was more than she'd ever hoped for over the years.

'This place seems to be working its magic on him already.' Cece's shoulder brushed Ash's arm as they wandered up the driveway.

Above them, moonlight streamed down on them as they paused at the foot of his home's staircase.

‘Give it a few days, and he’ll be part of the Falconer extended family.’

Ash paused midstep, his strong arms crossed over his chest. The moonlight fell on the rugged lines of his face, making him look almost seraphic.

Her heart stopped, and she bit her lip.

He sensed her mood shift. ‘What?’

She flicked her eyes past his face and onto the sparkling expanse above. ‘It’s so beautiful out here at night. The stars and moon are so bright and close out here.’

It was a deflection, but she meant every word of it.

‘You like stargazing, babe?’ His crackled voice sent shivers of pleasure through her.

‘I do. Byron has one of the most stunning starscapes I’ve seen. I’ve spent a few nights gazing at the constellations on my balcony at the townhouse.’

‘Sometime, I’ll take you where the skies will blow your mind.’

She met his gaze. ‘Really?’

‘Truly.’

He took her hand and walked her to the car, where Mason lay slumped, already passed out in the backseat.

Ash wrapped her in his arms when they approached her SUV door. She fell into his length, soaking in his warmth, scent and essence.

He nuzzled her neck. 'When you're ready, you're welcome to spend the night. Only when you're up for it, babe.'

She gazed up at him, her mouth soft. 'Soon, Falconer. I want to ease Mace into this.'

Truth be told, she needed to ease herself. Mason had already made up his mind about his new potential family.

However, she also wanted to be a responsible mother and not rush into anything that would rip their world apart and jeopardise the new life they were building.

'I adore you. That'll never change.' Ash's voice was rich with such feeling that her knees weakened.

He was saying all the right words and making all the right moves, and her walls were crumbling fast and hard. She clutched his thick shoulders to anchor herself to his solid and steadfast strength.

'I adore you more.' It was all she could say.

They swayed in the moonlight for a few more minutes until Ash pulled back.

'You stay here one more minute, and I won't let you leave.'

'Maybe I don't want to leave, but I need to because you need your rest. You've had a rough few days, Ash.'

His voice cracked even more with fatigue. 'True.'

He levered the car door wider and helped her inside. He kissed her on the corner of her mouth, leaving her yearning for

more.

‘Look at you fraternising with your staff.’

He huffed. ‘Keep at it, and I might have to fire you to love on you.’

Her heart stopped. Somehow, she found her words once more. ‘Fire away, boss. Fire away.’



He watched her drive away, his heart so gone for her.

It took a moment before he realised his phone was vibrating against his butt cheek.

He pulled it out and sat on the top step to take the call.

Saint launched into it without any preamble. ‘Brother, Mirren is getting trigger-happy.’

‘Is that right?’

‘He’s been shaking down his contacts all over Sydney, trying to find Liam. Those who’ve not cooperated in his search have been shot. He’s turning his campaign into a bloodbath. Two more men were gunned down in the Eastern suburbs yesterday. All known associates of Red Adder.’

Ash sighed. ‘Fuck. Whatever happened to the good old days in the coke industry? When the top dogs were gentlemen

in herringbone suits who preferred to deal with people over a cup of tea?’

Saint huffed. ‘It’s a dog-eat-dog world now, brother and desperate men do desperate things. He’s on the back foot, having lost a substantial amount of coke. It’s why he’s making violent decisions. He’s creating a hazardous and volatile environment, and the local cops have had enough. They’re urging us to move and execute our plan. With that amount of drugs in the wind for him, it feels like he has everything to gain and nothing to lose.’

Ash took a breath, staring at the galaxies swirling far above him, feeling the weight of the world on his wide shoulders. ‘We’ve no choice, then. Greenlight it is.’

# Chapter 16



Over the next week, Cece found herself at Falcon Farm most evenings.

She volunteered for the afternoon school run, picking up Jake and Mason and motoring to Bangalow for the evening.

Part of it was wanting to repay Rose and Ash for their kindness in caring for Mason when she'd been away.

Her other reason was to check on her brother while continuing to explore her connection with Ash.

So far, each day with him was a revelation.

One afternoon, he met her in a triple-breasted suit, dressed like a sartorial gentleman from GQ Magazine. He'd just flown back from a Sydney day meeting with senior Defence officials.

The next day, he greeted her dressed in a beekeeper's ensemble. Claiming he was off to harvest honey for his macadamia and honey-infused whisky.

On the third day, she found Ash in threadbare denim workwear and gumboots, looking quite the provincial

landowner. Pulling outside his house, she shook her head and smiled at his unexpected garb. ‘Love your style, Farmer Ash.’

He shot her a long wink. ‘I aim to please. Come with me,’ he invited when Jake, Mason and herself exited her car.

He handed her a pair of wellingtons, which she switched her heels out for.

Jake lent Mason a pair of his.

As Ash and Jake led Cece and Mason towards the paddock, the sun cast long shadows under the trees. The scent of hay filled the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of the animals that called this place home.

‘Alright, Mason, first up, we’ve got some chickens to feed.’

Ash motioned towards a flock of hens pecking at the ground. ‘You think you can handle that?’

‘Yessir!’ Mason’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

‘Here, take this.’ Ash handed him a bag of feed, his rough hands gentle against Mason’s smaller ones. ‘Just scatter it around, and they’ll come running.’

Cece’s son did as instructed, laughing as the chickens flocked towards him. Jake joined in as the chickens went ballistic with joy.

Ash watched with an indulgent smile, his eyes softening in a way that made Cece’s heart ache.

She rested a hand on his arm. ‘Seeing him happy like this means everything to me.’

‘Of course. He’s a sweet kid, and he deserves all the happiness in the world,’ Ash replied, his voice sincere. ‘Besides, I’m enjoying myself too.’

They moved from one animal enclosure to another, feeding the goats and petting the horses.

Ash was patient and kind with Mason, answering his endless questions and offering gentle guidance. It was a side of him she hadn’t seen before, which deepened her growing affection.

Liam showed up and joined in the fun. He’d spent the day with Diesel, harvesting macadamias and storing them away.

Cece hugged him as he enveloped her with more strength than she’d seen in years. ‘Farm work suits you.’

‘It’s kicking my ass, but I like it.’

He turned to leave.

‘Where you off to?’ Cece said. ‘Can’t handle the chickens?’

‘Taking a shower before dinner. Unless you’re up for ‘Aroma of Liam’ all night.’

‘Don’t take too long. You’re helping me set the table!’

Liam lifted his hand, waggled two fingers at her and whistled as he walked away.





The delicious scent of salt and pepper-rubbed steak wafted through the air. Cece watched Ash's strong hands flip food on the grill.

Something about how he handled the tongs, his muscles flexing beneath his rolled-up sleeves, made her heart race.

'Cece, can you pass the forks?'

Liam was laying cutlery down on the table.

She shook herself from her love-drunk moment and turned to her brother.

'Sure, here you go.'

She handed them to him.

Beyond the deck, the boys played tag around the yard, their laughter filling the air.

'Thank you.' Liam paused for a moment to shoot her smile.

'Hey, babe.' Ash's voice was deep and enticing. 'Nab the barbecue sauce from inside?'

'Of course.' Her expression flamed as Ash wiped the sweat from his brow with his hand.

'The sauce, my love.'

She jolted at Ash's gentle reminder, pushing back her chair and making her way into the kitchen.

Liam followed, giving her a pointed look.

‘So? I see Major Falconer is calling you ‘babe’ now. Making you blush so red hot you’re about to light up the place.’

‘Lay off.’

Her brother leaned back on a counter and crossed hands over his chest, his eyes dancing. ‘I know you two spent the night together when we were in Sydney that first night.’

She leaned back and raised a brow. ‘Really?’

‘Yup, came out to get water, and your bed was empty. Nowhere else you could have been but next door.’

Cece tried to disguise the blush on her face. Burying her face behind the cabinet door, she rummaged through a cupboard.

Just as an unbidden memory of her and Ash’s passion ripped through her.

Of their whispered promises between heated kisses.

*Damn, she was yearning for him.*

‘Cece likes Ash.’ Her brother grinned as she emerged from behind the door, red-faced.

She capitulated. ‘So what if I do? He’s a hard ass with a hot butt. On a serious note, he’s a man I’m coming to respect; he’s also kind and generous - and a man who gets shit done. Case in point, bringing you back to me. What’s not to like?’

Liam threw up his hands in surrender. 'Hey. I approve. I just like seeing you squirm as you admit it.'

'Savage. Take the platters of salad outside and stop harassing me.'

Liam did as commanded and laughed, sauntering away.

'Everything okay in here?' Ash stalked into the kitchen as Liam swept past him with a cheeky grin.

Hearing his voice sent a shiver down Cece's spine. She whipped around to face him, clutching the sauce bottle to her chest.

'Uh, yeah, I found it.'

She stammered as she held out the bottle, her fingers brushing against his as he took it from her.

'I'll take that.' He held her gaze for a moment too long.

The air between them crackled with electricity, and Cece's cheeks flushed with heat.

He reached for her face, bending to give her a searing kiss.

She moaned when he broke off their flaming connection and tried to pull him back, but he escaped with a chuckle.

'Food's ready.' Ash stepped back outside with a slow wink, leaving Cece panting and vexed.

It took a few moments to collect herself before joining everyone around the outdoor table.

The sound of laughter and clinking glasses echoed across the backyard.

Ash served burgers onto plates, his eyes twinkling with amusement at something Jake said.

Soon, their plates piled high with barbeque fare.

They all dug into their meal, the warmth of family surrounding them like a comforting blanket while the stars shone down on them in a silvery glow above.

‘Can we feed the animals again tomorrow?’ Excited, Mason bounced on his chair.

Mason had fallen in love with Falcon Farm’s menagerie. The newborn chicks were his favourite.

‘Sure thing, buddy.’ Ash nodded as he helped himself to a generous serving of greens, his eyes meeting Cece’s with a soft smile. ‘We’ll all go together.’

Jake waved at Cece with a fork. ‘Hey, Cece. Your salad is amazing!’

Ash raised a brow. ‘Aliens ‘bout to land because the boy hates anything green touching his lips.’

His son doubled down. ‘Cece has a touch with salads.’

She smiled at the gorgeous boy. ‘Thanks, sweetie. I’m glad you like it.’

She reached for the bowl of greens tossed with a tangy vinaigrette. Taking a bite, she couldn’t help but let out a satisfied sigh. It was delicious, but what made her heart swell was the sight of their blended families coming together.

‘See? I told you my mum’s also an amazing cook.’ Mason nudged Jake. Cece caught Ash’s eye across the table, both beaming with pride at their boys’ camaraderie.

As the evening wore on, the air grew cooler, and the group retreated inside to the cozy living room.

Later that night, Liam loped to his villa, stating he needed a kip after all the day’s hard yakka labour.

The boys helped clear away the table and were now engrossed in a heated Nintendo game, their laughter echoing through the house.

Cece found herself in the kitchen with Ash, finishing up the cleaning. The glow of the overhead lights cast a cozy intimacy over them. She rested against the counter, studying Ash as he scrubbed a pan.

*She could get so addicted to this life.*

‘Mason had a ball with the animals.’

He flicked her a glance. ‘That was the point. Liam doing OK?’

Cece nodded, her heart warming at his concern. ‘He is. Thanks to Diesel, he’s done with resting and taking it easy and is now working hard. Putting on some weight too and filling out.’

‘Good.’ Ash turned off the faucet and handed her the pan so she could wipe it dry.

Suddenly, a stampede of feet rushed into the kitchen.

Jake and Mason came to a screeching halt in front of their parents.

Cece called it. ‘Oh, no. What do you two want?’

‘Mum, can I have another sleepover with Jake?’ Mason’s words were heartfelt, his eyes hopeful.

Jake chimed in, matching his friend’s enthusiasm, turning to his father. ‘Please, Dad?’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Ash gave Cece a pointed look. ‘It’s the weekend, so I suppose that would be fine with me if Cece is OK with it. But only if she sleeps over, too.’

Cece glanced at Ash, her heart rate ratcheting with anticipation at the possibility of spending even more time with him. Their connection grew stronger every day, and she longed for moments alone with him.

After a brief pause, Cece nodded. ‘Alright, boys. We’re on.’

The announcement set off a string of cheers from the two boys, who raced around and hugged both parents before darting back to their gaming.

Ash glanced over at Cece, his gaze lingering. Her pulse quickened, heat rising in her cheeks.

‘Today was perfect.’ Cece’s voice was barely more than a whisper. ‘Seeing you with Mason, I don’t know, it just made

me feel something I haven't in a long time.'

'Is that so?' Ash bent closer, his tone teasing. 'What exactly did you feel, Cece?'

'Alive.' She breathed the word out, her heart racing. 'Alive, and that maybe there's still hope for us. For a future together.'

'Me too,' Ash replied, his eyes locked on hers.

The cleaning done, Ash nabbed her hand, tossed aside the cloth she'd held and pulled her outside.

They stepped out onto the verandah, the cool evening breeze brushing against their skin.

The sight of the lush greenery and twinkling stars overhead only added to the moment's magic.

Cece looked across the farm, realising she was beginning to see it as a place of refuge and a home where she could be happy with Ash and their boys.

Ash stroked her cheek, and she turned to face him. The intensity in his eyes took her breath away as he moved to brush a strand of hair from her face. His touch sent shivers down her spine.

'I know I pushed my luck in there, but I hope this weekend isn't too soon for us.'

Ash's voice was laced with desire.

She gave him a long look, sensing the pull between them grow stronger by the second. 'It's not too soon. However,

we'll have to be discreet.'

Ash's lips quirked, his eyes lighting with sensuous need. 'I can swing that. Pack a bag for you both and come by for dinner tomorrow.'

'At this rate, I'm beginning to think I live here,' she teased.

'And I'm beginning to like the idea.'

Ash closed the distance between them, bending down to take her lips.

They met in a heated twist of passion and promise.

Swaying against each other, they lost themselves in a searing embrace. Until the sound of Mason calling for Cece brought them back to reality.

After a few more lingering kisses, they pulled parted, their eyes locked for a moment before they turned to go inside.

Ash walked her and Mason to their car, bundling them inside. While Jake hovered on the verandah, waving.

'Goodnight, handsome.'

'Goodnight, babe.'

'Goodnight, BFF Number One!'

The last shout came from Jake, and Mace responded with grins and thumbs up. 'Cya BFF Two.'

In her rearview mirror, Cece caught a tenderness in Ash's eyes that she'd never seen before.



Her heart ached at the thought of leaving him tonight. Knowing she wouldn't be able to resist him and their forever much longer.



‘Dad, can Mace and I watch a movie in the cinema room?’

It was Saturday night, and Ash's dining room had just been cleared of yet another delicious feast.

Rose and Kit had since gone home, as had Liam.

Now Ash sat on the end of the expansive modular sofa, his feet up on the luxurious recliner. He held a whisky in one hand while the other massaged Cece's feet. She sat half-inclined next to him, also nursing a glass of wine.

‘Dad, please!’

Ash grinned with affection at his son and Mason, also hovering in the doorway of his living room.

‘Course you can. Jake, make some popcorn in the microwave upstairs, take some drinks and knock yourselves out.’

The handsome lad jumped into the air with a fist bump. ‘Yes! Movie night! Let's get Spiderman going!’

‘Only if you promise to keep the noise down.’

‘Thank you, Dad!’

Jake hugged his dad before turning to Cece with a knowing grin. ‘You two can have some grown-up time now.’

Cece’s cheeks flushed at his words, but she couldn’t suppress her smile. Ash winked at her as they watched the boys race to the cinema room. They clattered up the stairs, chattering about the film they were about to watch.

Cece turned to her sexy man. ‘Should we tell them?’

‘Tell them what?’ Ash lifted a brow, feigning innocence. He reached an arm around her waist, pulling her close.

‘About us, silly.’ She swatted his chest, her eyes sparkling with amusement. ‘I think they’re starting to catch on.’

‘You think? We’re not hiding at all, are we?’ Ash agreed, his voice just above a whisper. ‘Let’s do it. After I made mind-blowing love to you.’

They hadn’t had sex since Sydney, and Cece got heated up by the thought of making love with him again.

He bent over her and captured her mouth, igniting her soul.

They spent the next two hours watching a mindless movie on Netflix, ratcheting up their passion while waiting for their sons to go to bed.

After a suspicious silence, they found both boys sprawled on the floor of the movie room, covered in white kernels of buttery corn.

Laughing, they roused the sleepy pair and walked them into the bathroom.

When both boys were ready for bed, teeth brushed, and in pyjamas, Ash and Cece tucked the sleepy boys under covers in Jake's bed.

'G'nite.'

The boys' murmurs faded into mumbles, and both were lost in their dreams before Ash turned out the light.



Ash turned to Cece. 'Care for a drive with me?'

She cocked her head. 'This late at night?'

'I want to show you something. A promise I made to you some time ago.'

She cocked her head, curious to know more. 'How about the boys?'

'I'll text Rose and get her to keep an ear out via Alexa. We have a secure Echo pod in her house.'

'Sounds good.'

He pulled out his phone from his pocket and sent a quick text, nodding when he got a reply.

'All good, baby.'

'A drive it is. Take a jacket. I'll nab supplies.'

Cece slid her feet into trainers and shrugged on a jacket while Ash appeared with a mysterious carry-all bag.

He took her hand and led her outside. He folded her inside his Land Cruiser, and she settled into the luxe leather seats with a sigh.

It was a balmy night, and they drove with the top open all the way to the coast.

Coldplay's 'Magic' softly belted from the speakers.

'Love this band.' Ash confessed with a crooked grin. 'Their lyrics give me life.'

Cece angled her eyes at a sky with diamond-like celestial bodies rushing above her. 'Truly magic.'

Ash drove past Byron's centre, down treelined avenues and towards a secluded shoreline.

He parked along a stretch of darkened beach, the rig's headlights the only illumination.

Ash reached for a bag in his back seat and pulled a torch from it. 'With me, baby.'

Cece slid out of her seat. Ash slung the bag across his back as he led her out of the car and enveloped his arms around her.

A soft ocean breeze greeted them as their feet sunk into the still-warm sand.

She curled her hand tighter in his, a wave of longing washing over her.

Despite the uncertainty that had once clouded their relationship, one thing was clear: she was falling in love with Ash Falconer, and there was no turning back.

‘So where are we going again?’

She gazed up at him, and he gave her an enigmatic look.

He didn’t answer, instead leading her to a darkened mound where she made out a silhouette of a structure.

When he shone his light on it, she gasped.

She was looking at an architectural marvel. A dome-shaped small white building that was stunning in its geometric and abstract design. The angular, stone-like exterior and concrete façade were set into the hill to fit into its surroundings.

‘What is it?’

‘The Sovereign Observatory. It sits within a three-mile ‘dark zone’ with zero light pollution. Meaning even the naked eye can catch celestial activity from this point.’

‘Yours?’

‘A private one shared by those who own this land.’

‘Who would those be?’

‘The family, my Sovereign brothers and the local people of this land. Anyone from the Bundjalung of Byron Bay Arakwal, the Minjungbal, and the Widjabul people. They’re the Traditional Owners and custodians for this part of the Byron Shire, and they all have unlimited access.’

‘You are kidding me?’

He laid a hand over his chest. ‘Truth, babe. Some of the First Nations have used it to conduct engagement and outreach programs, including astronomy nights and workshops designed to enhance STEM learning by understanding our universe.’

Cece tilted her head up at him, then the building, mouth ajar. ‘Mind blown. Who built it?’

‘My dad, Cole and I. It’s our way of enjoying the one hobby we all love while honouring the land on which we stand.’

Ash led her to the door, which he unlocked using an app on his phone.

Inside, the fittings, fixtures and furnishings couldn’t be more different to the modern concrete exterior.

Wood floors created a welcoming palette, and the 360-degree shelf wall was packed with books, making it a relaxing haven for reading and rest.

There was also enough space for a double bunk and a warming room.

Cece let Ash lead her to the upper level, home to the central viewing tower.

A tall, imposing white and black machine sat at the centre of the space.

‘That’s a space telescope to view the night sky in all its glory. With precise pointing, stable LEO satellite tracking and camera attachments. Next to it is a spiral staircase that takes you to an exterior observation platform for more natural stargazing.’

‘Fascinating. Can I?’

‘Of course.’

They spent the next few minutes adjusting the optical tube until the night sky unfolded, magnified in awe-inspiring detail.

Cece lost herself in the clarity of a glowing starscape, and cosmic dust clouds unfolded in bright colours.

Ash showed her how to identify the hundreds of galaxies.

‘Do you see Venus? It’s the brightest natural object in the sky after the sun and the moon. See how it glows near a dim formation of stars?’

‘Yes?’

‘They’re known as the Beehive Cluster. Comprised of hundreds of celestial gas balls, many of which are too dim to see with the unaided eye.’

Ash’s body heat warmed her as he guided her movements. ‘Also, look out for comets and meteor vapour trails.’

‘Astounding.’

‘It is one of the best places to see stars in Byron Bay.’

Cece cocked her head with a cheeky smile on her face. ‘I thought that was at the Hemsworth enclave?’

Ash let out a loud laugh, throwing his head back.

She grinned as her eyes followed the strong line of his neck. Giving in to impulse, she reached forward and kissed his nape.

He pulled back in surprise, staring down at her.

His eyes heated, and he reached a hand to touch her face. 'Baby. Lips.'

He bent down his head, and they fell into each other.

His voice was husky with need when he spoke once more. 'Want more night sky?'

'Yes. I also want you.'

He bit his lip. 'I'll give you both.'

He nabbed the bag he'd brought. With a silent nod, he held her down the staircase of the Observatory and outside.

He used his torch to light the way.

Their feet sunk into the white sand as they negotiated the dune, reaching just above the beach.

Ash found a clear patch where he stuck the torch on the beach. He pulled a blanket from his bag, threw it down, shook it out, and turned to her. His eyes blazed with desire as he took her into his arms.

He murmured against her lips as he sunk them onto the blanket. 'I've been dreaming about this for days. Of how I'll make love to you right here. On this beach of sacred white sand.'



As he spoke, his eyes heated up in the flickering torch light.

‘You planned this?’ she whispered, touched at how well he knew her.

‘With all my heart.’

He dipped his head and took her breath away. Cece moaned, her fingers entwined in his hair as he deepened the kiss.

They pulled off their clothes between snatched kisses until they were both naked and desperate for each other.

Ash’s hands roamed her body, caressing her curves and eliciting soft gasps from her lips. His mouth trailed down her neck, biting and sucking at her skin until she writhed beneath him.

He finally reached her breasts and took one nipple into his mouth. He swirled his tongue around it until Cece was arching her back, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

The heat between them was intoxicating, and Cece lost control as Ash continued his assault on her body.

She didn’t care about the tension that had once existed between them.

She only focused on the pleasure claiming her, on the perfection of how they were sexing.

He moved lower to her waist, dipping to her wet core. Before she could protest, his mouth was already on her, his

hands spreading her thighs apart.

Cece moaned, her hips moving of their own accord as the pleasure of his mouth pressed against her folds and deeper into her wetness.

He teased her with his tongue pulled with his teeth. He lashed her pussy and flicked his wet tip over her nub. Waves of ecstasy took hold of her body until she gasped for breath, writhing beneath him, begging him to make her come.

When, at last, he drove his tongue inside her, Cece cried out. Her muscles clenched as she came wild and uncontrolled against his mouth.

He took a moment to relish her orgasm, lapping her up until she fell undone.

He straightened up, his eyes locked to hers as he reached for his jeans pocket.

Sheathed, he turned to her and took one pebbled nipple into his mouth, his fingers driving her wild in between her thighs.

He teased and sucked on her raised flesh until she cried out, her body twisting in an age-old rhythm. 'Ash, baby, I want you now.'

He raised an eyebrow and narrowed his eyes. 'You trying to command me, woman? The way you're dancing on me, I'll take my time. I'll slow dance you into ecstasy.'

Cece moaned as he entered her, her back arching off the bed as Ash split her with how thick he was. The moment he

began moving inside her, she reached her arms around him and drew circles on the small of his back. Holding him close as their bodies moved together.

He took his time, like he'd promised. Tormenting her with her every swirl of his hips.

She was helpless to his mastery.

He found her ear and licked her, sending jolts through her as he whispered. 'Feel that fire, baby. Don't fight it. Move to it, go where your body is telling you. Ride with me.'

He thrust harder and faster, his cock hitting her G spot, driving her wild. She clung to him, her kisses fiercer as she came once more, her pussy tightening its grip around his shaft.

Ash groaned as she tightened her embrace around him, orgasm after orgasm washed over her. She had never experienced an intense or powerful explosion. Or felt so connected to any other man in her life.

Just as she thought she couldn't take any more pleasure, Ash shuddered.

He groaned as he buried his face into her shoulder as he came, his cock throbbing.

He kept bucking, his load filling her as she twisted against him, as mini waves of pleasure continued to assault her.

Tears formed and slid under her lids.

Ash gazed down at Cece, wiping the trailing moisture.

He soothed her as she came down from their high. His rocking slowed as sensation flooded every inch of her body, and waves of emotion pounded her soul. He was perfect, and she'd never get enough of him.

They lay slack on the blanket, stunned by the intensity of their passion.

Cece reached her arms to hold him tighter. 'That was magical.'

His molten eyes locked on hers. 'Beyond.'

His lips brushed against hers. 'I love you, Cece.'

The words slammed into her core.

She stared at him, her hands shaking as she stroked his cheek. 'Really, babe?'

Her throat choked up.

He reached a hand to twirl a curl around his forefinger. 'Cece, I love you so much. From the moment you almost fell over me in the Conservatory. When you walked all over my heart with those sexy heels.'

She shook her head in raw wonder. 'I think I fell for you that day, too. You got under my skin like no other man had ever done. What I'm trying to say is that I love you too, Ash Falconer.' Her fingers grazed his stubble. 'You've driven me up the wall; you've made me so mad I've wanted to wrap my hands around your neck and throttle you. But you've cared for me like no other man, and I want to give the same to you for all our days. You mean so much to me.'

They kissed, their lips locked on each other.

Cece ran her fingers through his hair, her heart pounding.

Ash rolled onto his back and took Cece with him so she rested on him.

He found another blanket in his fantastic sack of tricks and pulled it over them.

Propping his head on the bag, he ran his hands over her skin as the soft breeze dried their heated bodies.

They lay listening to the waves, entwined in each other as comets blazed above and starlight played on the dark waters beyond.

Cece nuzzled her face against Ash's neck as she tracked the celestial bodies streaking across the sky, her fingers tracing the outline of his taipan tattoo. 'Stunning.'

'Almost as you are.' Ash's breath was hot against her skin. She shivered in response, a delicious thrill racing down her spine as his muscular arms gripped around her waist. 'You're so divine.'

'Flatterer.' She turned her head to meet his gaze. The intensity in his eyes left no room for doubt; he meant every word. Their lips met in a searing, passionate embrace, desire sparking between them like wildfire.

Yet the intimacy of it made her feel safe and cherished in a way she hadn't experienced in years.

'I don't want to go back. I want this to last forever.'

Ash's mouth twitched. 'Maybe, like someone once sang, we can talk to the moon, stars, and sun and ask them if tomorrow can wait.'

She pressed her lips to his chest, to his taipan tattoo and to the scars she found under it, hiding an old bullet wound. 'We can damn well try.'

'I promise, Cece,' Ash's lips brushed against her forehead in a tender touch. 'We're in this together, for as long as it takes.'

Safe up in his arms, Cece knew Ash Falconer was her rare and most precious find, who'd wrecked her heart for him for all time.



The following day, Cece woke up to the scent of brewing coffee and baking.

Her tummy growled as her mind rushed with images from the night before.

She blushed, remembering how they'd taken a dip in the ocean. They'd made love once more in the warm tropical waters, only returning to Ash's home at about 3 AM.

Where they'd fallen into bed and were asleep in an instant.

Refreshed but needing to get the sand out of her hair, she got up and showered.

Later, dressed and feeling like new, Cece made her way downstairs.

She walked through the kitchen and smiled at the breakfast feast on the table. Fresh, fluffy scrambled eggs, flaky pastries packed with ham, lettuce and feta, and a pitcher of fresh orange juice.

Cece stepped out onto the verandah. Her heart kicked at the sight of Ash standing by the railing, a cup in his hand.

He stood firm, lean, power-packed. His profile was at rest, clad in camo sweats, his chest bare, as were his feet, his magnificence silhouetted by macadamia trees and leafy gums.

Wrapping her arms around him from behind, she pressed her lips to the middle of his back. ‘Good morning, handsome.’

One arm captured her handhold. ‘Morning, baby.’

His voice was a rumble that sent shivers down her spine. He turned and gave her a long kiss, which she pulled away from breathless.

‘Coffee?’

She pointed to his cup. ‘I’ll have what you’re having.’

‘A caffè? Sure baby?’

She stared at the tiny cup. ‘Isn’t a caffè just a shot of espresso?’

‘Tis. I give it the correct Italian name. It can also be called a caffè corretto, espresso ‘corrected’ with a shot of liquor. The most common additions are grappa, sambucca, cognac or Irish cream. Either way, it’s delicious.’

‘I’ll have it straight, please.’

He gave her a lazy smile and then pushed off to the kitchen, returning with a small cup of her own.

Ash handed it to her, their fingers brushing together as she took it from him.

‘Much appreciated.’ Her heart fluttered at the slight contact. She brought the cup to her lips, savouring the rich aroma before sipping.

Ash leaned against the railing beside her, looking out at the view. ‘Sleep well?’

‘Like a baby. Just like our boys.’ She smiled, recalling how they’d found the boys asleep on the cinema room floor, surrounded by popcorn and the remnants of a movie marathon. ‘You?’

‘Same. I’m getting used to having you by my side every night.’ His eyes drank her like she was the centre of his universe. It was heady, and she blushed from the overflow of emotion.

He kissed her hot cheeks and nibbled her lips. They meshed against each other for a few more minutes until she pulled away, unable to take the heat anymore.



Ash used his chin to point toward their noisy sons, now racing cars in the living room. ‘Did you hear them this morning?’

Cece chuckled, glancing back towards the house. ‘No. What did they get up to?’

‘They argued about the strongest superhero in a DC versus Marvel clash. I had to intervene.’

‘Ah, the age-old debate.’ Cece shook her head. ‘What side did you take?’

‘Neither.’ Ash laughed. ‘I told them they might both be right because strength can mean different things.’

‘Smart answer, smexy dad.’

Their shared laughter echoed through the morning air, a perfect symphony of happiness and contentment.

Still, the spectre of Joseph Mirren hung over them.

Cece knew Ash was working on something, given all the calls between Saint and himself, and when the light in his eyes sobered up in thought.

It was also evident in the heightened activity on the farm as Reg and the Byron Sovereign team tightened security, checked cameras and installed fail safes.

It all pointed to a coming storm, which Ash and Cece didn’t speak about, choosing instead to live in the present,

Their Sunday unfolded in bliss. The hours became a blur of joyous moments, from an impromptu soccer game in the

backyard to an afternoon teaching the boys how to care for the animals.

At one point, Cece wandered towards the barn.

‘Hey, Mum!’ Mason waved her to where Jake was teaching him how to milk a cow with Ash supervising. ‘Watch this!’

‘All eyes on you, Mace.’ Her heart expanded with pride as Mason pulled an udder and fresh milk frothed into a bucket.

‘Good job, buddy.’ Ash praised her boy, his arm draped over Cece’s shoulders.

‘Thanks, Dad!’ Mason beamed before correcting himself with a sheepish shrug. ‘I mean, Ash.’

Cece and Ash exchanged looks while Mace, already past the moment, raced after Jake to the house with their precious haul.

Ash slow-blinked. ‘Did he just -’

Cece bit his lip. ‘He did. It came out so naturally, too.’

Ash tore his eyes away, but not before she caught his expression on the brim of tears.

After a beat, he spoke, his voice rough with emotion. ‘Thing is, I don’t mind.’

Cece rubbed his back, leaning into him. ‘I don’t mind mind either, Major Falconer. I don’t mind at all.’

Ash swung his eyes back to her, giving Cece a devastating smile that made her heart race.



Later that evening, Cece stood in Ash's kitchen.

The scent of garlic and herbs wafted through the air as she stirred fragrant garlic in a pan.

The enticing aroma of saffron and the sizzling pan mingled with the munching of carrots from the two hungry boys swarming the kitchen for snacks.

'Mum, that smells amazing!' Mason's eyes enlarged in anticipation.

Cece stirred the arborio rice. 'Thanks, sweetheart. I hope everyone likes it.'

During the week, she wandered into Byron's famous Thursday farmers markets, where she'd picked up the spices she used that night to make her winning dish.

Every ingredient was fragrant, and the herbs were fresh from the Falconer's shared kitchen garden.

Ash strolled into the kitchen, setting down a tray of freshly baked bread, warm from the oven. 'Courtesy of Rose. I don't think there'll be any complaints about dinner tonight.'

His gaze lingered on her flushed cheeks.

Cece couldn't help but smile back at him. The now-familiar flutter in her stomach lit up.

Liam strolled in, and soon, they were all enjoying the delicious paella, which Ash paired with Spanish Rioja for the adults.

After dinner, a sated Liam retreated to his villa for some much-needed rest while the boys settled in for a round of video games.

‘Come on, let’s get some fresh air.’

Ash led Cece onto the verandah. The cool breeze kissed her skin as they stood side by side. At the same time, the sounds of nature provided a soothing soundtrack to their stolen moment.

Cece leaned against her man. ‘Another perfect day,’

‘It was.’ He captured her lips. Cece clung to Ash, losing herself in his essence and feel.

Ash murmured against her mouth, his breath hot and heavy. ‘Babe, I can’t get enough of you.’

‘Neither can I,’ she confessed.

His jade gaze searched hers. She dealt warmth and affection, giving him the courage to continue.

‘I want us to live together.’

The weight of his words hit her. Her thoughts drifted back to their recent weeks and days together, their cozy evenings on the verandah and the laughter-packed afternoons with their sons.

For Cece, Ash, Jake, and this place was becoming her everything.

‘I want that too. I can’t imagine being anywhere other than here, on this farm, with you and our boys.’

‘Really?’ His eyes widened in surprise, hope shining within them.

‘I mean it.’ Her voice was steely with conviction. ‘This place feels like home. I can see how much you love it, too.’

Ash let out a breath he seemed to have been holding, his face breaking into a wide grin. ‘I can’t tell you how happy that makes me, Cece. Falcon Farm has been in my family for generations. I always hoped to share it with someone who would love it as much as I do. I’ve six bedrooms that need filling, hon. We’re going to be busy for the next few years.’

She inhaled at the idea of having children with Ash. ‘So it’s settled.’

He nodded. ‘Our future is here, together.’

‘Deal.’ Without hesitation, they sealed their pact with a tender touch of their lips. One that spoke volumes about their love and commitment.

‘I think we need to make this official. With them.’

Ash jerked a chin toward the living room where Mason and Jake sat, their eyes glued to the TV screen.

‘You think we need their permission?’

‘I think they’d be insulted if we didn’t ask.’

‘Let’s do it.’

‘Come,’ he growled, leading her by the hand. As they approached the boys, a flutter of nerves danced in her stomach, wondering what they’d say.

‘Boys, pause the game for a second.’ Ash’s solemn tone earned curious looks from both boys.

Her heart rate quickened, anticipation building inside her.

‘Is everything okay, Dad?’ Concern ran across Jake’s young face.

‘Everything’s fine, son.’ Ash smiled before turning to face Cece, his expression softening. ‘I just wanted to ask Cece something important, and I thought it’d be nice to do it before you two.’

‘Okay.’ Jake’s eyes widened with curiosity.

Mason was more laid back, holding out judgement until he heard the adults.

Ash began, his voice steady, a deep reverberation through the room. ‘Cece, we’ve been spending a lot of time together. I think it’s safe to say that we both feel something divine between us.’

‘Would you do me the honour of being my girlfriend?’ Ash’s voice was brimming with sincerity and hope.

Cece’s breath hitched in her throat. Despite having talked it out, her eyes filled with tears as she absorbed the weight of

his words. She searched his face for a long moment before finally finding her voice.

Her heart overflowed with joy. ‘Yes. Yes, I would love to be your girlfriend.’

‘Really?’ Jake piped up, his eyes shining with excitement. ‘You guys are gonna be together?’

‘Looks like it.’ Cece beamed at the boys.

‘Awesome!’ Mason cheered, his enthusiasm infectious. ‘Does this mean we get to have more fun dinners together?’

Jake jumped in. ‘Will we be brothers? Will we all live here together?’

‘I don’t see why not.’

Ash winked at the boys as he embraced Cece, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Cece couldn’t help but think that this was where she was always meant to be, marvelling at how this rough, gruff, generous ex-soldier had once been her worst nightmare and now was her forever dream.

# Chapter 17



‘**W**hen are you flying in?’

‘Tomorrow. With Tiny Tim, Cole, Kamila and Kris.’

Ash squinted at Saint onscreen on his phone. ‘We’ll have Reg and the crew on this end to assist.’

For weeks now, both men had worked day and night to lay the groundwork for a takedown of Joseph Mirren.

They’d ID’d all the gear they needed to take out on the mission, gathered the command team, and reviewed their mission prep numerous times.

All the while waiting for Liam to recover so he could be as sharp as possible to deal.

Now that he was back on his feet and working part-time at the distillery, the operation could come into its own.

‘Has the cheese been dangled?’

‘Yup, and there was a bite.’



This had involved Cece taking a call from her mother and her stepfather. During which she'd let 'slip' that Liam was staying with her in Byron Bay.

She further added she was now living at Falcon Farm. This was partly true, given how much time she and Mason spent with Ash and Jake at their place.

Not an hour later, the general called Cece, inviting himself for a weekend stay. Stating he missed his family.

He'd insisted, so Cece made a show of shifting diary commitments to accommodate him until they agreed on a time and address.

Joseph confirmed he'd be flying in on a private charter.

'We'll be ready for him,' Ash told Saint. 'You think he's coming in solo?'

'I've put a tail on the man. He's gathering a small team of shady-looking men to accompany him on his trip.'

'Who are they?'

'Three or four Czech low-life crims. All known to the cops. One of them could be the general's minder.'

'Is that right?'

'He came in on a flight from Amsterdam two weeks ago. I think he's been assigned to ensure the Ks get back into their hands.'

'Fun and games.'

'See you soon, brother.'

Ash disconnected the call. He glanced out of his Falcon House office window. His eyes caught sight of a group of unwitting guests in high spirits heading to the pool for cocktails and sundowners.

If only they had an inkling of what intrigue lay hidden behind the boho coastal vibe of Byron Bay.

He headed to his car, keen to see his woman and spend another night with his family.

He arrived just in time to catch Kit and Cece heading off the boys at a game of table tennis in his games room.

He joined the fun, subbing the boys to beat his dad and woman.

Later, after dinner and when everyone was in bed, Ash and Cece stood on the verandah of his home. He wrapped her in his arms and sighed.

He bent in for a kiss and then laid his forehead against hers.

‘You OK, baby?’ Cece asked, sensing his sombre mood.

‘Always better when I’m with you.’

‘You’re worried about Joseph.’

‘Of course. You ready?’

‘I can handle it. Liam, too, is super focused on seeing the old man pay for his crimes.’

‘It might get dicey, babe, but know I’ll do everything possible to keep us safe.’

‘I know you will.’ Cece lifted her lips to his. Her sweetness was enough for him to let go of the shadows in his mind.

He felt the world around them fade away, leaving only their undeniable connection and the promise of a future together.

At that moment, Ash was precisely where he belonged – by Cece’s side, sharing her life and love with him and their boys.



The next day, Saint landed with Sovereign’s Sydney crew.

Ash met and drove them to the Farm.

There, they mapped out scenarios, rehearsed walk-throughs, and rigged up the place, ready for their unsuspecting visitors.

Meanwhile, Saint and Ash ran Liam and Cece on what to expect.

Ash hadn’t been keen on involving them. Cece changed his mind, reminding him there was no way to keep the operation believable without their inclusion.

So he went over what would happen several times.

‘ We’ll try to have you out of the way when the fun ends and the hard yards begin.’

They were also to be kitted out in bulletproof vests under their clothes. Saint also gave Cece a few pointers with a gun. Although she’d not be armed during the operation, she’d need to know what to do if she had to use one.

It helped that Cece had retained some rusty knowledge from a shooting course she’d taken years ago when Joseph floated the idea of her joining the army.

They practised til they couldn’t do anymore, but wait.

The morning of the operation was blessed with clear blue skies and sunshine.

The scene was set with Mason and Jake safe with Kit and Rose back in Falcon House, closer to town.

Joseph Mirren was due in at 10 a.m.

Gil, who’d since recovered from his OD scare, was back on board as one of Reg’s right-hand men.

He’d been tasked with keeping an eye out for the general at the airport, and he called in, advising the man landed on time.

According to Gil’s report, the general hopped alone into a white suburban van waiting for him outside the arrivals terminal. An SUV with his Sydney cronies followed at a reasonable distance.

They headed toward Falcon Farm, with Gil tailing both vehicles.

A drone cam tracked their advance as they turned into a private driveway in Bangalow.

When it registered their arrival, the Sovereign crew melted away from view.

Ash kept an eye on Cece sitting beside Liam in the living room of his grandparent's grand old house.

She glanced towards his direction, her crossed left leg jiggling with nerves.

*Calm baby.*

He stood behind a tall cupboard at the back of the room, in the shadows of the faded mansion's vast living room.

The manor itself was nowhere near Falcon Farm. Instead, ground zero was the old Falconer family home, a ridge away from the main property.

It was far enough from the highway. Hidden amongst a stand of gum trees in the middle of the vast macadamia orchard.

No one lived in it on a permanent basis. Rather, it housed seasonal workers during the harvest months.

Yet it was still a proud mansion, having withstood the ravages of time. Its weathered boards and stalwart roof were still handsome. Empty at present, it was perfect for the operation.

Moments passed in silence.

The only sound came from the dark wood floors and doors creaking in the wind, and curtains fluttered at every window.

The large windows let soft light shine through the glass, bathing the rooms in a warm glow.

The crunch of gravel echoed through the room as a car parked in the driveway.

Ash watched as Cece jumped as the engine cut off. She and Liam exchanged a look.

Her brother cast his eyes at the door, and she smoothed her hands over her body and stood to her feet, feeling the edges of the bulletproof vest under her sweater.

Ash saw his woman push back her shoulders as she went to the door and yanked it open.

Liam joined her, crowding her in the entrance.

The siblings stared as ex-Major General Joseph Mirren walked up the stairs towards them.

From his hidden position, Ash's lips curled as he spotted the white-haired man in a dress shirt and slacks, all impeccably ironed.

His face was a canvas of tight exhaustion.

His hard eyes narrowed at Liam, and Ash caught a shiver running through his woman's body.

He hoped her mind wasn't racing with worry. *Trust the process, babe.*

First, the siblings had to act like all hell.

Cece plastered a smile on her face and reached a hand out to their guest.

‘Dad, you got here.’

The man gave her a thin slash of his teeth. ‘In one piece.’

‘You’re alone?’

‘Your mother couldn’t make it. Busy with her sewing bee.’

Ash shook his head, astounded at how easy a lie came to the older man.

He had it on good authority that Cece’s mother had slipped away from her Double Bay home just that morning.

It was where Joseph had locked her up, threatening her not to leave until his return.

After a call from Samantha, Cece pleaded with Ash to get her to safety.

At his request, Sovereign’s Sydney-based operative, Gunny, arrived at Samantha’s Double Bay address and unpicked the locks.

An appreciative Samantha escaped her prison to spend a few nights at her sister’s house, where Gunny was parked outside for added security and peace of mind.

‘If it isn’t the prodigal son.’

The general reached out and clapped his hands around his stepson.

Liam, stiff and silent, pulled out of the embrace and turned, walking into the house.

Cece tried the same, but Joseph's fingers bit into her arms, stopping her short, his voice dropping to a low whisper. 'Why didn't you tell me earlier Liam was with you these past few weeks?'

'I didn't know you were looking for him.'

From his hidden position, Ash saw Cece's jaw tic as she gave the man a tight smile. 'Won't you come inside? I baked.'

The older man followed her into the house as he stared in disgust at the old two-story mansion. 'This is your new place?'

His eyes flicked over the ageing curtains, moving back and forth in the breeze. The faded pastel walls were adorned with family portraits, ornaments, carvings, and masks lined the mantelpiece.

Cece shook her head. 'It's the old Falconer residence. A temporary option for now.'

A wooden antique fan rotated above, pushing the musty air about.

Joseph's mouth twisted. 'Have the Falconers fallen in their fortune?'

Cece shrugged. She pointed her stepfather to the worn couch, where the colours of the fabric were as muted as the rug underneath their feet.

Liam was slumped into a single-seater close by.



Joseph wheeled around to face him. 'I've been wanting to see you for some time, son. Where have you been?'

Liam shifted in his chair, uncomfortable. 'Needed some R&R.'

'From what?'

'It all became too much.'

Joseph's eyes narrowed in derision. 'Typical.'

'Tea?' Cece walked in from the adjacent dining room with a tray overflowing with cups, plates and cake.

Joseph waved her away. 'Not now. I need to find out more about Liam's absence.'

He sat on the edge of the dusty couch. 'You left Sydney without giving something of mine back, son. Do you still have it?'

Liam glared at the man, shaking from the energy required to hide his rage. 'I might. Some of it anyway.'

The general's nose flared. 'I want it, now.'

Liam held his tongue for an extended moment until Joseph shifted, rearing forward in aggression.

Liam sat back with a slow grin before serving the older man with a lazy shrug. 'Sure thing. I've no need for it.'

He got to his feet, heading towards one of the ground-floor bedrooms.

His stepfather, eyes blazing with fury, half rose to follow him, then seemed to think twice.

He sat back on the couch. 'I'll have that tea now.'

Cece poured out a cup and attempted small talk. 'How is business going?'

'As well as can be expected,' came the terse response.

By his deepened frown lines and pale, sweaty skin, Ash could see Joseph was under considerable stress.

'You seem tired. You should retire soon. No need to work so hard.' Cece kept her expression flat.

The general gave a short bark of mirthless laughter. 'If only I could.'

*Damn right*, Ash thought as Cece offered her stepfather a slice of cake.

Joseph declined the offer with a shake of his head, his eyes darting towards the corridor where Liam had disappeared.

The relief on his face was almost comical as his stepson sauntered back out again, a canvas bag in his hand.

Cece feigned innocence. 'What's in it?'

'None of your business,' Joseph clipped, rising to his feet and nabbing the prize from Liam's hands.

He yanked the receptacle open and stared at the bounty within.

He barked at his stepson. 'It's all in there?'

Liam nodded. 'Like I said, most of it.'

The general leaned in and whispered something to his stepson, who plastered on a terrified reaction.

*An Academy Award for you, Liam,* Ash thought, studying the trio, imagining Joseph's threat.

A knock at the door sounded through the cavernous ground floor.

Ash jolted. This was unexpected.

He saw Cece's quick eye flick to his hidden position.

'Won't you answer it?' Joseph uttered the words with such fake nonchalance it sent a shiver of worry through Ash.

Cece's expression was reluctant as she walked to the door and opened it.

A young man stood on the porch. He was dark, swarthy, and thin. His body shook like he'd fall over if the wind blew harder.

Ash recognised him. *Gil?*

The unexpected walk-in was *not* part of the plan.

'Hey, he grinned. 'I'm Gil, one of Ash Falconer's employees.'

Given she'd never met the man before, Cece hesitated. 'How can I help you?'

'I came by to see -'

With a sudden twist, the man pushed into the room.

From his hidden position behind the antique cupboard, Ash jolted as sudden chaos erupted.

Gil withdrew a handgun from his jacket.

Liam rushed him, but Gil used a strong kick that impacted his solar plexus and crumpled Cece's brother.

Whirling around, Gil grabbed Cece and wrapped one hand around her neck. The other pointed at her temple. 'Nobody fucking move!'

Liam froze, mid-gasp, bent over from the air knocked out of his lungs.

Mirren crowed. 'Good work, Gil.'

He clapped his dry hands together, nodding to the now smug ex-soldier.

Ash exchanged glances with Reg, who was holed up with him behind the tall cupboard.

*What the fuck?*

Ash trained his Glock on Gil.

He cursed under his breath. He didn't have a clean shot, with Joseph standing between him and the young traitor.

*Gil, fucking Gil, who'd grabbed his woman.* That alone had Ash's blood boiling.

Ash's mind raced.

*If Gil fired, would shooting back be justified? Hell yeah. Lives were at stake.*

Joseph whirled around, his face triumphant. 'I know Liam and Cece are not alone, so whoever else is in this house with them, please show yourselves.'

Reg and Ash exchanged looks. Ash jerked his chin at Reg. He was the sniper, so he'd stay back while Akimoto acted as the decoy.

The burly Japanese American emerged from the shadows, arms akimbo, his gun raised in surrender.

The general wheeled around. 'Ah, here comes the Calvary. Where's everyone else?'

Reg's face was stony. 'Outside.'

Joseph turned to Gil. 'Can you confirm that?'

The young man turned to the man who'd been his mentor, shame in his drug-addled eyes.

Ash cursed. Gil was back on the snow, that was clear - and the likely reason he'd betrayed Sovereign.

Reg nodded, regret crowding his expression.

Gil affirmed Reg's words. 'Like he said, I think the rest are outdoors.'

'Your weapon, man?'

Joseph nodded to Reg, who placed his gun on the floor and kicked it across towards the older man. Joseph picked it up with a satisfied smile.

Cece was shaking like a leaf, and Gil tightened his grip across her shoulders. She moaned, and Liam half rose from his

seat.

‘Dad, let her go. She’s your daughter, for goodness sake. I’m your son. Don’t do this.’

The general simpered. ‘You’re not my son, neither is she my daughter. You’re damaged goods. Collateral. The scion of the man I hated the most.’

Liam fell back into his chair in shock. ‘Our father?’

‘Give the man a gold star. Your father, Malcolm, was my impetus, my motivation, the reason I drove myself so hard.’

‘Why?’

Joseph threw his hands into the air. ‘First, he took my position in the forces. He outshone, out-talked, and made me look like dirt to the senior officers, and then he stole my girl.’

Liam snarled. ‘Mum?’

‘Yes, keep up, boy. We both met her for the first time on the same night. She walked in, and I spotted her first. I pointed her out to Mal. I told him I would try for a date with her.’

Cece let out a cry of disbelief.

Her stepfather gave her a cold look. ‘Believe it. He offered to be my sidekick. I accepted, thinking the support was required because she was such a beautiful woman. However, when we approached her, he again took all the glory. He charmed her so much she forgot me, and voila, he got the girl. I hated him for it.’

He paced the room as he waxed on. ‘So my chance came when he told me he was dealing drugs in the barracks. I had him snuffed by his own product. Fed him too much of the stuff one night, and he OD’d. Once he was out of the way, I took over his position, wife, and life. You kids were the unfortunate side effect. Now you’re going to be my freedom.’

Joseph reached for the canvas bag containing the drugs and money. He moved towards the door, ready to exit. ‘Let the games begin.’

He used his phone to make a call.

Moments later, a burst of gunfire roared in the fields beyond. The general’s mini-army was firing on the Sovereign team in the orchard.

*Damn Gil. He’d given away their play.*

Some of it.

Ash was confident the young fool hadn’t received the entire operational plan, so he was somewhat on the back foot.

He was also sure Saint and the Sovereign team would have pegged the intruders way before they fired. The fight would be lethal, short and sweet.

Or so he hoped.

Joseph whipped round his head to Gil. ‘Once I’m clear, ice them.’

Reg moved to interject. ‘Hey. Let’s talk, figure this thing out.’

Joseph shook his head. 'There's nothing to discuss. I have my gear and money back. There's no need for this hopeless pair. What more should we discuss?'

With the general now easing to the front door, Ash had a clear shot at Gil.

It would have to be a double tap. To make it hit. He'd need to calculate it with care. Otherwise, this would be a shit show.

Reg tried one more delaying tactic. 'You're making a mistake.'

Joseph paused mid-step. 'Am I now? I don't think so.'

While they spoke, Ash eased his phone as quietly as possible from his pocket. Without making a sound, he set the alarm on the device and placed it on the floor.

Ash shuffled to the left so that he was on an angle that put Gil between his aim and the general. Liam and Reg were in the clear.

Ash was counting on Reg's ingrained SAS training in knowing when the shot would come.

He maintained a tight, two-handed grip and waited for the alarm to go off.

In seconds, it rang out loud and clear in a haptic that shrilled and punctured the air.

The diversion worked. Gil's attention was jolted, and his arm around Cece loosened.



Ash aimed at centre mass—Gil’s chest—but his attention focused on his woman.

‘Baby drop!’

At his loud shout, Cece collapsed into a limp stance as they’d practised.

Gil was caught off guard as she slipped through his hold and fell to the floor.

Reg dived for Cece, pulling her away from the blow-back.

In fear and shock, the young man fired in a wild arc.

Time slowed for Ash as he went into sniper mode.

Calculations run through his mind. His perspective sharpened, breaking down into size, colour, and shape to almost a molecular level.

Gil fired again, which made the decision for Ash. It was either his people dying or Ash taking Gil out.

He took care with his aim, maintaining a horizontal plane. He wanted no shots to angle toward the floor, where he hoped Cece, Liam, and Reg were.

He pulled the trigger.

With a thump, Gil fell to the floor.

The general reacted. He turned his head and pointed Reg’s weapon, squeezing off a shot in Ash’s direction.

Ash responded. He spat out four bullets in seconds. The sound reverberated off the walls and the roof, creating a wave of energy.

Surfaces rattled, and ornaments crashed to the floor as the bullets went through flesh and crashed into the walls.

A thud followed as the crumpling body as the general collapsed.

A clatter of footsteps sounded on the stairs outside as Saint and Cole crashed into the house.

Reg lifted a hand as they stormed through, their weapons cocked. 'Hold fire! They're down, we got 'em!'

The walls were a mass of holes from the shoot-out, and the front door hung in tatters.

Smoke and gunpowder residue hung in the air.

Ash tucked his Glock away and charged into the aftermath, sliding to his knees before his woman.

Cece's wild eyes met his, and she folded into his arms.

'You're safe, baby,' he murmured. 'You're safe. I've got you.'

She was shaking hard, and he rose to his feet with her in his arms as he looked around at the carnage.

To where Gil lay face down on the ground, a bullet wound in his upper back.

Guilt ran roughshod through Ash. *Such a waste. This could have been all prevented.*

Liam sat on the floor, staring at the scene in shock. His eyes came up to Ash's as she shook his head, unbelieving.

Ash sliced his eyes to the general.

Splayed out on the ground, face turned to one side.

He wasn't moving, but his eyes were open, his mouth gasping like a fish.

Ash spotted two exit points—one in the middle of his back on the left-hand side and one on his thigh.

He beckoned to Reg, who shakily got to his feet.

Ash pointed to his woman and her brother. 'Brother, take them both away from this mess.'

Reg reached for Cece to lift her to her feet, but she raised a hand to stay him. 'I'll be OK.'

She rose, meeting Ash's gaze for a long moment.

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. 'I'll sort this out and be with you, babe. Soon.'

She nodded. Her face was steely as she nabbed her brother's hand and led him to the verandah.

Ash watched them leave. Before turning to Reg, now crouched next to his fallen ward, placing a finger on the neck of the sprawled man.

'Gil?'

'Gone.' Reg's voice cracked with emotion. 'Son of a bitch. He was in with Mirren all along.'

Ash's jaw clenched, wracked with rage at yet another victim falling to Joseph's diabolical greed.

He walked over to the man in question and knelt next to him.

Saint joined him, standing shoulder to shoulder in support.  
'Good shooting.'

'What happened outside?' Ash growled.

'We had them pegged from a mile away. They shot off but we had pinned them down before they saw us coming. We pushed Cole out as bait - made him the only visible target. They went for him, and our guys emerged from the undergrowth and gave them a good beating. We've captured one. Two are done and dusted.'

'Who's alive?'

Saint sucked his teeth as he sheathed his weapon. 'The Czech handler. He's screaming blue murder in Slovak.'

Cole, who stood beside Saint, jerked a chin to his older brother, eyes clouded with concern. 'You OK?'

'I'll be fine,' Ash clipped.

He'd unfinished business to attend to, with the man bleeding out onto the wooden floor.

Turning, he touched a knee to the floor and loomed over the prone body. 'Joseph, can you hear me?'

The wounded man's eyes fluttered open, and his mouth worked as he tried to speak. 'I need help.'

Ash nodded grim-faced. 'In time. You'll first answer my questions. Starting with Gil. How did you get to him?'

A gurgle of air seeped from a wounded lung as Joseph gasped. 'Help me.'

Ash glared down at him dispassionately. 'You're nowhere near death's door. So tell me what I need to know, and you'll receive the aid you need.'

Joseph's hands fumbled at his chest, but he gathered some strength from within. 'He was weak. Hungry for it, desperate for the Red Adder mix of fentanyl and coke.'

Ash hissed.

The general ignored his irate reaction. 'He begged for it. So I had him come out here and feed me intel in exchange for product.'

'Why?'

'I suspected you were looking into me. Do you think I cared that Cece needed a job? She was just leverage. I already had an in with Gil but was keen for another angle.'

'How did you know it was me?'

Joseph grimaced. 'I guessed. You were always the straight one on the squad, the one I couldn't bend to my will. Then you went and made a name for yourself on tour. Earned your decorations and started a security firm that Defence and government trip over to lock in. Of course, they would turn to you to look into me. It was mere deduction.'

Ash's nostrils flared. 'Why the song and dance? Pretending not to know I was looking into you?'

Joseph laughed. 'Why not? I love playing cat and mouse games. I went into the army for the adrenaline rush of the

hunt. It infected me. I missed it after I retired from the military. It's a bug that never lost its hold on me.'

Ash gave the general a long, cold look. 'Chasing a high at the expense of so many.'

The general's wandering eyes met his and fixed on him. 'Well said.'

'Who was your contact in the Red Adder gang? We know that while on tour, you linked up with their leader, who was fronting a Czech military unit. Together, you set up a drug ring that used Defence Force resources to get drugs into Australia.'

Joseph's eyes glittered. 'You're a treasure trove of information.'

'No, you were. You shared most of it with us.'

Joseph growled. 'I did no such thing.'

Ash gave a grim laugh. 'Ah, but you did. We've got you on secretly recorded videos and wiretaps. You're toast on that front. So who's the warlord?'

Joseph shook his head. 'I'm no rat.'

'You're worse. You're a bug, one I'll enjoy squashing under my feet. No matter, we have his name already. Dmitri Kirov.'

Joseph squirmed, his face falling in fright.

Ash grinned. 'The truth compels you, I see. I hear the man is ruthless against anyone who snitches. He's also got a

network of ready-made assassins throughout the prisons. I'm sure you'll be thrilled to meet them.'

He leaned in closer and knelt by the fallen man. 'One thing though, I haven't been able to work out,' he paused for a moment, 'is the location of Slade North. Where is he?'

Cole and Saint exclaimed behind him, reacting to what he'd just revealed.

Ash had never discussed his suspicions about their lost squad brother with them until now.

'How would I know?' The general tried to deflect, yet his eyes told a different story. They'd narrowed and turned sly.

Ash grinned without mirth and took his weapon, jamming the barrel into the seeping chest wound of the man below him.

Joseph squirmed and gasped.

Ash was sure he wasn't hurting him that much—just enough for candour to emerge. He barged on, unmoved. 'Confirm the following for me. Slade North is alive, and his location is secret. Your Red Adder associates kidnapped him during a Sabre squad ambush. So he wouldn't share what he'd found about your acts of treason? Am I right?'

Mirren stared at Ash wide-eyed.

Ash pushed the barrel in further, and Joseph screamed.

'Are my suspicions correct?'

Now weeping in pain, the general nodded, gasping, shuddering.

Ash was hit with such a lurch of feeling he almost fell back as Cole and Saint rushed in, their faces incandescent with fury.

Cole growled. ‘What the fuck? Where is he?’

The general coughed, his body shaking harder. ‘Somewhere along the Gulf of Aden. Send me to the hospital, and I’ll give you coordinates.’

Ash cocked his gun, aimed at the general’s head, and fired.

To a spot just above it. The bullet scorched past the ear of the older man, who screamed in fright as the lead projectile sunk into the floorboards.

‘OK! OK! He’s with the Salebaan clan, part of the Harardheere-Hobyo Network. In their Upli compound, seaward, south of Mogadishu.’

‘Why?’ Ash’s voice was cold, cutting.

The general’s lip curled with scorn. ‘He saw something he shouldn’t have. He was also useful as collateral.’

The four Sovereign men in the room stared at the grinning man, madness glinting in his wild eyes.

Ash cursed under his breath and clenched his fist to stop him from slamming it into the older man’s face. He straightened to his feet and jerked his chin to his friends.

Moving as one, they walked out of the room.

Leaving the writhing, bleeding man behind.



‘Hey.’ Joseph called out, his voice hoarse and cracked in fear and desperation. ‘Hey!’

Still, the Sovereign men powered on.

On the verandah, Ash handed his bloodied weapon to Cole and turned left, lifting his woman into his arms. He charged towards a pair of SUVs parked at the foot of the stairs. He helped Cece inside, then followed suit. Saint hopped into the driver’s seat. Cole took the passenger side.

Liam and Reg followed, sliding into a second SUV.

The cars peeled off, roaring away from the old homestead, leaving a cloud of dust and the weak cries of a condemned man in their wake.

Much, much later came the sound of sirens and ambulances to the rescue.

# Chapter 18



**S**ix weeks later, Ash picked up a call from Saint.

‘Turn on the news. ABC.’

He flicked his desk screen to a live coverage channel, where a dark-haired host droned away.

The visuals flicked to a series of maps and grainy footage of a night op in motion.

*‘An Australian hostage has been rescued in a recent dramatic operation involving a joint US and Australian special operations task force in Somalia.’*

*After touchdown some days ago, they advanced on foot to the Salebaan pirate clan compound south of Mogadishu.*

*The kidnapped ex-soldier was freed during a fierce firefight. Twenty gunmen holding the hostage lost their lives, officials said.*

*According to reports, the kidnappers had seized Soldier X many years ago during a protracted battle in Afghanistan.*

*Injured during the initial firefight, he became collateral between various militia groups.*

*At the time of the rescue, he was a captive of the Salebaan Clan, which dominates piracy, smuggling and trafficking off the coast of central Somalia. Key figures from the clan were also arrested in the raid.*

*Liberated, Soldier X flew back to Australia in a military aircraft. From reports, Soldier X's family and friends wept for joy at the news he was now free.*

*Somalia's transitional government welcomed the operation. The new U.N. envoy to Somalia – the first permanent U.N. representative to the region in 17 years – also supported the successful military exercise.'*

Ash breathed out, turning off the screen. 'Fuck yeah.'

The Sovereign crew were seven days back from their harrowing overseas mission.

Where they'd brought home Slade North, the last and missing man from their Sabre Squad.

Saint huffed on the line. 'You were a GOAT in theatre. Never seen you so ruthless with a sniper rifle.'

'We all were, brother. I couldn't have lived with myself if we'd failed him again. How's he doing?'

'Not talking. Sleeping most times and deep into rehab or silent when awake. Apart from this evening, Kamila has been by his side all day, every day.'

‘I can imagine. She was a badass, too, during the whole show.’

‘The woman outdid herself.’

‘I’ll visit Sydney next week to check in on him.’

‘No worries, Ash. See you soon. I’m heading to the Eatery now for a well-earned whisky.’

‘I’ll be there soon to raise a glass with you in a few, my friend. For a job well done.’

Saint was staying at Falcon House. He and the rest of the Sabre Squad were taking a well-earned vacation after their successful mission.

Ash tapped off the call and gazed out of his window.

His heart ached recalling how he’d wept when he’d seen Slade’s thin, worn face for the first time in over a decade.

It still killed him. Yet their reunion had been as sweet as he’d imagined after all these years.

‘Babe, you coming?’

He shook himself out of his head and turned to see the love of his life tracking towards him.

Her beauty exploded all over him, wrecking him like it did every time he saw her.

When she got to his side, he bent and gave her a searing kiss, ignoring her lip gloss protests.

She panted against his lips when he released her. ‘What was that for?’

‘For being my light out of the darkness. Thinking of you and the boys and Slade’s freedom kept me alive these past few weeks.’

She gave him a long, tender, gentle look as her eyes misted over.

‘You’re not alone in that sentiment, Falconer. We are each other’s light.’

He stroked her cheek. ‘And may it shine on, steady over the years. Now light my way to this party.’



The Sovereign crew gathered in the gardens just outside The Eatery.

Drinks circulated, and nibbles were served as they waited to start their well-deserved banquet.

The sky was awash with brilliant pinks and oranges. At the same time, a rainbow arched above in a kaleidoscope of reds, yellows, oranges, blues, indigos, and violet.

The colours of the Big Dipper and of hope.

While not quite celebrating, the Sovereign family was marking its recent victories and taking time to cherish each other over a meal.

Cece wore a draped midi dress, an easy and breezy masterpiece that flowed over her curves. She’d paired it with

her signature Identita heels, this time in bright purple.

Ash was in casual slacks, tee and slides, a reliable pairing with little effort or rules required other than the fit of the trousers over his muscled body and the slim T-shirt.

Jake and Mason were in shorts and tees. Their feet shod in good old Aussie flip-flops. In which they implausibly raced around the property during cocktail hour.

Rose showed up in a stunning gown in peacock colours. Kit, grinning with her on his arm. Liam accompanied them, now their unofficial third son. Diesel, too, was present, as was Reg.

Saint, Kris, Kamila and Cole represented the Sydney crew.

The men came in stylish tees and slim slacks combos with suave dress shoes. Kamila shone in a drop-dead navy sheath dress.

During the last few days, Cece got to know Ash's Sovereign crew better. Kris was dark-haired, tall, silver-eyed, and imposing. Almost pirate-like with his rough-bearded-messy-man-bun and dark hair with silver highlights.

Kamila, who'd jetted in just for the evening from Sydney, was stunning. Her hair hung down her back and was a deep black, her eyes shimmering with intelligence, her skin honey dark and smooth.

Cece thought she was a fitter, more shredded version of Naomi Campbell.

Quiet and self-assured, Kamila's eyes flicked around, noticing everything around her, even the finest and most minor details.

Cece liked her, having shared in-depth conversations about life, love and loss earlier that day poolside at Falcon House.

Jake's excited shouts broke through her thoughts. She watched him race around the gardens with Ash in pursuit, hunting him down. Father and son collapsed on the grass in an impromptu father-son wrestling match.

It was adorable and heart-melting.

Cece spotted Mason standing by the tangled pair, a wistful look in his eye.

Ash, too, noticed because he looked up mid-wrestle and beckoned to her son.

Mace, who'd missed out on the attention of a father for many years now, now had Ash's love to count on.

The joy on his face was incandescent as he threw himself on Ash. His laughter brought tears to her eyes as Ash treated Mason to a moment of pure magic, tackling him to the ground.

'Not this shit again.'

Cece turned to see Saint loping up to her, a grin on his face and a toothpick between his lips.

'Got to give it to him, big guy is on target. Even when he's got two bucks shaking their antlers at him, he has them both in a crucifix while taking some good belting with the elbows.'

Cece laughed at Saint's commentary. She'd come to enjoy the man's dry humour.

He wore it like armour, always sanguine, droll, and light on the surface with a thick impenetrable wall underneath. Yet she sensed there was so much more depth to Saint Tahana than met the eye.

'Your boy is as tough as Jake, but those two pups are a few years away from the submission they're going for. You, my lady, will have fun watching it unfold.'

With that, Saint strolled away.

Cece was caught between jags of laughter and a wave of emotion as she witnessed Mason's play with the man lighting up her world and that of her son.

She turned away to wipe tears from her eyes.

Her body flamed as Ash's arms wrapped around her from behind. Her man had a way of lighting her up from inside with a single touch.

'Doing good, baby?'

She turned to face him. 'I'm awesome.'

'That you are.'

'You OK after getting smashed by the boys?'

'Hey! I won. The silver-back once again dominated the arena.'

'Your feats of strength enthralled me. Even better, without getting any grass stains on your ass. Mind-blowing, Falconer.'



Where are the boys now?’

Ash grinned in triumph. ‘Gone to find easier targets. Met everyone?’

‘Most of them. Even Kamila who’s shared some hairy commando stories. She’s badass.’

Ash nodded as he pulled Cece even closer. ‘She put together most of Slade’s rescue. She worked to the bone to plan the logistics, the mapping, the whole shebang. She deserves a medal, no doubt.’

While Cece hadn’t met Slade yet, she’d heard enough about how much he commanded the respect and love of his mates.

Ash venerated the man who’d survived years of torture and mistreatment as a hostage and pawn for rebel terrorist groups.

‘I’m so happy for you all. Bringing him home must feel amazing. That took courage, baby,’ she said.

Ash smiled, yet his expression held a tinge of sadness. ‘Slade is worth it. He’s one of the finest men you’ll ever know. And to have survived over twelve years in the wild and still be as sharp as ever is beyond me.’

‘I can’t wait to meet him.’

‘You will when he’s ready. He’s being very picky with who sees him. Most times, it’s Kamila, which makes sense, given she was his closest friend for years before he got captured. In fact, she’s flying out in two hours back to him. Where she feels she belongs.’

Cece spotted Reg in the distance, wandering solo along the edge of the beach with a beer in his hand.

Cece suspected Gil's passing was why the man was more sombre and stern than usual.

Ash caught her gaze. 'Reg was close to Gil, as he is to all his mentees. He's grieving.'

'No doubt,' Cece said. 'Losing someone he cared for to drugs and greed must be difficult for him to process.'

'I'll have to live with the fact I was responsible for his passing,' Ash murmured.

'You did what you had to, baby,' Cece said, stroking her man's cheek. 'Defence thought the same and cleared you for your actions that day.'

'Still doesn't take the sting away.'

'I know.'

Ash's rasp was gruff, tinged with sadness. 'Damn Gil. A waste of young life with so much potential.'

Cece wrapped her arm around his waist. 'You did your best for him, but he made his choice. There's nothing more you could have done.'

The young man's funeral was slated for the following Saturday in Orange, the town in country New South Wales, where he'd been born. Ash and Reg would be in attendance, along with a good contingent of the Sovereign team.

Ash sighed into her hair. ‘I hope the storm’s now over, babe.’

‘I hope so, too. Meantime, let’s celebrate the wins so far.’

As if reading minds, Rich appeared, a small dinner gong in hand, which he tapped to announce the meal was ready.

‘Mum, we’re starving!’

Cece turned, laughing, as Mason and Jake barrelled past. ‘You two had better find a seat if you want to eat.’

The boys yelped back in excitement before skittering to their places.

Soon, everyone sat down, and the tables were jam-packed.

The entire Sovereign crew took out three expansive tables in a private corner of The Eatery. They overflowed with laughter, conversation and sharing, the buzz a sign that it’d be a night to remember.

The banquet began with Ash making a toast, thanking his friends for banding together and returning their once-lost mate to the fold.

They all raised their glasses to Slade and fell into an impromptu minute of silence. In remembrance of all the suffering he’d had to endure and how he’d dealt like a champ.

The conversation picked up as servers wheeled out the starters. Prepared by Rich, each course celebrated his farm-to-table aesthetic.

The first course was grass-fed beef tartare alongside locally made bacon and a spicy scotch quail egg. Accompanied by pancetta and soba salad with tomato and avocado.

The main course featured a steak with sides of sauteed mushrooms and lamb's belly with braised fennel. The lamb racks had been cooked in a hot wood-fired oven and served with chorizo and green pea risotto.

Rich's apricot and tamarillo chutney balanced out the richness of the lamb.

The last course was dessert, accompanied by a chamomile and honey crème brûlée. Alongside was a chocolate cake infused with citrus, black pepper, and cinnamon, which Jake and Mason destroyed.

Ash's distillery, Falcon By the Sea, supplied the wine and whisky. His legendary cocktails were made on demand at the bar, including The Al Capone, a whisky-based mix with pineapple, vanilla, and honey notes.

Last was a bourbon-based whisky cocktail called Moonshine. Developed by Diesel, it contained honey, calvados, and Jack Daniels.

As everyone ate and drank, Cece looked around at her friends, family, and boyfriend, not quite believing this was her portion.

She turned Ash and found him gazing at her like she was the only woman in the world.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. ‘You’re a hundred million dollar treasure, baby, and I’ll give the world to ensure you’re always by my side for life.’

She shivered, her heart overflowing with emotion, and she was so glad he’d almost wrecked her. He still did every night in their bed, undoing her with his love.

‘You feel me?’ Ash whispered to her.

Beyond The Eatery’s glass doors, the waves beat a melody on the shore.

Above, the dusky sky melded into a symphony of stars. She could hear the party still going on around them as she lost herself in his gorgeous green eyes.

The world fell away.

‘I feel you,’ Cece told him, her heart filled with love. ‘With all of my being.’

They snuck in a quick kiss, then pulled apart to be social. Still, Ash wrapped his hand around her, his attentiveness leaving her cherished and loved.



Later, Cece and her newfound family returned to Ash’s house.

While Ash put the boys to bed, Liam and Cece sat downstairs reminiscing about the last few weeks.

‘What a great night. Sucks balls that so much suffering came before it.’

‘What sucks is that Joseph could have been successful in life without destroying lives,’ Cece said, pouring a nightcap for Liam.

‘He should have done what most ex-Army senior retirees did. Joined a board, wrote a book about his time in the military, or travelled around the globe with mum.’

Cece shook her head. ‘Instead, he got addicted to being a puppet master of hate, revenge and adrenaline. Pure evil.’

‘We were mere pawns in his game.’ Liam sounded morose, not quite over the sting of being used by his stepfather.

Cece had long moved on, caring not one iota for the man who tried to destroy her brother.

Liam stirred from his reverie. ‘What happens to mum now?’

Cece smiled as she took a sip of her wine and folded into a couch. ‘She’s talked to me about selling up in Double Bay and buying a property in Byron so she can be close to Mason and us.’

Liam nodded. ‘It’ll be so cool to have her live here and see my evolution into a farm boy. She’ll never believe it.’

He’d decided to stay on with the Falconers, accepting the role of farm apprentice.

The few weeks he'd worked on the land had done him good. He'd put on weight, his cheeks filled out, and his muscle mass returned. Revealing handsome features underneath the beard that he now sported.

Cece smirked at him. 'Can't wrap my head around it myself. From drug pimp to farm hand. I sense a book in there somewhere.'

Liam laughed as Ash descended the stairs after putting the kids to bed.

Cece reached a hand out to her man. 'They down?'

He leaned over and kissed Cece. 'Never seen them blackout so fast.'

'It's been quite the day.'

'Fuck, it's been a major year.' Ash groaned, flopping beside her and twisting to place his head on Cece's lap.

'Where we at with Joseph?' Liam asked drily.

Ash flicked his eyes to him. 'I spoke with Senior Inspector Kitt yesterday. Once he's released from the military hospital, he'll be charged for his part to play in organised crime. For conspiracy to import vast amounts of kilos of cocaine from the Middle East to Australia and for treason and betraying his men all those many years ago.'

Liam whistled under his breath. 'Damn, that's cold.'

Cece pursed her lips. 'It's what he deserves. How long will he go away for?' she asked, trailing her hands through Ash's

hair.

‘Between the evidence derived from your recordings, Liam, our wiretaps and Slade’s witness accounts, ADFIS RCMP could slap him with up to 35 years. That’s what Kitt is recommending. He may get some reprieve if he spills the beans on the leaders of Czech mafia families and the shootings and havoc throughout the East Coast in their drug wars. All eyes are now on their kingpin, Dmitri Kirov.’

‘Who he is he?’ Cece asked.

Ash shifted so he could see her better. ‘The mastermind behind the Red Adder gang. No one knows where he lives. Some think it’s on a yacht that moves freely between all oceans. His nephew Radian Kirov, who lives in Sydney, is suspected to be his local gendarme. We believe he was liaising with Joseph, calling the shots on killing rival gang leaders and extorting protection money from small business owners.’

Liam’s lips twisted. ‘I know Radian. He’s a nasty mofo. He and Joseph were working together. I can testify to it all.’

Ash jerked his chin. ‘You may have to, brother. Your testimony is money. Radian’s brother Marko was the handler we nabbed along with Joseph. He’s chosen not to say a word but give it time; he’ll soon be singing if he wants to live under protective custody.’

‘So, is your Defence contract over now?’ Liam asked.

Ash shook his head. ‘In fact, they’ve increased the scope. We’re now chasing down the cartel down across the globe.’



With any luck, we'll track Dmitri, and the Red Adder era of dominance will end.'

Cece nodded. 'I think we all want that.'

The trio fell into silence. Outside, the sky filled with stars, welcoming the sliver of the moon peeking over the horizon.

The heat from the day finally released into the night, returning the scent of the sea and the forest to the hinterland.

Gazing over the view, Cece's heart swelled with the hope of creating a new future with Ash and their boys.

*Forget Joseph, forget her past, forget her disappointments.*  
The freedom and joy she felt in this moment were all that mattered now.



He proposed one early morning during their weekly coastal walk.

The ritual was one they'd come to cherish. As they discovered how much they both loved immersing themselves in the tranquil beauty of Byron Bay's coastal trails.

Cece was gazing at yet another breathtaking viewpoint, soaking in the calmness and tranquillity, when Ash fake-coughed to attract her attention.

Turning around, she found him on one knee, an open jewel box in his hand and a gentle smile.

She'd met his jade gaze with her tear-filled hazel one. 'Oh.'

'Cece,' his already gruff voice cracking even more. 'You came into my world and wrecked it, babe. All the sleepless nights, all the heartbreak, all the darkness and pain I went through led me to you. But I know if I'd not gone through it, I'd have never found a love like you. My world is brighter now, and I want to share it always with you. If you'll have me.'

She tried but failed to wipe the tears streaming down her face. 'Yes! I do! I will!'

She fell into his arms, and their lips melded as he placed the simple diamond tear-shaped ring on her finger.

Ash caressed her face, his molten eyes glittering down at her. 'Baby, with this rock on your hand, I'll give you the world. That's my sacred promise.'

Cece gave him her soul, letting it shine through her gold and hazel eyes. 'This time, for both of us, it will last forever. I know it.'

As they kissed, the mesmerising sounds of crashing waves and the gentle rustle of palm trees provided an enchanting symphony; their skin caressed by the gentle sea breeze that carried love, freedom and release.



Ash and Cece formalised their partnership six months later.

They wanted a small wedding - a simple celebration of their love for each other, the ocean and their loved ones.

Cece suggested Falcon House for the wedding to Ash one morning over breakfast. ‘It’s the one place that has welcomed Mace and me and brought so much healing.’

Ash nodded as he poured milk into their sons’ cereal bowls. ‘Having the wedding at Falcon House is a given, babe. Do whatever you like for the day. The place will be all yours.’

She sighed with happiness. ‘We couldn’t have picked a more perfect venue if we tried. Plus, this way, we get to include everyone we love at the hotel and family and friends.’

As Falcon House’s events director, Cece was more than up to the task of organising each element of the day herself.

Her approach to planning was practical and organised. She made decisions fast, spending her evenings after school pick-ups updating budgets, booking travel for their far-flung friends and negotiating with suppliers.

Cece set forth designing a celebration weekend focused on fun and well-being.

Guests would have access to the spa and the Eatery’s best meals. Yoga by the sea, early morning runs and group walks

were added to the itinerary - with opt-out options included for those who preferred to sleep in.

For the wedding itself, Cece envisioned a sit-down event in a tent that could hold 120 guests. The concept was for a ceremony by the water and a colour palette inspired by nature.

Perched on the edge of the gardens facing the beach, the luminous tent would be bathed with natural light.

She added white flowing curtains for romance, giving glimpses of the delightful gardens, swimming pool and golden sands beyond.

The news that their boss was marrying their new favourite colleague delighted Rachel, Brad and Denise.

They stepped in to ensure everything would run without incident, from the ceremony to cocktails to the food and wine service at the reception.

Rich, now over his crush on Cece, offered to create a banquet-worthy menu based on his kitchen's core tenets of simplicity, flavour and sustainability.

The one thing Ash stood firm on overseeing himself was the music.

He managed to land 'Brass Nirvana', one of Australia's leading brass bands, to serenade the guests on arrival.

Made up of a few of his ex-military colleagues, it was an ensemble of fifteen of the country's best cornet and percussion players with a vast repertoire, from classics to the latest hits.

He commissioned them to perform before the ceremony and during the bridal walk song. And for some light music for the signing of the register and as the couple exited the venue.

Selecting the wedding dress was exciting for Cece, who flew to Sydney to pick her dress. She went straight to designer Moira Hughes' studio and picked three dresses. Two weeks later, she returned and made a completely different choice.

'I just fell in love with the third one,' she told Rachel over lunch one day. The woman had become a good friend, and Cece enjoyed brainstorming wedding ideas with her. 'Even better, they're rushing it to me in less than a month. Record time! I'm so glad it worked out because I loved it, and it's perfect for my beach wedding.'

She picked the Byron dress design, named not after her new hometown but after the leader of the Romantic Movement, Lord Byron, who'd influenced the opulent femininity of the gown.

Translucent layers of silk created the perfect trestle for the French 3D lace to reach and grow from the tip of her heels to the peak of the gown. The branches had been specially designed to wrap around the body, highlighting the silhouette, while the corset's design was sculpted from beneath.

It was what she'd always dreamed of.

On the morning of the wedding, the weather was on point, with sunshine bathing the lawns and gardens in a golden glow.

Cece stared at her reflection in the mirror at her Falcon House cottage as her mother helped her slip into her dress. ‘It’s all so surreal.’

Samantha hugged her. ‘This is exactly how brides should feel, my darling: pampered, loved, on top of the world.’

Cece kept her jewellery pieces simple and befitting the al fresco theme. She wore a classic diamond necklace, bracelet, drop diamond, and pearl earrings belonging to her grandmother.

For beauty, she worked with a sun-kissed look and kept her hair down to ensure it was as natural as possible. ‘Less is always more.’

She smiled at Samantha, who looked radiant, fresh off a trip to Europe she’d ventured on alone.

It’d been her gift to herself, in reward for all the hard times she’d endured with Joseph. She’d had a ball, traipsing through a gastronomic adventure of Italy, Spain and France. She’d met solo travellers like herself and made friends for life.

At the same time, she’d indulged in out-of-this-world food experiences and drank the most heavenly of wines.

She’d returned refreshed and renewed, looking forward to an active life as a single and now empowered older woman.

This, she shared with her daughter. ‘I know less is more dear. My life is so much more without your meddling stepfather.’

Cece laughed. ‘That’s an understatement.’

‘Enough about me.’ Samantha laughed as she zipped up her daughter. ‘It’s your day, honey, so let’s get those stunning shoes on.’

‘With pleasure.’

Cece slid into her Identità pointed-toe, slingback décolleté stiletto heel in satin studded with crystals. She gasped at how gorgeous they looked on her feet. ‘Divine.’

The ceremony started just after 4 p.m., the service taking place under a jaw-dropping bower.

Made of garden and spray roses, Geraldton wax blooms, everlasting daisies, banksias and king proteas. Also interwoven were hanging amaranthus, flannel flowers and waratahs.

Guests sat amongst flower-draped garden chairs arranged in a circle around it.

As the brass band played, leading the charge were two grinning, cheeky, boyish ring bearers who strutted in casual cream made-to-measure suits by Sydney tailor Brent Wilson.

Ash followed his sons down the aisle, flanked by Cole and Slade in a wheelchair, also clad in Brent Wilson.

Then came Rose and Kit, the pair beaming at their firstborn son’s happiness.

Silence fell as everyone sat up in anticipation.

The brass band launched into the evocative ‘Rise’ arrangement by Stijn Aertgeerts, signalling the bride’s arrival.

A collective gasp rose from the guests as Cece appeared at the steps of the Conservatory under a magnificent flower arch.

She clutched a wild native bouquet woven with white and cream proteas, quicksand roses, soft green eucalyptus, and succulent features.

An elegantly dressed Liam and Samantha, resplendent in a gold and peach gown, flanked her.

Liam gave Cece a squeeze on her arm. 'Ready?'

'As I'll ever be. Thank you both for being here.' Cece's whisper overflowed with emotion. 'For supporting me. I couldn't have done it without you.'

Samantha smiled at her daughter. 'We're so proud of you. You're such a beautiful bride, Cece.'

Liam nudged her. 'Now go get your man!'

Cece stepped forward, feeling more beautiful than she'd ever done and in awe of this moment. It showed on her glowing face as she walked between her brother and mother as they escorted her to her groom.

He turned to face them as they drew close.

On setting his eyes on Cece, Ash clapped his hand over his heart with such drama that it set the wedding party off into hysterics.

Yet his face softened when she stood by his side. He gazed down at her with such love that tears pricked her eyes.

'Beauty babe. How can one man be so lucky?'



‘I love you too, Falconer.’

They slipped into a world of their own for a moment. Only breaking their gaze when Saint coughed and led them in an emotion-charged and moving ceremony.

The couple exchanged personal vows and ethically made wedding bands by Temple and Grace.

The present company hooted and whistled as the couple, now Mr and Mrs Falconer, sealed their promises with a heated kiss.

The group headed for cocktails by the beach, where the lush landscape of the Falcon House provided an enchanting backdrop for photographs.

As their photographer captured their post-wedding joy on the beach, and brass concerto notes floated in the air, Ash gazed into Cece’s eyes. ‘This, baby, is, hands down, one of the best days of my life. The only other when Jake was born.’

She smiled up at him. ‘Is it sinking in yet?’

Ash shook his head in wonder, his eyes twinkling. ‘Never, it feels like I’m dreaming.’

He kissed her then, not caring who saw or was around.

Cece blushed, her head spinning as his arms closed around her.

‘I love you.’

She reached up to hold him close, her mind, body and soul humming. ‘I love you too.’

While the Falcon House crew set up the tent for the reception, they mingled with friends under the rattan-woven fans, keeping guests cool.

The brass ensemble provided background music during the afternoon drinks reception.

Twilight fell on the tented reception, setting every surface aglow with golden light.

The reception began with Cole and Kris giving the groom's toasts, which had everyone in stitches as they shared stories from Ash's younger and wilder days.

Slade also spoke, his words more solemn and thought-provoking. He had the room in floods of tears as he shared how much he cherished the sacrifice of his friends, Ash and Kamila especially, in rescuing him.

The atmosphere was electric, laced with laughter and joy.

Together, Ash, Cece and Rich had designed a light summer menu.

The artful light fare in sizeable sharing platters captured their favourites, from sesame bread butter bites to burrata cheese, aromatic and spice-laden salads, fresh barbecue fish, and thick Wagyu steaks.

There were trays of lamb perfumed with ginger, cumin, and cloves served alongside roasted beetroot and garlic in saffron-and-orange-scented yoghurt, grilled asparagus and courgettes in garlic butter and palette cleansing lemons in olive oil.

Fresh bread was served with baba ghanouj, sprinkled with pomegranate seeds, feta and copious amounts of za'atar. As well as fragrant rice packed with shallots, garlic, fresh coriander leaves and saffron.

For a bold statement, Cece and Ash chose a pavlova wedding cake layered with mangoes, apricots, lychees, berries and cream. Perched on a detailed stand, Rich had arranged multiple mini pavs around the dessert table as delectable small treats.

The food was paired with the best regional small-format wines and Falcon By The Sea's signature multi-layered single malt whisky with the aromas of fruit and Australian native berries, served on the rocks.

The first dance was to their favourite track, 'Magic'. Cece fought tears as Ash lifted her into his arms, swaying together.

After that, followed more dancing, more toasts.

Their DJ got on stage and got people to sing and dance between live brass sets.

Later, the couple cut the towering pavlova dream cake, which was devoured in minutes.

Cece hit the dance floor in a dazzling two-piece, a bejewelled white silk cami. She matched it with flowing draped pants that balanced romance with prep.

Later in the night, they served ice cream cones and grilled cheese toasties with pickles that Jake and Mason gulped down in the dozens.

The couple danced with their two sons for the night's last song.

Both boys clutched onto their parents, unwilling to let them go.

Jake's mouth trembled. 'We'll miss you both.'

Mason was more stoic. 'I know newlyweds need a honeymoon, but you must call us.'

Cece kissed the top of his head. 'Every day. Promise.'

Ash reassured them with a hug, his voice strong and steady above the pulsing music. 'We'll be back in two weeks. It'll go so fast. Rose and Kit have a gazillion fun things planned for you guys. You won't even miss us.'

The night ended with much fanfare, handfuls of rice and showers of petals.

The newlyweds jumped into Ash's truck, which the Sovereign team had plastered in ribbons and garlands of flowers.

They drove off, leaving behind their wistful family, friends and guests. Who trailed back to the party, walking barefoot along the shoreline, listening to the waves break under a moonlit sky.



Ash's Landcruiser growled onto the sand at Sovereign Beach.

The wheels crunched over the dunes as they tracked past the Observatory towards the far end of the secluded shoreline.

He stopped, turning off the engine so they were enveloped in darkness.

Above, a bank of clouds had rolled in, obscuring the moon's pale light.

Cece could just make out Ash's profile, and she gave him a crooked smile. 'We're honeymooning here, babe?'

'Not quite.'

He touched a button, and the car's intense LED light bars beamed on. They lit a long, dark jetty that jutted out to sea, disappearing into blackness.

One Cece had not encountered on their previous visit.

'Intriguing.'

Ash shot her an enigmatic look before flashing the LEDs on and off twice more.

He slid from the truck as the shadows fell around them once more.

'For real babe, where are we going?'

Ash ignored Cece, rounding the bonnet. He opened her door and put out his hands.

'Hop up. I'll carry you.'

Incredulous, she let him pick up her.

He used a booted foot to slam shut the passenger door.

Then he was moving. With her in his arms, tracking over the sand toward the dim pier.

Cece's night sight kicked in, and she made out the waves crashing to shore. She wrapped her arms around his neck. 'This is one very mysterious threshold.'

'You haven't seen anything yet.'

'Our bags?'

She'd packed two suitcases with palm trees and the sun in mind, the only hint from Ash of their destination.

'They've gone ahead.'

'Where to?'

He didn't answer, carrying her like she weighed nothing in his arms.

The waves rocked the dark supports until he got to the end of the jetty, placing her down on her feet.

She gave him a pointed look. 'You're a fount of secrets, honey. This gets more curious by the second.'

He only grunted as she wrapped her hands around his waist.

Not a minute went by when she heard a rumble.

Powerful, throbbing, cutting through the waves.

Like a spectre from the abyss came a silhouette. Moving towards them in darkness, its enormous shape blacking out the

starry sky.

A single bulb pulsed from high above it as a warning to low-flying craft.

Reverse thrusters kicked in, and water churned as the massive yacht moved with precision to the edge of the jetty.

Lights turned on within the vessel, revealing an arrow-shaped aerodynamic design.

Unbelieving, Cece allowed Ash to lead her to the automated landing platform extending from the rear of the sleek mega-machine.

A man stepped down to the stern.

Tall, muscled, broad-shouldered, dark skin almost sable.

She'd never seen him before, and her eyes watered at his drop-dead model features.

He gave her a nod, face solemn and closed off.

His dark eyes tracked to Ash. 'Sir, welcome onboard the Sabre.'

'Appreciate the pick-up, Kellan.'

Cece was speechless as both men stretched their hands. To help her step to the guide rails and up the steps to the main deck.

Where a pool lit from within sat inlaid into the deck floor.

Further, glass doors led to a sumptuous onboard living space where more luxury awaited her.

Cece gasped at an interior decorated in earth tones with black walls and glass accents, the latest in high-end décor.

The furniture was white, grey and black, as modern as it got. Yet it was welcoming, warmed by exquisite rugs and colourful, striking art on the walls.

Kellan stepped to the top of the rails. ‘I’ll leave you both to it. If you need anything, call. The crew and I will try our best to be invisible. We’ll have meals prepped and set out for you and keep cleaning to the early mornings. Most times, you won’t know we’re here. Enjoy your honeymoon.’

He disappeared just as silently as he’d come.

Cece turned to nail Ash with a stunned look. ‘Where am I? What is this dream I’m in?’

He smiled, triumph in his eyes. ‘Shocked much?’

‘Beyond. Who’s freakin’ badass yacht is this?’

‘Sovereign’s,’ her husband said with nonchalance as he strolled toward the bar.

Cece jolted. ‘Why? How? I need to know more. Now.’

Ash poured them drinks from the crystal-walled bar, then tracked back to her, handing her a glass of champagne.

‘It’s a surveillance ship masquerading as a luxury yacht. It’s where we wine, dine and keep an eye on Australia’s wealthiest crims. It includes a helipad, pool, and multiple sunning decks. Everything we need to keep up the facade. From time to time, we use it for personal travel.’



‘I’ve no words.’

‘You like?’

‘I love!’

Ash grinned, pleased with himself, sipping on his whisky. ‘Under the hood, she boasts four engines, capable of revving up to an impressive 23,172 horsepower. The hull is reinforced steel, and the superstructure is sleek black aluminium. Cruising speed is around 20 knots, with a top speed of 28.’

‘You’re geeking again, baby.’

He grinned. ‘Can’t help it.’

‘So this is a workhorse dressed up as a Black Friesian?’

‘In a manner of speaking. It lets us patrol the coast, and it can travel internationally. It has a helipad, and it’s well-armed. We used it as a jump point into Somalia for Slade’s rescue.’

‘Impressive.’

She lowered her voice. ‘And Kellan? The Adonis who let us onboard. What does he do?’

‘He captains the ship. He’s Kamila’s brother, in case you can’t tell. However, he wasn’t in my squad. He served a few years later, still in the SAS.’

‘I see the resemblance now. He’s an ex-commando, too?’

Ash nodded. ‘He works with a crew of two: Tommy, our onboard chef and Digger, the ship’s maintenance engineer. All ex-soldiers who can defend the ship if need be.’

Cece folded herself onto a couch and tucked her feet under her, sipping from her glass. ‘And for last time, my love. Where is the Sabre taking us?’

‘To an island getaway, babe. Somewhere solitary. We’ve got food, fuel to last us for days and grog to keep us love-drunk all day and all night. On that note, bottoms up.’

She protested. ‘You can’t rush champagne.’

He gave her a heated look, and she hurried to down her glass.

Ash stalked to her and put out his hand.

He levered her up and lifted her into his arms.

She protested. ‘Ash.’

‘Ssh.’

He swept past six guest cabins that could accommodate up to 12 guests and into the sumptuous primary cabin.

The door slow-closed behind them as he lay her on the king-size bed.

Standing back up, he stripped off his clothes.

Her mouth watered at the sight of his tanned broad shoulders, the rippling chest, his narrow hips and her prize, his proud pulsing cock.

His knee sunk into the mattress beside her as he removed her clothes and kissed her all over.

He levered himself above her as they both lay naked, his hips ready to thrust between hers.

‘Ash.’ She placed a hand on his chest to stay him.

Confusion creased his heated gaze. ‘What, baby?’ His voice was thick with need.

‘I’ve something to tell you.’

‘Yes?’ He brushed his lips against her throat. While one of his legs pressed between her thighs, urgent and impatient to get on with loving her.

‘I just worked it out after two months -’ His teeth grazed her throat. ‘And I take full responsibility for not reminding you in Sydney -’

‘About what?’ He was busy planting kisses along her tits and sucking at their swollen tips.

Cece grasped Ash’s head and made him look into her eyes. ‘Ash, I’m trying to say I’ve missed my period a few times.’

His body locked and went still, his brow arching high as he gaped down at her. ‘You serious?’

She took a shaky breath, her gaze filled with worry. ‘I’m late, really late.’

One of his hands moved to her face, his fingers trembling against her cheek. ‘Are you saying what I think you are? That you’re pregnant?’

His baritone was even more hoarse than ever.

‘Yes.’

Ash’s jade eyes widened, flooding with emotion. ‘We’re having a baby?’

She nodded.

He buried his head into her neck, in the one place he loved the most, overcome with feeling. ‘Cece, my gorgeous girl, my sweet queen —.’ He ran his hands over her, pressing kisses everywhere before stopping at her stomach. ‘Fuck. I must be the luckiest man alive. I have never been so much in love, baby.’

‘So you’re happy?’ Her heart raced, almost expecting him to say it was too soon.

A soft growl burst from him as he pinned her with a stern yet fond glare. ‘Are you kidding me? What did you expect me to be? I’m freakin’ over the moon, wifey.’

His chest rumbled as he stroked her with reverence, and she saw a sheen in his eyes. He pressed his lips on her tummy, then moved up, placing tender, sweet, heated kisses all over her skin.

‘Do you think it’s a little girl?’ he said, serving with her a jade-hued gaze filled with hope.

‘I think you want it to be.’

‘I do, with soft curls and freckles like her mama.’

‘And emerald eyes like her dad.’

He proceeded to kiss every freckle he could find, driving her wild with need.

When she couldn’t take it any more, he held her wrists above her head and slid into her.

He growled, his crackled voice reverbing through the stateroom. ‘Let me show just how happy I am, my sacred queen.’

She groaned as he pumped, pleasure building deep inside her, making breathing hard. Widening her legs with abandon, she welcomed him as far as she could go until they shook from release.

He took her with slow, deliberate loving, pausing almost between each thrust to give her long, exquisite kisses. His fingers entwined with hers while his lips devoured her.

His movements caused pleasure in rolling waves until her body moved in sync with his. Their lovemaking was even more explosive than the first time they’d met. More poignant, more touching, more pure, more free.

He reached down and pinned her hips against the bed. She whimpered as he bottomed out each stroke, going deeper than he’d ever done before. She flamed out, her inner muscles spasming out of control.

His breath hitched as she reached her climax, the force of it pushing her body so hard against him that it almost lifted him off.

He moaned and drove himself deep inside her before allowing himself to feel the warmth of his release.

They came down their high with long, heartfelt kisses, murmurs and whispers.

A long time later, after Ash had fallen asleep, Cece untangled herself from his limbs and slid from the bed.

Pulling on a robe, she headed out to the wrap-around balcony of the yacht that was rapidly moving away from the coast.

She opened the sliding glass door and stepped out into the cool breeze.

Gazing out to the haze of a summer night at the lights of a receding coast, she breathed in.

Her hands cradled her tummy's soft mound, and she leaned back against the glass, tears slipping down her cheeks.

She'd re-written the rules.

She'd reinvented herself in a new place.

She'd shed the pain and angst.

She'd found her truest love.

She'd found her deliverance.

Feeling free like light and air. Like a bird's wings in the wind.

Finally, truly, fantastically wrecked with sacred love.

THE END OF ONE BEAUTIFUL SOVEREIGN STORY



## AND THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

**The Sovereign Saga continues with Cole and Salma's love story.**

### **'LOVE TO CRUSH YOU'**



Cole Falconer is Sydney's hottest bachelor ...

The ex-military hero is also a handsome bar and venue entrepreneur, one of the city's most attractive, sexy and successful publicans and billionaires to have taken the zeitgeist by storm.

He's been photographed with international supermodels, actresses and beauties, each more gorgeous than the next.

Until one unprepossessing woman catches his sapphire gaze.  
Unrelenting and not used to being refused, he wants her, but  
she keeps him at arm's length.

Salma Dan is a professional ex-surfer trying to heal her body  
and mind after a devastating setback.

She's made a promise to herself. Never again to let her heart  
and soul be crushed to pieces ... yet Cole keeps pulling her  
back into the power of his aura, the touch of his heat and the  
passion in his wildfire blue eyes.

He's a force of nature that could calm the storm within her ...  
only if she lets him in.

*Set in the stunning and glamorous eastern suburbs' beach  
escapes of Sydney's Bondi and Tamarama, 'Love to Crush  
You' is a spicy, addictive billionaire romance. It is  
recommended for mature readers only.*

**[Pre-Order 'Love To Crush You' on Amazon Kindle](#)**

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# 'Love To Crush You'

## *Excerpt*



*'Mr Falconer is the handsome bar and venue entrepreneur, one of the most successful publicans to have taken Sydney by storm.*

*His career took off when his first location, Toby's, went stratospheric a few years ago. Since then, he's established a slew of trendy venue brands.*

*Each is designed to wow punters with elegant entertainment and premium food. Let alone their out-of-this-world alcohol selections and outstanding service.*

*The kingpin's charm, personality, looks, and bank balance have garnered him many admirers.*

*Falconer guards his personal life with fierceness, but in recent times, eagle-eyed photographers have spotted him on the streets with international supermodel Flávia Orcata.*

*She has been his on-and-off girlfriend for the past eight years in between many lovers and girlfriends, more gorgeous*

*than the next.*

*Still, the pair are not usually found together, their busy schedules to blame. Given Mr. Falconer's value of privacy, their relationship status remains unknown.*

*What's also enviable is that Falconer is not only a hospitality titan. He was also a decorated special forces soldier before retiring to civilian life. Which adds to his mystery and appeal.'*

A loud sigh echoed in the staff lunchroom.

'I can't believe he's our boss-boss. He's so hot, I'd jump him in a minute.'

Tina, one of the Beach Room's managers, was hunched over an iPad, her glazed eyes fixed on an article in the latest edition of her favourite online gossip rag.

Salma gave the woman a cursory glance before focusing on her plate balancing on the small high table before her. Not caring one iota about the Forrester - or was it Falconer - person Tina cooed over.

She moaned under her breath, rubbing her aching leg.

She sighed, exhausted. Relieved she'd managed to survive the eight-hour shift that she'd extended into ten for the extra cash.

But her energy reserves were dwindling. So, too, her patience and pain threshold. With the last hour to go, she was counting down the minutes. Until she'd escape, drive home and collapse into bed.

Tina, sensing Salma's disinterest, changed the subject. 'Have you seen the new bartender they hired? He's even hotter than Falconer,' waving the magazine before Salma's face.

Salma sighed again, exasperated by her colleague's fixation on physical appearance. 'I'm not keen, hon. Can we please talk about something else?'

*Or not talk at all?*

Tina shrugged, turning to one of the other workers in the room to continue her gossip.

Salma chewed her meal in silence, her thoughts turning to her car crash of a life.

*How had she gotten here? Why had she let Hawaii derail her so much? How was she, once the youngest global champion in her sport, now a 31-year-old woman waiting tables? What happened to conquering the world she'd once ruled?*

Miserable and soul-crushed, she threw out her dinner scraps and dragged herself back to work.

An hour later, she pushed through the crowds at The Beach Room.

Set over Bondi's golden sands, the interior showcased beach-inspired elegance in 360 glass. Guests ascended to the skies above the sandy shores to enjoy made-to-order cocktails. Where the beauty of the panoramic water views surrounded them.

Today, however, Bondi's answer to luxury rooftop bar escapism sucked at Salma's soul.

Revellers gathering for Christmas parties packed the place. One of the most feted seasons for the hospitality industry, yet the most dreaded by the servers on the ground.

It was busy, crowded, even shouty - a scene she'd have avoided if she wasn't working.

The space heaved as it did most nights. The bright lights behind the expansive servery turned on as soon as the sun dipped under the horizon, giving Salma a piercing headache.

She squinted at the DJ, revving the crowd from their elevated box as yet another bouncy track began to play. Only adding to Salma's misery.

She sidestepped as the all-glass elevator spat out fashionistas and trendsetters swarming into the space. They took photos in front of the famous glass views for their gram. All eager to get a mention at one of the most illustrious watering holes in Sydney.

Salma swung past the hordes with her tray, keeping it steady. It overflowed with seasonal, delectable share plates. Designed to complement the bar's signature cocktails, five of which were also on the tray.

Just as she rounded a corner, a sharp pain shot through her thigh.

To her horror, her leg gave way, and the entire load crashed. It fell against a table, exploding over the laps of five

men hustled around it.

Panic bloomed in her chest as the guests leapt from their seats.

She gaped at their expensive suits, now stained with food and drink. They, in turn, all glared down at her on the floor, their faces incandescent in a mix of shocked surprise and rising anger.

A wave of curses rose from their lips as they tried to mitigate the disaster, mopping the liquid mess with the pitiful pile of already sodden napkins.

She dared not meet their gazes, focusing more on stumbling back to her feet.

One of the men leaned over and extended a hand.

She glanced up at him and jolted at the blue-eyed hottie, the tallest and most rugged of the five.

He had dark brown hair to the shoulders and a manicured beard.

Although plastered in the dregs of an espresso martini and a classic daiquiri, he carried himself with an irresistible mix of casual yet sartorial style.

He oozed confidence and class in equal measure. Not the kind she bumped into every day.

‘You OK?’

His voice, a baritone growl, sent shivers down her spine as he pulled her to her feet.

‘I’ll be OK, I -.’ She trailed off, mortified, a hot flush suffusing her face.

With a breath, Salma shook her hand from his. Regaining her composure, she rushed to the mess on the floor.

She couldn’t stop apologising. Her words tumbled out in an incoherent jumble. She even fumbled as she tried to clean up the shards of glass and turn around her fuck up.

‘Settle down. You’re fine.’

The stranger’s words were calming, and she managed to string together some sense. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she muttered, mortified. ‘Been on my feet for ages, and I must have slipped. Let me clean this up for you.’

The last few weeks for Salma had been tough. Her leg was acting up more, the pain spiralling out of control.

‘Breathe. Take your time.’

So she did, bent over, hands on knees, pausing for a beat as her heart rate slowed and her muscles throbbed and rippled in pain.

When she could, she glanced at him to find his cerulean gaze on her. ‘I’ll bring you fresh napkins and free drinks on the house.’

The tall man nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘Damn this to hell.’

The bitter words came from the stouter and more sharp-featured of the gathered group. He attempted to wipe cocktail

syrup from his white shirt while shooting daggers at her. ‘How did she get a gig here if she can’t keep the grog off customers’ laps?’

‘Hey, Macca, chill. Give her a break.’

The no-nonsense command came from the man who’d helped her to her feet.

His deep voice rumbled as he addressed her. ‘Bad day, that’s all. We all have them.’

He, too, brushed slivers of orange and lime peel off his suit.

Yet he gave Salma a measured look laced with some concern that reached up to his piercing blue eyes. Something in the way he looked at her made her feel like she was more than a server who couldn’t keep her clumsiness at bay.

‘It’s all right. Just an accident. You okay?’ He repeated his earlier question, adding a quick, fleeting touch to the back of her hand.

A bolt of electricity flew between them as she reacted to the touch. Salma jolted at a strange flutter in her stomach. She checked herself as an ache grew between her legs.

Resisting the unexplained yet delicious sensation, she went back to her cleaning. Trying to ignore him and the disaster around her, she disassociated.

She flinched at a tap on her shoulder as she tried to gather the plates and glasses. Looking up, her eyes met the silver-blue

beauties once more. Him again. With the voice and the model slash rock star looks.

‘Let us help.’

He gazed down at her from his tall height. His light silver-blue eyes studied her with an intensity that slammed to her core. Abruptly, he turned to the men at his table. ‘Brothers. Let’s do this.’

Salma shifted at the unexpected lurch through her body.

Her brow rose at his command, which launched four of his mates into action.

She stepped aside, wide-eyed, as they set aside their sodden suit jackets, rolled up their sleeves and pitched in to tidy up the mess.

She rushed away and returned with cleaning gear.

A faint smile danced on her lips when one of the group members, Dave, made light jokes about butter fingers. They laughed off the incident, putting her at ease.

However, the silver-blue-eyed cool cat stayed by her side—not saying a word until they cleared up the last of the debris.

He worked like he had some idea of how to clear a mess. He crouched next to her, the material of his pants straining against his thick thighs. His shirt moulded to his muscled chest. His hands veined and sprinkled with dark hair, his forearms a work of sculpted art.



Salma sliced her eyes over to his profile. To where his dark brown lustrous hair, thick and wave, fell over his temple. He had thick brows above those stunning eyes. Which she sensed could warm into a heated pool of cerulean bliss.

*They'd also blast you with ice if you angered him.*

Her gaze drifted to his groomed moustache and beard, which she suddenly wanted to touch. To trail a finger down the sensual mouth and chiselled jaw underneath.

His beautiful, rugged masculinity would leave most women breathless. Not the type of guy who would muck around on the floor, wiping up spilled booze.

He took her now-dented and cracked platter, tossing it into a bin. He nabbed the broom and dustpan to sweep away glass shards while she stepped back, hiding her incredulity.

When done, he accepted her offer for a towel and hand sanitiser. As he tidied himself up, his piercing gaze locked on hers. He held out his now clean, lean, tanned, veined, strong hand.

She took it, and a jolt of electricity ran through her veins.

‘Cole.’

The silken, irresistibly sensuous, rumbling baritone was a smooth, lush dream.

His palm, not so much. This was no pretty boy with satin hands. No, this man had done plenty of hard work outdoors. Evidenced by the rough skin, calloused scars, and heat, plenty of heat.

‘Salma,’ she replied, shuddering as a thrill ran through her.

‘Nice to meet you, Salma,’ he rumbled, head cocked to the side as he studied her.

While he didn’t smile, his eyes crinkled at the corners. Her gaze followed to where the light lines extended to the threads of silver at his temples.

She estimated him to be in his late thirties or early forties.

He took care of himself. Going by the muscled chest showing under the open neckline of his shirt.

Her eyes noted and appreciated the way his body moulded into the well-fitting suit he wore.

She found herself smiling, buoyed by his warmth and that of his friends. Except the one who still glared in her direction.

‘How do you like working here?’

‘It’s passable.’ She served him with a shrug as she put her cleaning kit away, tucking a small mop under her arm.

He gave her a nod. ‘Your boss a good person?’

She lifted a brow, wondering where his line of questioning was going. ‘My line manager is OK, I guess.’

‘Don’t let them give you a hard time in there. If they do, let me know.’

For a fleeting moment, she wondered why he would care. Or if her shift boss would listen to him, but she didn’t press the issue. She had much more on her plate at this moment.

‘I won’t. Let them give me a hard time, I mean.’

She was stammering and gave up trying to explain herself. 'Your free drinks are coming up.'

She turned to leave, bin and mop set in hand.

Then came a rumble of harsh words behind her.

'Is the fuckin' cripple going to get docked for ruining my \$200 Tommy Bahama shirt? I got this delivered yesterday, boys.'

This came from the salty, stout man who still hadn't gotten over the incident.

The barbs nailed the already horrible day into a catastrophic coffin.

She didn't wait to hear what else he said. Limping away, her stomach churned. She pushed back into the bustling kitchen, her leg aching and throbbing. Tears pricked the edge of her eyes as she tried to compose herself.

She took a deep breath and threw the cleaning kit into a cupboard.

At the bar, she ordered another batch of cocktails and drinks from the mixologist to replace the ones she'd decimated.

With a catch of relief, she spotted Louie, one of the other servers she was friendly with, on the floor.

Salma limped to him and tapped his shoulder. 'Louie, could you do something for me please? My leg's killing me.'

He was a kind guy with a good soul. After hearing her out, he agreed to take her replacement order to the table of five men. Salma didn't have it in her to face them again.

She headed to the staff room, done for the day.

Alone, frustration boiled inside her as she yanked open her locker.

Her heart pounded hard, and tears threatened. The raging man's callous words cut deep. Triggering pain and an overwhelming sense of helpless rage.

'It's not my fault,' she whispered as she threw her bag over her shoulder and lit out.

*None of it was.*

Gnawing at a nail, she brooded as she limped to her car. She had to let the incident go. She couldn't let one rude customer ruin her day.

Nonetheless, it was hard, so hard.

She'd once been a rising star in competitive surfing, poised for greatness. A freak encounter with nature shattered her dreams and left her with scars, twisting her flesh from mid-thigh to under her knee.

The subsequent dearth of her career, the endless media hounding, and the crushing of her dreams had spiralled her into depression. Worse still, her surfer boyfriend, Glen, broke up with her, unable to deal with her agony.

Back then, she'd faced a long road to recovery. Now, her leg ached less most days, but some were hell. More so when her mind wouldn't let go of the unbearable loss of her past success.

It'd been a coincidence of bad luck that she'd had a heavy load today. Just when the aching exhaustion got too much to bear

The incident replayed in her mind like a B movie, the stranger's sneering words ringing in her ears.

*Apart from her crushed body, the bar life wasn't her scene any more,* she concluded. Too many tossers, self-fluencers and alpha male wannabes frequented The Beach Room for her liking.

Add to that the screeching, high-maintenance VIP guests. Plus, the taxing effort on her body. It was all Salma could do not to scream after every shift.

Something had to give. At 31, she needed to step up and take on more responsibility for her future.

She'd made some sound decisions in recent years. She'd used most of her surfing career income to pay down a cute semi in Bondi Junction.

She'd also paid off most of the mortgage and had an excellent credit rating. She owned a serviceable SUV. Salma also had enough in the bank to keep her going for a few more years.

But, with all her lucrative surfing contracts gone, she needed a long-term fallback.

Which bartending would not quite provide.

Neither would she be able to handle long shifts standing on her feet for hours for much longer. The incident tonight pushed her toward the inevitable.

Brent Simons, an old university mate and principal of a leading school, had approached her months ago with the promise of a great career.

Then, she'd put him off, needing more time to think about the direction of her life.

Now, she made up her mind.

Salma decided to leave the stress of bartending in the dust.

A few weeks later, she took a full-time teacher's position at Bondi Prep, a K-6 school founded on diversity and excellent scholarship.

As a K to Year 2 teacher, she'd finally put her English, Math and Literature degree to use. While also working with children, which she enjoyed.

It helped that the money on offer and the school's reputation were fantastic.

Most of all, it'd be a chance to find her way in the world, to rebuild her hopes and dreams.

*Never again would she let her heart and soul be crushed to pieces.*



**Pre-Order 'Love To Crush You' NOW on Amazon Kindle**  
**(and on Kindle Unlimited)**





# About the Author

Sky Gold is a best-selling author, writer and lover of all things delicious, fun and courageously life-affirming. She looks to her gorgeous husband, her kids, her wonderful extended family, her friends, her sweet Czech Blue cat, and the stars themselves for her inspiration.

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## Also by Sky Gold

'The Sable Riders' - a breathtaking starlit series that's been described as 'scintillating' and 'packed with intrigue, betrayal, sensual heat, fast-moving action and HEA romance'.



## Stars On Fire

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BWZ257SE>

*'Selene, I don't do forever. It's not what this is.'* - Kainan Sable.

He's lethal, wraith-like ... **a warrior who lives in the twilight**, the hidden inferno amongst the stars.

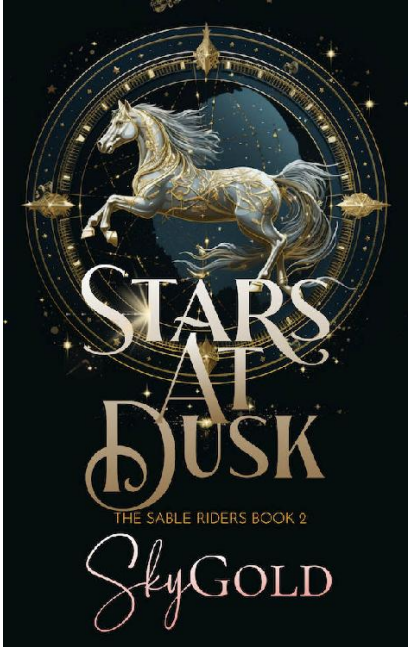
She's driven, ambitious, and unrelenting ... **with an allure that forces him from the shadows.**

He needs to control the intensity of his reaction to her. **She fights the temptation**, glinting in his sapphire wildfire eyes.

**He wants revenge. She wants forever.** But he can't give her 'forever' ... Or can he?

War is stirring in the skies and stars above Eden II. Kainan and Selene find themselves caught up in the maelstrom. **Together, they'll light the stars on fire**, even as darkness beyond their control seeks to turn their destiny - and their forever - to ashes.

*'Stars on Fire' is AVAILABLE NOW on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited!*



STARS  
AT  
DUSK

THE SABLE RIDERS BOOK 2

SkyGOLD

# Stars at Dusk

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BXRRK864>

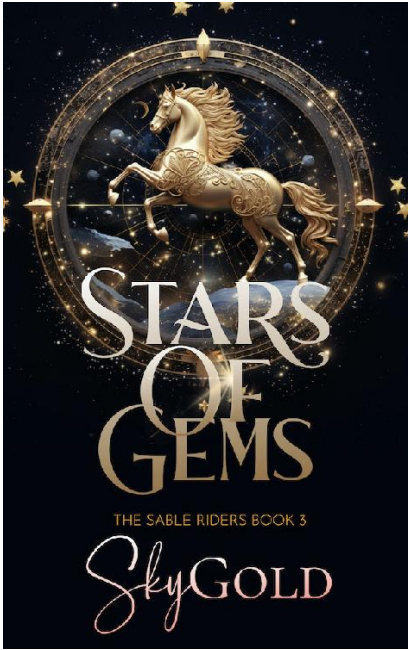
She's **sassy-smart-strong** ... A genius, generous, confident scientist.

He's a master builder, an ex-warrior, a kick-ass engineer and ... **her new ballsy and sometimes grumpy 'boss'**.

**They fight their feelings for each other** ... while keeping their top-secret breakthrough from a ruthless and secret galactic organisation.

Together, **they'll fall into a twilight dusk of heady love and impossible starlight.**

*Get Your copy of 'Stars at Dusk' today.*





## Stars of Gems

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C52NKKHN>

Illanna Merani is **the wildfire volcano** to Zane Sable's **icy tundra**.

She's **the meteoric stardust** to his **deep, dark, frozen depths**, the savage steel to his cold metal.

When they meet ... the wild connection between them is **stratospheric!**

Together, they'll set off a meteoric tsunami of epic proportions, a kinetic explosion of attraction and sensuality that will **sear the stars above into gems of incandescent light**.

*Get Your copy of 'Stars of Gems' today.*



## Stars in Mist

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CCN9JQVS>

She's the love of his life. **The one that got away.**

They shared a love so deep and eternal. Until she mysteriously disappeared. **Now, he endlessly searches the galaxy for her, only her.** Convinced that neither time nor space can keep them apart.

Just as he's about to give up, **he gets a glimmer of hope. Could this be the HEA he's scoured an entire universe for?**

Together, their souls will find each other amongst 'Stars in Mist'.

***Pre-Order 'Stars' in Mist today!***