

Jeannette winters

Making Magic in Suite Twenty-one

*Barrington Billionaire Series
Book Twenty One*



MAKING MAGIC IN SUITE
TWENTY-ONE



JEANNETTE WINTERS

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my very dear friend Sissie King. Your strength and courage has been an inspiration in many of my stories. Thank you for being you!!!!

Also a huge thank you to Deepti Mahajan, my editor, at mahajandeepi@hotmail.com. We make a wonderful team.

And to my wonderful readers. You continue to challenge me and I love it. Please keep those emails coming

CONTENTS

Jeannette Winters

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Epilogue

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MAKING MAGIC IN SUITE TWENTY-ONE

He was there with one mission; do recon and report back. An injury changes everything, and a woman he's not supposed to touch is sent to nurse him back to health. How long can he keep his hands off her? Find out in this forbidden love story.

Ryker Stone

I knew my brother was hiding something. His excuses were getting old, and I'd been voted as the one to find what the truth was.

Very simple. Right? I should have known better. When it came to the Stone men, nothing was ever as it appeared. And when I arrived in Tabiq, I quickly learned this was going to be more difficult than I thought.

If things were complicated enough, I got hurt and the sexiest nurse I'd ever laid eyes on had made it her mission to personally ensure I recovered fully. Now I was in a different type of pain as I'd been warned that she was hands off.

Instead of searching for the truth about Bennett, I was trying to hide my own lies, as suite twenty-one proved to be my lucky number.

Was my luck about to run out, or could I convince Nurse Meri that the hardest thing to heal is a broken heart?

CHAPTER 1



Meri

“President O’Connor, are you sure you want me to keep this a secret?” I asked, hoping I had heard her incorrectly.

Reesa O’Connor whispered, even though we were alone. “Yes. No one can know about this.”

“Including your husband?” I asked. She nodded.

This was an awkward position for me to be in. Finn wasn’t just her husband, but he was also my boss. As nursing staff, you did not hide things from the chief of staff of the hospital. At least not if you wanted to continue to be employed. Not sure but if I was right, the president of your country swearing you to secrecy trumped all else. She wasn’t giving me any time to think about my decision either.

“I will tell him when I am ready to. If he learns about this now...then he will insist I step down as president. I can’t let that happen. Not right now. There is about to be an election in a couple of months. Have you seen the other candidates?” she asked.

“None of them are people who I would vote for,” I replied. It wasn’t just because they were men, but they didn’t have the same vision for Tabiq’s future as Reesa did. She was meant to be president. And I understood how this information getting out could impact her chances of re-election severely.

I wasn't just doing this for Reesa, but I was doing this for the entire country. Tabiq needed Reesa. She'd done so much for the country in just a few years. More than what her predecessors had in decades. Another change now could set us back and I wasn't about to risk that. I remembered what it was like, all too well. Granted, things had already started to change when the Hendersons, for some unknown reason, decided to plant roots here in Tabiq. The violent human trafficking seemed to stop, almost abruptly. Was there a correlation between their arrival and our corrupt government being overturned? No one ever talked about it. We surely didn't feel comfortable about asking. There always will be an underlying fear in the heart of Tabiqians. Fear of all the good things being ripped away from them.

But the Hendersons alone could only do so much because this wasn't their country. They could never really understand what we'd been through, or what we needed. Reesa, on the other hand, did. She knew it wasn't just about making opportunities for us, but also about helping us believe that we could achieve anything we wanted and if we were willing to fight for it. Work hard for it. Her being president in a country that had once only viewed women as property for profit, proved just that to us. I know I wouldn't be the nurse-in-charge at the hospital if it weren't for Reesa. So many others wouldn't be where they were either if she hadn't continued to fight for Tabiq.

She might not know it, but she was a hero to many of us Tabiqian women. She was living proof that a better tomorrow was possible if we persevered.

You have my loyalty. I'll do whatever you need of me.

"Then you understand why I must do this," she said.

I nodded, still feeling that there had to be another option. Hiding it from everyone else was one thing, but her husband, that made no sense to me.

"What does it have to do with Dr. O'Connor? I'm sure he'd want to know," I said, honestly.

She shook her head. "You don't understand."

“No, I don’t. Maybe you can explain it to me.”

Reesa fiddled with her fingers for a moment before replying. “Something happened and it is not public knowledge. Only Finn knows.”

“Okay. What happened?” I prodded her to continue.

“There was a lot going on. It was as though I was being pulled in several different directions. Not getting enough sleep, and not eating well and it had been catching up with me. I was under a lot of stress. Eventually, I was exhausted, feeling dizzy and weak all the time. I couldn’t keep anything down, and when I did, I got the worst stomachaches. Then one night, the cramps were horrible. Finn had been working late because someone had suffered a massive heart attack. I thought it was food poisoning. I didn’t know, there was just so much pain. It wouldn’t go away. All I could do was lie on the ceramic tile floor in the bathroom holding my stomach. But the waves of cramps continued and I...I...”

“Lost the baby,” I added softly. She nodded.

“I had been so busy that I never even knew I was pregnant. I wasn’t gaining weight. In fact, I was losing. But when Finn got home and found me on the bathroom floor, he confirmed it. And he...he was beside himself. A man who deals with life and death situations all the time, looked white as a ghost, eyes filled with tears as he just held me,” she said, trying to hold her composure.

Even though her husband Finn had seen a lot of death due to his job, this was different. It was personal. It was...family... his family. But he had never shared that with any of us. I recalled a week last year when he wasn’t himself. He was quiet and spent little time at the hospital, which had been extremely odd. Now it was understandable. He’d been mourning the loss of his baby.

If I had known maybe I could’ve....

There was nothing I could’ve done or said even back then to make the situation better. Grieving was something one had to do at their own pace, and we all did it differently.

My heart went out to Reesa. I could see how even a year later, losing the child still affected her. How could it not? But like Finn, she never let us see her suffering. I couldn't believe she was sharing it with me now. I was touched by her vulnerability and the trust she was showing in me. I was going to be honest with her as well. "President O'Connor..."

"Please, call me Reesa."

In Tabiq, we rarely used a person's first name unless they were a close friend, or you were asked to. I felt honored. "Reesa, this is all the more reason why you should tell your husband," I said softly.

"And if I do, then Tabiq will be without a president. That cannot happen," she stated firmly. "Not for a day, never mind for however long it would take for someone to be elected. And think about it. A rushed election could be devastating for Tabiq. That person would step in and take control and set us back years. That's what happened in the past."

Hiding this from Finn was going to be nearly impossible for Reesa to pull off. But the stress of Tabiq falling under the rule of scum again was going to be a lot worse for her. She was right, and Tabiq was still fragile. We didn't normally allow ourselves to dwell on the past, but we also never forgot what it was like. It was hell on earth, and families still hadn't recovered from the brutality.

"I'll keep your secret under one condition." It sounded foolish to me to be speaking to her in such a manner, but I wasn't talking to her as the president. Right now, I was her nurse, and she was my patient. A very difficult one at that.

"What is that, exactly?" she asked, not looking pleased about being challenged.

"You allow me to examine you each week." That seemed like a fair compromise and what was best for Reesa. Although I couldn't help but think about Tabiq as a whole, Reesa needed to remain my priority.

"If you come to my office, it would be a red flag. Even my secretary will question if something was wrong," she stated. I

opened my mouth to make a suggestion and Reesa quickly added, “My coming here isn’t unusual. I am here very often visiting Finn. However, too many people would wonder why am I disappearing into an exam room with you. How would we explain that?”

She had valid points, but I wasn’t giving up. “I can come to you, or you come to me. We don’t need to do this at the hospital. At least not all the time. How would you feel about coming to my home?” I asked but my first thought went to the dirty dishes in my sink. I had meant to clean them before rushing off to work this morning, but there was a nurse who had called in sick, and I ended up covering a part of her shift before starting mine. Patients came before dishes. And laundry. And dusting.

Oh God. My house is a disaster.

I could tell Reesa was contemplating my suggestion. Before I had time to think up another one, she nodded.

“That is something I can do. It will also be a bit tricky as I travel with security. We will need to come up with a reason as to why I am going to your home each week.”

This was getting to be more complicated than I originally thought. *Lies usually tend to complicate things.* I wanted to say that she was a politician and probably better at it than I was, but she wasn’t like the others. And from the expression on her face, she was uncomfortable about lying just like me.

“I...I guess I could text you when I am on my way home, and you happen to be driving by me when my car breaks down? You could offer me a ride home and I can invite you in for tea?” That would work once, but I would need to become very creative after that.

“Okay. I agree to let you monitor me once a week.”

I really wished she’d agree to be under the care of a physician, but I knew she’d never agree to that. I had to accept this small victory. “And you *will* call me if you are having any issues, including keeping food down,” I stated firmly.

She nodded. “Fine. But if it comes to a point where it interferes with my duties, then we will need to revisit this conversation.” Reesa placed a hand on her stomach and said, “Believe me nurse Meri, I won’t do anything to jeopardize me or my child.”

“I know you won’t.”

“I just don’t want anyone to know about my pregnancy until after the election. I must win. Not for me,” she said.

For Tabiq. For us.

“I will keep my word.” *As long as you keep yours.*

“Thank you so much. Now I better get out of here before my husband starts looking for me. I’m not even sure how I will explain what took me so long as it is.”

“Simply. You were stopped by one of your loyal constituents who couldn’t be happier that you are running for re-election,” I smiled. At least that wouldn’t be a lie.

Reesa rolled her eyes. “I love talking to people. But you know, going out and trying to convince them to vote for me, is different. It ties up so much of my time that could be used doing something more useful. My secretary means well, but she is good at her job, but not campaigning. The last time my brother Jasper had done a lot of that prior to me entering the race.”

I knew nothing about politics, but I did read a lot about other countries. “Have you ever thought about hiring a professional?”

“Professional what?” she asked.

“I am not sure what they call them, but I was watching an American movie and the person hired someone to handle the campaign. All the guy needed to do was show up and speak and answer questions, and the other guy handled all the scheduling. Maybe if you could find someone like that, you wouldn’t have so much stress. That would be good for you and the baby,” I reminded her.

“Someone to run my campaign? I don’t know who I would even go about looking for someone like that?” she said.

“The Henderson family seems to have connections just about everywhere. I would start with them,” I suggested.

“Bennett Stone will be picking me up after I meet with Finn. Maybe I can see if he can talk to the Hendersons for me,” she said. “And then I can concentrate on my competition. I will never forget the last time I was elected. The other person was...well you know what he was. Scum. He wanted the old ways back. Women to be silent. Controlled. Abused. That is *never* going to happen.”

“And we are eternally grateful that you feel that way. Tabiqian’s have suffered enough.” A chill ran through me just thinking about what it was like before. It was hell on earth. I wouldn’t be a nurse now. Not even sure if I’d be alive. I had so many friends, just a few years older than me and what they had been through was horrendous. And the fact that our own government and police had not just allowed it, but were profiting from it, was what made it go on for longer than it ever should have. We had no protection. No one to fight for us. Our future had been bleak.

Reesa reached out and touched my shoulder. Softy, she said, “It’s not all me. It’s people like you who make it possible for me to do what I do. It’s all of us fighting together to make a better Tabiq. I’m just the one who gets all the credit.”

And yet another thing that makes you a good president. You’re humble.

“Then I guess I better continue to do my job and make sure the next generation of O’Connors makes it here safe and sound.” *I just hope it doesn’t cost me my job in the process.*

“I guess so.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. Then she jotted down a number. “This is my personal cell phone. Text me next week when you’re going to be leaving. I will let you know if I’m free at that time.” I raised my brow and she sighed. “I mean, I’ll let you know when I can go for a drive. Is that better?”

I smiled. "It is." There was a knock on the exam room door and we both tensed. "I'm with a patient. One moment please," I said firmly, hoping they would just leave. I pulled the curtain close in case they chose to ignore my statement and open the door.

Thankfully the door remained closed. "I'm sorry to disturb you, nurse Meri. Dr. O'Connor would like to speak to you when you're through," Nurse Dedra said.

I exhaled and stated, "Please let him know I'll meet him in his office in a few minutes."

"Yes ma'am."

Reesa looked up at me. "Do you think this has anything to do with me? Do you think he knows?"

I shook my head. "If he had, he wouldn't have sent another nurse to knock on the door." He was extremely fair as a boss, but he wouldn't tolerate anyone standing between him and his wife. He might oversee the only hospital in Tabiq, but Reesa was his world. And everyone knew it.

It was a beautiful thing to witness. A man loving a woman with his whole being. Not something we ever saw displayed in public, like hugs and kisses, but you'd need to be blind not to see how they wore their love for each other like armor. Everyone should be loved and cared for like she was. "Very true. He would never sit back if he thought I was sick."

Yet, you want me to lie to him. Great.

I knew better than to rattle the lion's cage. There was only so long Reesa could hide this from her husband. Eventually, her body would show physical signs. It was going to be up to her how she was going to answer those questions.

"It's most likely another person calling in sick. Seems to be a trend lately and I don't know why." When I had started, people were begging for more hours and never seemed to want to go home. Not the case now.

"Do you think they are lying and not ill?" she questioned.

“I...I think that people are happy. They enjoy their lives at home now, unlike before. They are dating, and since you have created other activities to do in town, they probably are out doing them. I’ve been tempted to try my hand at bowling myself.” *Not that I have any time, since I’m working all their shifts.*

“Sad that them being happy brings more work on your plate. The hospital is lucky to have you. And so am I. You didn’t have to agree to do this for me. But I’m so grateful you have,” she said, giving me a hug.

Now you tell me I could’ve said no.

“I’m here for as long as you need me,” I said. “But we better get out of here before your husband comes looking for me.”

She smiled. “At least he isn’t worried about where I am. That’s a first.”

“Sounds like there is something going on at the hospital that I need to be brought up to date on as well. Why don’t I leave the exam room first, and after a moment, when I know there is no one in the hall, I’ll text you so you can leave as well.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

I slipped out of the exam room and walked to the end of the hall. When I was sure no one was around, I texted her and waited until she left the room and went the opposite way. All this sneaking around was not something I felt comfortable doing. I felt as though all eyes were on me, even though they weren’t.

Reesa was heading towards Finn’s office. I opted to call him on the phone. He answered right away.

“I’m sorry for keeping you waiting. You wanted to speak to me?” I said when he answered.

“Yes. I need you to come to my office. I have something important to discuss with you,” he said. I heard a knock on his door, and he said, “Come in. Oh, hello sweetheart. I was about to call you.”

“Would you like me to come later? It sounds like you have someone with you already,” I said, knowing Reesa made her appearance.

“No. Come now. She will need to hear this as well,” he stated firmly.

My heart raced. The confidence I’d felt moments earlier vanished. This didn’t sound like a short-staff issue. It was something more.

“I’ll be right there.”

I ended the call and took my time walking to his office. It was important that Reesa had a few minutes alone with him. When I arrived, I knocked, and he told me to enter.

Reesa was sitting across from him, but I could see she was upset. *Oh no. He knows.*

“Please sit.” I did as he instructed. “I know you have a lot of pressure on you, but I’m about to dump even more. My mother has become ill back home in Ireland. It’s her heart. I’m sure you know I can’t sit here while she puts her life in someone else’s hands.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. And, yes, I understand. What do you need from me?” I asked.

“Logan Henderson is going to arrive in a week. I need you to help keep things running smoothly until then.”

“A week?” That was a long time without someone in charge at the hospital. Especially since Finn was head of surgery as well. Thankfully, it wasn’t as though the hospital was overrun with patients. An occasional accident happened, but fortunately, Tabiqians were in good health. Still, I never imagined that at thirty-three years old, I’d be in charge.

“I know you can do it. And there is someone arriving tomorrow who will be here to help with the scheduling and the daily running of the hospital. You just need to worry about the patients like you do every day,” he said.

“Okay. I understand what you need from me. You just focus on your mother, and I will handle everything here,” I

said.

Reesa said, “And I’m here as well, so you can reach out to me with any questions you might have.”

She was the last person I was going to put any pressure on. “Thank you.”

“Since you will have a long day tomorrow, why don’t you go home now and get some rest?”

“Do you mind my asking who will be here to help run the hospital while waiting for Dr. Henderson to arrive?” I asked.

“Sorry. Brice Henderson will be here. He was traveling to Tabiq anyway and was with Logan when I called. He’s familiar with what I need and if he has any questions, he can get the answers from Logan.”

Logan was the first person to step in at the hospital and had played a huge part in bringing modern technology here. Before Logan, if you had to receive medical care, there was a very good chance you weren’t going back home. The survival rate had been low. But Logan and Finn had turned everything around. Not just by having the top medical devices on hand, but they paid for the medical training of each employee of the hospital. I was one of the lucky ones to be sent to the U.S. to nursing school under Logan and graduated under Finn. As long as one of them was going to be here at the hospital, I knew everything would be okay. But a week without either of them scared me. I wasn’t about to let them know. This was my chance to prove to myself that their trust wasn’t misplaced.

“I’m sure everything will run smoothly,” I stated, trying to keep things positive.

“I agree.” He turned to Reesa and said, “He’s bringing his wife Lena with him, so hopefully the two of you can have some girl time together and relax.”

Reesa smiled. “That would be nice.” *Yes, it would, but I have a feeling that relaxation is not something you’re good at.* “I’m sure Lena will want to spend time with Ziva and Alex.”

“Then I guess it will be the three of you,” he said.

“Maybe we can make it four, and you can join us,” Reesa suggested looking directly at me.

I knew each of the ladies, but none of them personally. Not that I wasn't honored to be invited, but it wasn't my place to *hang out* with them. There was no reason to.

“Thank you for the invitation, but apparently, I'm going to be busy this week.” *But that doesn't mean I'm not checking up on you.*

“Then maybe we will have to bring lunch to you,” Reesa smiled. “Someone has to make sure you're taking care of yourself, while you take care of everything else.”

Smiling, I replied, “Thank you.”

Finn seemed pleased with the arrangements. “Any questions?” he asked me. I had plenty, like did he really think I could do this, but I knew he never would leave me in charge if he didn't believe in my ability. I looked at Reesa and she seemed comfortable with Finn's decision as well. Guess it was just me who had doubts. I shook my head and he added, “Good. Then it's all settled. So, if you don't mind, I promised my wife we would have lunch together.”

I got up and said, “Safe travels and my best to your mother.”

“Thank you, nurse Meri.”

I left the office and closed the door behind me. With Finn gone, I didn't need to worry about lying to him. But lying was the least of my worries now. I needed to focus on all the patients and nursing staff while caring for his pregnant wife.

Yeah. No pressure on me either.

CHAPTER 2



Ryker Bennett

“Thanks for picking me up at the airport. It’s a lot smaller than I thought,” I said as I got into the passenger’s seat of his black SUV.

“There is not much air traffic here except for tourists. They all stay at the resort,” Bennett replied.

“A five-star resort and you want their first impression of Tabiq to be that airport? I’m surprised New Hope is still up and running. I mean hell, Bennett, even from the sky, I questioned if I wanted to land here,” I said. “Maybe I should talk to the manager.”

“Ryker, you’re here on vacation. This is not a marketing opportunity for you. The Hendersons handle all that themselves,” he reminded me.

I’ve been hearing about the Hendersons since Bennett married into that family over ten years ago. Granted, Zoey didn’t seem to be anything like her brothers, but the Henderson influence on Bennett still bothered me. He wasn’t the same guy I remember when he was in the Marine Corps. I expected him to change when he left the Corps, but not this much. It was almost as though he was on a mission that no one knew about. And hell, not I neither our other two brothers understood why he opted to make Tabiq his home.

Bennett told me little to nothing about this place. Hence, we, which included me and the other Stone brothers, decided that this was where I needed to spend my three weeks' vacation. Someone had to find out what was going on here that Bennett was becoming absent from too many family functions.

We pulled in through the gates of New Hope and I saw the guards on either side. Not the welcoming committee I pictured. "Are you expecting trouble?" I asked.

"No. Not now. But Tabiq is a conservative country and not everyone welcomes us foreigners being here," he stated without even looking at me.

"Yet this is where your in-laws decided to build a resort. I don't get it. None of it makes sense," I replied.

"When you see the beaches and the resort, it will. And the food here is unbelievable," he stated.

"It's just not safe anywhere else." It wasn't a question. He didn't need to tell me that the guards were packing. I could see by the look in their eyes that they weren't there just for looks.

We pulled up to the main entrance and he put the SUV in park. "Ryker, you won't need anything that the resort doesn't offer. If you want to go into the town, let me know. I'll be happy to bring you."

I laughed. "I might be your baby brother, but I'm thirty-six. A little old for a babysitter, don't you think?"

We got out of the SUV and headed into the resort. "Don't take it personally. It's the policy here for everyone. No exceptions," he stated firmly. "If you read the terms and agreements that you signed in regard to your stay at the resort, you'd know that already."

"I scanned it. Then laughed and wondered once again, why people come here." There were many countries that offered everything New Hope did, without the list of restrictions.

Before he answered, I was greeted by the receptionist. "Hello. You must be Mr. Stone. Welcome to New Hope."

“Call me Ryker. He’s Mr. Stone,” I said, pointing to Bennett.

She nodded. “Here is the key card with your access code to your room. I’ll have your bags brought to your room immediately and they can help you unpack.”

“I’m all set with that,” I replied. “But a cold beer would be great.”

“I’ll have one sent up. And if there is anything else that you require, don’t hesitate to call the front desk. Enjoy your stay with us Mr...I mean, Ryker,” she corrected herself. I could tell she didn’t like using my first name. That was probably a cultural thing. They would get used to me. I was *nothing* like my brother.

“I have to pick up someone else, but if you’d like to meet for dinner tonight, I’m free,” Bennett stated.

“Did you get demoted? Last I knew you ran your own security company. Now you’re a taxi driver.”

Bennett snarled. “I see you didn’t leave your sense of humor back in the States.”

“Never travel without it,” I smiled. “To answer your questions, since currently I’m here alone, I’d like the company. Maybe we can talk about what keeps you here,” I grinned.

It was a question he was asked often and one that he avoided each time. I was sure tonight there would be another excuse or distraction that prevented him from having this conversation. That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to try.

He mumbled something under his breath as we parted ways. I headed up to my room. Twenty-one was my lucky number. Hopefully, it was a sign I was going to get the answers I was after.

When I got inside, I looked around. It was an entire suite. More than I needed, because I had no plans on spending much time here. *Who knows. Maybe I will be able to mix business with pleasure.*

I went out onto the balcony and Bennett hadn't exaggerated. The view was amazing. Photos hadn't done it justice. Since we weren't meeting till dinner, I had plenty of time for a swim. Unpacking could wait as well.

There was a knock on my door, and it was room service with a bottle of beer. I downed it, then changed into swim trunks.

A quick swim turned into grabbing a surfboard and giving it a shot. That was a horrible mistake. I'd never surfed before and the board came out from beneath me and hit me on the right side of my head. I saw stars, and for a moment, thought I'd black out, but I didn't.

Cussing, I dragged the board onto the beach and grabbed my towel. As I wiped the water from my face, I saw the white towel turning red.

Fuck.

I haven't been here even twenty-four hours and I'm injured. Bennett was going to have a field day with this.

A waitress who was serving another guest on the beach must have seen me because she came rushing over.

"Sir. You're bleeding. We must get you to the hospital."

"It's only a flesh wound. I'll be fine," I reassured her.

She shook her head and waved for someone else to come and look. Before I knew it, there were four staff members there and one man in a suit. I recognized him. Alex Henderson.

"Damn it, Ryker. What the hell happened to you?" he asked.

"Guess I'm not meant to surf," I replied. "No one here seems to understand that all I want is to go to my room and lie down. It's not a big deal."

"Maybe not from where you are, but that is one hell of a gash. You might need stitches," he said.

Fuck no. I saw what the airport looked like. No way was I going to the hospital. I probably would get some infection and die. “I’m good. Seriously.”

“As a guest at the resort, I must insist that you get medical treatment. If you will not go to the hospital, then I will have them send someone here. Your choice,” he said sternly.

“Fine. I’ll go.” Having someone come from the hospital didn’t seem right. What were the odds they would have the right equipment with them if I did need stitches? “I’ll call Bennett for a ride.”

“He’s busy. I’ll take you,” Alex replied. “Just hold the towel against the cut. Hopefully, the bleeding will stop before you lose too much blood.”

I didn’t listen and pulled the towel down to look at it. It was soaked with blood.

Maybe I do need to go.

Alex had an SUV brought up front and we headed to the hospital. It was fifteen minutes away, further than I’d have liked. Thankfully this wasn’t a heart attack or anything major. When we pulled up, a nurse came rushing out to the vehicle with a wheelchair.

She opened my door and said, “Mr. Stone, let me help you.”

“Ryker. My name is Ryker,” I said as I slipped out of the car and was about to refuse the wheelchair, but I found myself weak with my legs about to give out, and immediately felt thankful for the wheelchair.

She grabbed hold of me and helped me in the chair. “Don’t worry, Ryker. I’ve got you. You’ll be okay.”

I saw the entrance of the hospital getting closer, then nothing. Everything went black.

My head was killing me. I reached up for the towel, but it wasn’t there. Instead, there was another barrier, just now sure what it was.

“Hello, Mr. Stone. I’m Nurse Meri. You’re in the hospital. You hit your head, but you’re okay.”

Her voice sounded like an angel, soft and sweet.

I opened my eyes, but the bright light made me close them immediately.

“Ryker. My name is Ryker,” I said.

“That’s a good sign,” she replied.

“What is?” I asked as she leaned over me and flashed a bright light into each of my eyes.

“That you know your name,” she smiled. “Your brother is on his way.”

“Good. I need a lift back to the resort,” I said.

“Not tonight. The only bed you’re sleeping in is the one you’re occupying right now.” I tried to get up and she placed a hand on my shoulder. “I’m serious. You’re not going anywhere. You’ve lost a lot of blood and you’re spending the night here. If you’re strong enough tomorrow, then you can return to the resort.”

I wanted to argue and get up anyway, but she was right. I didn’t have the strength to even get up right now. Even though I wanted to stay awake, I felt exhausted. “I’m so tired.”

“You’ll feel more awake tomorrow. Now, sleep,” she said.

“Where’s Bennett?” I asked.

“He’s dropping off the president, and will be right here after,” she said.

The president?

I must have hit my head worse than I thought. “President of what?” I asked.

“Tabiq. President O’Connor. Now rest. I’ll check on you again shortly.”

She walked away and I heard the door open and close. I felt for my cell phone and realized it was still in my suite at the resort. I was trapped here for the night, but if Bennett

arrived soon, I was going to insist he take me back with him. Never spent a night in the hospital before, and not about to.

Until he arrived, I needed to close my eyes and get some sleep. But my head was pounding, and sleep wasn't coming.

A few minutes later, the door opened again, this time it was Bennett. "What were you saying about not needing a babysitter?" he said as he approached my bed.

"Oh, now you got jokes." If my head wasn't hurting, I'd appreciate it more. "But if you're getting me one, maybe you can see if that nurse Meri is available," I tried to smile, but even that hurt my head.

Bennett glared at me with his arms crossed. I'd seen that look so often that it didn't faze me. As expected, he ignored my comment. "Alex wasn't sure what happened," he said. "Care to elaborate?"

Not that I wanted anyone to have witnessed it, but I'd rather not be telling the story myself either. It was just a stupid accident, but since I was lying flat on my back in a hospital, I guess it could've gone much worse. I could've been knocked out while I was in the water.

"Tried my hand at surfing and took on one of the bigger waves. You can see how that turned out," I said. "I lost my balance. But I blame our parents."

"Why them?" he asked.

"They should've moved to a state by the ocean." Our mother had been deathly afraid of water. Her father had drowned saving someone even though he was a good swimmer. She did insist that all four of us boys take swimming lessons, but she denied all our requests to vacation at a lake or the ocean when we were young.

"Or maybe you should've heeded the signs posted. It was a high surf warning. Hence why no one else was surfing," he said.

"You know I always like a challenge," I replied.

“And that’s how you broke your leg snowboarding when you were eight. Oh, and your arm skateboarding when you were ten. Do I need to go through the list?” he asked.

“Rather get hurt having fun, than sitting on my ass doing nothing,” I said. “Besides, I believe you’re the one who suggested I enjoy everything the resort had to offer.”

“Is this what I have to look forward to for the next three weeks?” Bennett sighed.

I chuckled. “You’re the one who said I needed a vacation.”

“And Tabiq was the only place you could think of?”

“Thought you’d like some quality time with your kid brother. I mean, I haven’t seen you in three years. Figured if I didn’t come to you, it might be another three before we crossed paths,” I said honestly.

Bennett nodded. “We both have been busy.”

It was an excuse. Yeah, I’ve been busy. I was at the top of my game in marketing. I had more clients than I could handle. Yet I was still here trying to figure out what was really going on with Bennett. I wasn’t losing any sleep over it, but our parents weren’t getting any younger, and now with them retired, they wanted time with the family. That included Bennett, his wife, and his kids.

“Looks like we have plenty of time now. But what did I hear? You were driving President O’Connor around? Like the president of Tabiq?”

“Yes.”

“Just, yes? No explanation?” I prodded.

“Do you need one?”

“I’d like one,” I stated.

“There are some security issues and me and my team are here to ensure her safety.”

“So, you don’t handle the security at New Hope?” I asked.

“I handle a lot of different things. Occasionally I even pick up friends or a family member at the airport,” he added sarcastically. “Surfing and lying on the beach aren’t things I have time for.”

“Maybe I can give you a hand with some things while I’m here,” I offered.

Bennett laughed. “Nurse Meri said you’re not doing anything for a few days. But thanks for the offer anyway.”

Nurse Meri. Just thinking of those dark gorgeous eyes of hers was enough to raise my blood pressure. *Wonder if I could talk her into giving me a sponge bath.* I chuckled softly and Bennett looked at me puzzled. He knew I was no saint, but I wasn’t going to share my thoughts with him.

“You know me better than that. I agreed to spend the night here, but tomorrow I’m out. You can either take me up on my offer or wonder what crazy-ass adventure I am on next,” I warned him. “I do believe I heard someone talking about cliff diving somewhere on the island.”

“I’m regretting letting you come,” Bennett said.

“Funny. I’m a paying customer. And if you recall, I wasn’t invited.”

I heard a low growl, but he finally gave in. “I do have something that you might be able to help me with.”

“Security?” *I’ll keep an eye on Nurse Meri for you.*

“No. Marketing. Well, not exactly that. But we can talk about it when you’re feeling better.”

I raised the head of my bed and said, “Work always makes me feel better. What do you need? Hendersons run out of ideas?”

“This is not for my in-laws.”

“Then who? You already said you’re busy, so you could be looking for me to help drive you more business,” I concluded.

“The president is running for re-election. She’s excellent at being president but she is looking for someone to run her

campaign.”

“You want me to be her campaign manager?” I asked, stunned.

“Hell no. You’re in marketing, not politics,” he reminded me.

I thought about it for a second. “What’s the difference? She’s the product and I need to get the people of Tabiq to agree she’s the only product they need. Sounds like marketing to me.”

“Ryker, you’re not from Tabiq. You don’t understand how things are done here or what the people even want in their president.”

“Honesty. Loyalty to Tabiq. Family values. Understanding that she is one of them, and they are her sole priority. That sounds like what everyone wants from their president. I can sell that.”

Bennett knew I was damn good at my job. I’d taken companies on the verge of bankruptcy and turned them into a billion-dollar company. It wasn’t easy, but it was about getting in front of the right people.

“Just remember, all I want you to do is listen to her and see if there is any guidance you can give her. I’m not asking you to do anything more than that,” he said.

Not asking, but we will see what I actually do.

“Don’t worry. There’s nothing wrong with my hearing.”

He peered at me for a moment, then said, “I’ll talk to her and see about setting up a meeting in a couple of days.”

“Why not tomorrow?” I asked.

“You haven’t looked in a mirror yet, have you?” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t hire you. You look like you got mugged.”

I raised my hand and felt the huge, wrapped bandage that seemed to go all the way around my head. *I was attacked, just by a surfboard.*

“I thought it was just an abrasion.”

“From what Nurse Meri said, you nearly cracked that thick skull of yours open.”

“Obviously she had no idea how thick-headed the Stone men are,” I replied.

“Since you’re spending the night here, I have a feeling she’s about to find out,” he grinned. “I’ll be back in the morning to pick you up. And I better not get a call from the hospital before that.”

“Worried about me?” I asked.

“No. Worried about the nurses,” he stated. In a serious warning tone, he added, “Tabiqian’s don’t joke. They don’t take kindly to flirting. Like I said, you have a lot to learn before you meet with Reesa.”

“Reesa?”

Bennett replied, “The president of Tabiq.”

“Oh, yeah. Her,” I said, with a wince of pain from my head.

No sympathy from Bennett. “Now behave, or I’ll put you on a plane myself tomorrow.” He walked out of my room and closed the door.

His tone said he wasn’t playing. I could remind him that I wasn’t a kid any longer and he couldn’t tell me what to do. But the rules here definitely were different. I wanted to stay, but my reasons for being here may have just changed. The Tabiqian people were as big of a mystery as to why Bennett stayed here.

He obviously knows something I don’t.

CHAPTER 3



Meri

“Good morning, Nurse Dedra. How was our American patient last night?” I asked.

Even though I was at the hospital all night, I found an empty room and slept. Everyone knew where to find me if they had any questions or there was an emergency. But I wasn’t going to be any good to anyone if I was exhausted beyond thought. I didn’t want to meet Brice with bloodshot eyes either.

“He was very...grumpy. And he asked for you several times.”

“Was he in pain?” I questioned.

She shook her head. “I believe he was just disappointed that you were not his nurse. I explained that I was capable of taking care of him, but his expression said he didn’t believe me. I am telling you the truth; I took very good care of him as I do for all my patients.”

Smiling, I patted her on the shoulder. “Nurse Dedra, do not take it personally. He was...difficult last night with me as well. And...dealing with a foreigner is not like caring for a Tabiqian. They have different expectations.” *They want to be pampered like this is a hotel and not a hospital.*

“I’ve checked his vital signs again, and he appears to be stable. I saw nothing that concerned me. Should I let him

know he will be released from the hospital today?” she asked.

I know he wanted out and I trusted Dedra, but I needed to examine him myself. Just didn't want Dedra to know that. It was important not to have her questioning her abilities, especially at a time when I needed to count on her the most.

“I was about to head up that way so I can do it. But I really could use a favor,” I said.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Would you be willing to work an extra shift again tonight?”

“But I'm on during the day. I...won't have had any sleep,” she replied.

“I know. That's why I'd like to send you home now, and you can have the entire day off if you are willing to return tonight. You're the only one I trust enough to handle that shift and with you here, I can get some rest. What do you say? Want to help me out again?”

She smiled. “Of course. I'd be happy too.”

“Good. Then go home and I'll see you back here tonight around nine.”

I headed off to Ryker's room but stopped to grab him a tray of some breakfast. When I entered his room, he was sitting on the edge of the bed with his swim trunks back on instead of the hospital Johny.

“Where do you think you're going?” I questioned.

“To the resort,” he stated. “I was hoping someone would show up.”

Why? So you can stare at me again?

“If you needed assistance, Nurse Dedra would've been able to help you,” I reminded him.

“I asked. She couldn't,” he replied.

I was afraid to ask, but needed to know because Dedra hadn't mentioned anything shocking. “And what in particular

did you require?"

"A cell phone." He stood up, waving his arms, putting his half-naked body on display. I'd seen it when I took care of him after he blacked out. Granted, I was too preoccupied saving his life to admire just how fit he was. But it didn't matter. He was my patient and now since he was doing well, he was about to be discharged.

"I don't recall seeing one when you were admitted."

"As you can see, I traveled very light when I was brought in yesterday. I didn't have one. I need one so I can call my brother," he explained.

Placing his breakfast tray on the portable table, I said, "I do not have mine on me, but I'd be happy to call him for you when I'm free. Is there a message you'd like me to give him?"

"Yeah. I need a ride. It's morning and I'm ready to leave."

There was no need. Bennett had already called me earlier letting me know the time he would be here, either to check on his brother or pick him up. *Seems the Stone men don't ask, they tell. That might be fine in their line of work, but here at the hospital, I'm the boss. At least for the moment.* Dr. O'Connor taught me well, and I didn't let patients or their families dictate what was best for the patients' care. "Mr. Stone..."

"Ryker," he reminded me.

Forcing a smile, I said, "Ryker, you have not been approved to leave yet."

"Really? Your nurse said my vital signs were normal. If you take a good look at me, do you see anything that would give you cause to hold me here any longer?"

I let my eyes roam over his chest and down his rippling abs. There was no need to look any further. He was a beautiful specimen of a man. But he had suffered a head trauma, and no matter how perfect everything else looked, he wasn't going anywhere until I felt he was ready.

Grabbing my stethoscope, I listened to his heartbeat. It sounded better than mine, which was racing. I knew my hands were cold, and his bare chest felt...hot and inviting.

“See, I told you, I’m fine,” he stated. Breaking the trance that I was in.

Better than fine. Maybe perfect.

I’d never looked at a patient in any other way than professionally. Ryker broke that track record. What was it about him that my body was ignoring what my head was telling me?

“Not sure you’re feeling right though,” he said. “Your hand is trembling.” He covered it with his.

I snatched it away quickly and put the stethoscope back around my neck. “I’m fine. Just didn’t get much sleep last night.” There was too much on my mind, including him.

“Couldn’t stop thinking about me?” he winked.

Arrogant ass.

“Of course. I worry about all my patients. It’s my *job*.”

He placed a hand on his chest and said, “Oh. That hurts.”

“And what about your head? How is that feeling? Because that’s what brought you in here,” I replied.

“It could be better, but nothing I can’t deal with,” he stated.

Reaching up, I began to remove the bandages. “I want to examine you and make sure everything looks good before I discharge you.”

“Thought you had a good look a minute ago,” he grinned,

I pulled on the tape, well aware that the action wouldn’t hurt his wound and that it might remove a few strands of hair. Giving it a quick tug, I tried to hide the pleasure I took in hearing him wince.

“Hey. How about a little TLC?” he whined.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Must have been caught on a strand of hair,” I said, biting my lip. “I’ll try to be gentler,” I said before doing the same to the next piece of tape.

“Hey. If this is gentle, I’m afraid of what it would feel like if you were rough,” he stated.

“Please, Mr. Stone, hold still,” I said firmly.

“Ryker, are you giving Nurse Meri a hard time?” I heard Bennett say from the door.

I was so focused on Ryker that I never heard the door open. Before I could reply, Ryker said, “I think she’s trying to kill me.”

No one could see me roll my eyes. “Mr. Stone, I’m just trying to make sure your wound is clean. You wouldn’t want it to get infected, requiring you to return to the hospital now, would you?”

He looked me directly in the eyes and said, “I thought you were trying to hurt me just so I had to stay.”

“I would never do such a thing.”

He raised a brow. “Are you sure about that?”

I smiled. “Of course. Why would I want to keep the difficult patients any longer than I needed to?”

I heard Bennett laughing. “Keep it up, Ryker. She can make it a lot more painful than it needs to be,” he warned.

Ryker snorted. “I think she already is.”

“Sounds like you have been your usual difficult self,” Bennett commented. “Nurse Meri, is he well enough for me to get him out of your hair?”

With all the bandages off, I looked at the sutures one more time. Everything looked good. I turned to Bennett and said, “He is free to go, but he must keep it clean and dry. No swimming or washing his hair until I see him again in three days.”

“Hello. I’m right here. You don’t have to tell my brother,” Ryker said.

I turned to Ryker and said, “I figured I should tell someone who is likely to listen to my instructions.” I pulled out an antibiotic cream and handed it to Ryker. “Apply this as directed on your wound twice a day.”

He tossed it to Bennett, and I choked back a chuckle. “Since I don’t have pockets, he might as well hold onto that.”

“I didn’t say a word,” I said, fighting the urge to laugh. I’d dealt with Bennett on many occasions, and his brother wasn’t anything like him. He was lighthearted and comical. I wasn’t about to admit it to him, but it was refreshing from the grumpy, whining, patients I had this week.

He got off the bed and said, “Three days?” I nodded. “Okay, it’s a date.”

“It’s an appointment,” I reminded him, not feeding into his playfulness. Not in front of Bennett at least.

“What if I bring you flowers,” he asked.

“That would be lovely. I will donate them to a patient in the hospital who would appreciate them,” I smiled.

Ryker looked at Bennett and said, “And you think I’m the difficult one?”

Bennett grinned. “I think you met your match. And I would give up if I were you. She’s not interested. Now let’s get out of here. Nurse Meri has someone waiting to speak to her.”

“Anyone in particular?” Ryker asked.

None of your business.

That didn’t matter. Bennett told him anyway. Now I was the one who felt invisible.

“Yes. Brice Henderson. He’s here to help at the hospital until Finn O’Connor returns.”

“Who is Finn?” Ryker asked Bennett.

“The president’s husband. I’ll tell you all about it on the way to the resort,” he said, urging Ryker to leave.

Correcting their behavior would only delay their departure. Not that I was rushing them out, but Bennett was right, I had important things I needed to do. Ryker was discharged, and was now in Bennett's care.

At the door, Ryker turned back to me and said, "See you in three days." Before leaving, he gave me that sexy wink and I was left speechless.

Damn him.

It would serve him right if I had Dedra go and check his wound. It also would make perfect sense as I had so much on my plate already. But I had a feeling that Ryker wasn't a rule follower, and that checkup was going to require a bit of nagging on my part. I had no problem with that at all.

What I learned from doing my internship in a US hospital was that they had more help than we did. If someone was discharged, they would call housekeeping to clean the room, wash the bed, and make it for the next patient. In Tabiq, as a nurse, we did all of that ourselves. It would be easy for me to ask another nurse to do it, but that was not how we did things. Finn had a rule, don't ask anyone to do something that you won't do yourself. And if you can do it yourself, then do it.

The room wasn't needed at the moment, and if I had something that took priority, I could always come back and clean it later. I did have my cell phone on me, and I checked for messages. There was none.

I remember Finn telling me that Brice would contact me when he wanted to meet. It was possible Bennett had used Brice as an excuse to move Ryker along. Because for a man who said he was anxious to get out of the hospital, he had been stalling a lot.

Placing my cell phone on the table and turning on the volume, I cleaned the room while listening to a lecture that I had downloaded on running a political campaign. Not that I thought I could really help Reesa in any way, but I was willing to at least try. If I heard anything that sounded worth sharing with her, I would. I knew she had no time to listen to these.

Heck, I didn't either, but it was better than listening to just music like I normally do when I clean.

Once again, I hadn't closed the door and I had company.

"You must be Nurse Meri," his deep, American, voice filled the room. It wasn't Bennett or Ryker. With very few American men strolling the hallways of the hospital, there was no reason to panic. It had to be a Henderson.

I spun around. "Yes. I am. And you must be Brice Henderson." He looked like his brothers, just a bit older. I didn't want to guess, but I'd say he was around fifty or so. I used to think that was ancient, but the closer I got to forty, the younger the fifties seemed. "I can finish this later if you'd like me to join you in an office to talk."

"No. This is fine." He had a serious look on his face, but that wasn't unusual with that family. They were serious about business, but once you got to know them, they relaxed and actually were pleasant to speak to. Most of my interaction had been with his brother Alex since he lived in Tabiq with his wife Ziva. Not knowing enough about Brice, I wasn't going to even attempt to guess what he was thinking. He asked, "Are you planning on throwing your hat into the ring?"

"Excuse me?" I asked, puzzled. What did he mean, throw my hat? Americans had such odd sayings, and even though I had spent a couple of years studying nursing there, I still didn't understand a lot of slang.

"That's an odd choice for a nurse."

Cleaning the room? No. It had to be something else. He pointed to my phone, and it clicked. "Oh. The lecture. No. I'm listening to that for...a friend," I said.

"Hopefully that friend is your current president," he said, peering directly at me.

I could tell from his piercing eyes he was trying to gauge if I was going to tell him the truth or not. I had no reason to lie. Not about this at least.

I held my head high and met his strong gaze with my own. "Yes. Of course, it is for President O'Connor. I can't picture

anyone else running this country as well as she does,” I stated.

His jaw relaxed slightly. “And you’re wanting to be her campaign manager?” he questioned.

I laughed as I shut off the lecture. “I said I want her as president. If I had the job, she wouldn’t win. I know nothing about politics.”

“Then why listen to the lecture?” he asked.

I couldn’t tell him that I met with her and the pressure she was feeling wasn’t good for the baby. *So here comes more lying.* I was about to learn how good I was at it since it wasn’t something that came naturally to me.

“It’s not that I want to help her. It’s that I have the utmost respect for her and what she does. But I really didn’t know anything about the campaign process. So, I decided to learn about it. You know what they say, ‘knowledge is power’.”

“Very true. And it is just confirming what Finn said about you,” he replied.

I wanted to know what that was, but I wasn’t about to ask. It was better to let Brice think it wasn’t eating at me. Even though I knew it would haunt me all day.

“I’m finished in here. Did you have any other questions for me?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Yes. How can I help you? I know you’ve got a lot on your plate. I don’t have any medical training, but I’m great at recruiting people who can help you.”

“Thank you, but your brother Logan will be here in less than a week. There hopefully won’t be any emergencies that require additional staffing,” I stated.

He nodded. “I want you to feel comfortable reaching out at any time. I’m here to support you.”

That sounded so odd. A Henderson here to help me. Little ole me. Not the entire hospital? “Thank you. I will reach out if something arises. And I hope you feel comfortable doing the same,” I stated.

“I do. Did you want me to work on the schedule? Or is there anything you need me to order and get here?” he asked.

“Dr. O’Connor submitted an order for all supplies prior to leaving. If you would like to use his office to confirm when the items should arrive, that would be helpful.” I really had no idea what to have Brice do. I knew what Finn did. Brice wasn’t a doctor. There had to be a reason why Finn chose Brice to be here.

Just wish you had shared that information with me.

“I will do that. And if you have any questions regarding that lecture you’re listening to, I’d be happy to answer them.”

“You know about politics?” I asked.

He nodded. “I actually know that person who gave that lecture.”

“Seriously? Do you think they would help Re...President O’Connor with her campaign?” I asked, upset at myself for almost using her first name.

“I could, but she would need to be the one to ask me,” he stated. “I try not to not to give her any advice unless she reaches out directly to me. Like I just told you, I’m here to support, that’s all. Unless there is something you know that I don’t, and I should call her.”

“No. Nothing.” I hoped he believed me because I wasn’t sure *I* bought that reply.

He looked at me for a moment, then said, “I look forward to working with you. I’ll be in Finn’s office if you need me.”

“And I will have my cell phone with me if you need me,” I reminded him, holding it up.

I didn’t want any more surprise visits. I liked the routine I had for myself. I preferred running a certain way. That was funny because being a nurse was anything but routine.

I chuckled to myself as I left the room. Ever since I had spoken to Reesa in that exam room, nothing had been the same. And from what my gut said, it was only going to get a lot worse.

I'm on for the ride, but I don't like it.

CHAPTER 4



Ryker

“Are you ready for the meeting with Reesa?” Bennett asked when I opened the door to my suite.

“As ready as I’m ever going to be. It’s not like I’m working for her, just listening and giving advice, as you’ve already reminded me a million times,” I grumbled. “I haven’t finished my coffee. Might as well come in and have one too.”

“Thanks, but I’ve been up for hours. The last thing I need is more coffee.”

“Why were you up so early?” I asked.

“Work,” he replied.

“Really? I never would’ve guessed,” I said sarcastically. “You do know that you can tell me what you do here, and I won’t share the information with anyone if you tell me that it’s confidential.”

“I know. “

Still nothing. Not sure he was ever going to share what was going on here with any of us. But that meeting with Reesa hopefully would shed some light on it. Bennett seemed clueless that this was the reason behind me wanting to meet with her. I mean, what did I care who won the presidential election? This was not my country. I knew nothing about Tabiq. It was quite possible that she was not the right candidate.

It would make things a lot easier if I asked Bennett questions, but I'd rather hear it from her. The more time I got to spend with Reesa, the more likely I'd understand what the hell was going on here.

My coffee mug was empty, and I placed it on the table. I'd call room service when I returned to retrieve it. "Guess we should head out."

The SUV was already parked in front of the entrance. I thought Bennett and I would chat on the way, but he was tuned into his earpiece and having a conversation. Bennett seemed to be doing more listening than the person on the other end.

"If you would rather go another time, that's fine with me," I stated, honestly. I knew Meri wanted me to pay a visit to her sometime today too but that wasn't on the top of my list.

He shook his head and kept driving. It wasn't long before we were at Reesa's office, but he just put the vehicle in park and stayed tuned into his earpiece. I checked my emails on my cell phone while he finished up. Five minutes later, he turned off the vehicle and said, "Let's go."

Slipping my phone into my jacket pocket, I got out of the SUV and followed him inside.

"Hello Mr. Stone. President O'Connor is ready for you. You may go right inside," her receptionist stated.

Bennett nodded and we went into the office. Reesa was on the phone. "I know. It's hard, but what choice do you have?" she paused. "You do what you need to. I'll see you when you get home. I love you." Then she ended the call and turned her attention to us. "Hello Bennett. Nice to see you again." Then she got up and extended her hand to me. "You must be Ryker. I've heard so much about you."

And I, on the other hand, have heard nothing.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, President O'Connor."

"Please, call me Reesa while we're here. This is a very informal meeting," she said and sat back down. "I'm happy that you even agreed to come meet with me while you're here

on vacation. I truly feel horrible about pulling you away from the beach.”

“No problem. I’m not allowed to enjoy it any longer.”

She looked at the side of my head. “I heard about your accident. How are you feeling? Are you up for this meeting?”

“Yes. Since Bennett seems to have removed all fun activities from this trip, I look forward to doing something I enjoy. Marketing.”

Reesa smiled. “I thought I was the only one who loved what they did. Of course, I’m not sure if I’ll be doing it for another five years. Things are changing in Tabiq. People have come to think of their future differently. That’s a good thing, and yet, a bad thing.”

“How so,” I questioned.

“It means that they are forgetting the mistakes from our past. And when you do that, you risk making them again.”

That had me puzzled and she opened it up for me to ask. “What kind of mistakes?”

Bennett interjected, “We don’t need to get into that. Why don’t you talk about what you want the people to know and why you are running for re-election.”

Well, that wasn’t very subtle. Obviously, there was something he didn’t want me to know. Didn’t he know that it was only going to make me more inquisitive? Maybe the time had fogged his memory and it had been so long since we’d been together. It was like he didn’t know me at all. *The little pesty brother who hated secrets and wanted to know everything.*

“To me, it sounds like she is running on the platform of that past that Tabiq can’t afford to revisit. And the only way to ensure that is by addressing it,” I stated. Turning my attention back to Reesa, I said, “Just an overview is fine.” *I can dig for the details once I know what I’m looking for.*

“Bennett, it’s fine. He’s your brother. I’m sure he wouldn’t be here if you didn’t trust him, am I right?” I turned and

looked at Bennett who was staring at me. Finally, he nodded. *Had me worried for a minute there brother. If you don't trust me, we have bigger problems than I thought.* Reesa continued, "Good. Then let's catch him up to date as to where we are now."

"I think I'll let you do that talking," Bennett said to Reesa.

"That's probably the best. Now I just need to think about where to start. Bennett, have you told Ryker anything about Tabiq?" she asked.

"No," he replied.

Not that I haven't tried to get you to open up. I was glad he admitted it.

"Okay. Well let me start by telling you, it's ugly. There are things in our past that we never let outsiders find out. And for good reason too. It wouldn't help. If anything, it would bring more pain and suffering to my people. I can't risk that. So before I tell you anything, you must agree to keep everything you learn about Tabiq, to yourself. It is not to be discussed outside of this room."

"I have no issue with that." That was true. My only interest in Tabiq was to understand my brother better.

"Good. This started before I was even born. More than fifty years ago. My country was suffering great poverty, and the people in charge were desperate. Unfortunately, not to save everyone, but to make themselves rich and powerful. They looked to the most convenient commodity they could find to sell. The women." My expression must have given away my shock. She continued, "You heard correctly. It's disgusting that the people who were sworn to protect the people inflicted so much fear and anguish."

It was odd that if this was happening here, why hadn't the rest of the world known anything about it? "I cannot even imagine what it was like. How long did that last?" Surely if it was that long, someone, like the US, would've picked up on what was happening and stepped in and put a stop to it. It's not like the US hadn't done so in other countries, so why not here?

“Unfortunately, it took place for many years. The men who had created the opportunity for such things to happen in my country died. But the behavior and pattern continued even after their deaths. It only stopped around ten years ago. And even then, it has been a slow process,” she stated.

“What stopped it?” I asked.

She looked at Bennett again, before answering. “Overthrowing a government takes brave men who are willing to do what they must, including risking their own lives. It was a bloodbath, and no one knew what to expect, but they were victorious, and we thank God for what those men did every day.”

I turned briefly to Bennett. *Men like you and your team.* The timing sounded right. Had he come here as a mercenary to fight for the Tabiqian people? If they were that poor, they never would’ve had the money to hire Bennett and his team. And as far as I knew, that wasn’t the kind of work they did. Since leaving the Marines, I thought he did high-level security. Overthrowing a corrupt government didn’t seem to fit.

“How did they know your country needed help?” I asked.

“I do not have the details of what happened back then. It was very hushed, and who exactly led the mission and was involved is still a mystery. I have my suspicions.” I didn’t miss her brief look at Bennett out of the corner of her eye. “But the who doesn’t matter as much as the what. They are the reason I am president today. Not that they elected me, but there were no elections for many years before. If there had been, then people would’ve had a chance to change things themselves. But instead, the government and law enforcement took lethal action against anyone who protested or tried to stand between them and their rule.”

This was exactly what Bennett and his team had been trained to do. It was making sense as to why he had come here. Now as to why he was still doing it, that was what was puzzling to me. “It is amazing that Tabiq is as...free now after what you told me. I would think that it would take centuries to overcome,” I said.

Reesa nodded. “It will take generations to fully heal. But you’re correct. We have made great progress. My fear is if the wrong person is elected to office, everything could be lost. I am not in office for any other reason than to save my country and my people. I would give my life for them,” she said firmly.

I looked at Bennett and knew he’d do the same.

“Reesa, I know we just met, but I make it my business to be able to read a person and their character. I would say that you are the right person to have in that seat. I’m sure my brother agrees.” Bennett nodded. “What makes you think any of your opponents have a chance against you?” I asked, still trying to process everything she said, knowing damn well there was a lot she didn’t say.

“I can’t speak for any of the others seeking to be president, but I do know that intimidation, in order to win, is not unheard of in Tabiq,” she stated.

“And you believe that is taking place now?” I asked.

“Your brother has informed me of a couple of...people who are *not* happy with the direction Tabiq is going.”

Not exactly a confirmation, but I understood what she was trying to get at. “You mean thriving?” I asked.

“That is one aspect of it. But I’m a woman. I’m in charge. Some of them will never accept that,” Reesa stated, sounding disgusted. “But I want the next generation of women to know that they are equals and as valued as any man. That what a person can or can’t be is not based on gender.”

Ah. Equal rights. A battle that is never-ending. Even in the US, we have struggles that still need to be addressed, and too many people pretend as though everything is okay. But what Reesa was fighting was different from what we were doing back home. “You being president now has shown them just that. And from what you said, it sounds as though Tabiq needs to be reminded of exactly that,” I said.

She gasped. “You want me to bring up the painful past?” I nodded. “It’s what we are all trying to overcome. Don’t we

want them to think about the bright future ahead of them?”

“Yes. But I stand by my statement. Even though it will be difficult, I think you should run your campaign reminding people of what was then and what is now. Let them see how far Tabiq has come. Remind them of everything you have personally done to help get them here. Once you have accomplished that, then you can talk about what you foresee for the future. For the generations to come. A stronger, more stable Tabiq.”

Reesa looked at Bennett and said, “He’s good.”

“He is good at his job, but he is not a campaign manager. I wouldn’t take all his advice, even though he has some good ideas. I suggest that you still seek out someone who does it professionally,” Bennett stated.

I cocked a brow. “Thanks, brother. I appreciate that. But as I mentioned, marketing is all about sales. Reesa needs to sell her ability to the people. She needs to build her trademark. I’m sure everyone in the country knows her name, but do they really know her? Do they know the passion that drives her? Because that’s what she needs to show them. As she said, she would give her life for this country. Let them know that. Let them feel that. They need to believe that.”

Selling was my business, and now I’m selling my own skills.

“How long are you in Tabiq?” she asked.

“Three weeks, well a little closer to two. I forgot to count the last three days because I haven’t been allowed to do much other than wait for my checkup at the hospital.” Time was going by too fast, and if I weren’t diligent, I would be leaving Tabiq without the answers I’d come seeking. That would be really disappointing. Not just for me, but for all of my family back home. I’d made some progress in this meeting, but there was a lot yet to learn. “Why?” I already knew what she was about to say.

She folded her hands on her desk and leaned towards me. “Because I really think you could help me prepare for some of

the meetings I have scheduled.” *So do I.* “It is different this time around. Before they were comparing me to the old ways. But now they are going to be looking at me, at my track record, and I need to give them a lot more. Would you be willing to spend some of your remaining vacation giving me some guidance? I will compensate you for your time.”

You are and you don't even know it. Helping you is helping me. “I’d be happy too. No need to pay me. It’s not like there is much more I can do while I’m recovering,” I said.

She had a huge smile that looked to be a sign of relief. I understood why. Reesa was right. To be reelected was different. The people who liked you would probably vote for you again, but it was the ones who weren’t sure or hadn’t given much thought about it that could be easily swayed to vote for her opponent. This was a critical time for her with only a few months left before the election. You can have a great product, but never got it off the ground because no one knows about it.

“I can’t thank you enough,” she said. “I can’t wait till I tell my husband Finn the good news. He’s been telling me that I needed to have someone who could look at this with a fresh set of eyes. And that’s exactly what you’re bringing,” she sighed, appearing to be more relaxed than she was when I first arrived.

“I heard he’s traveling right now.”

“Yes. His mother needed open heart surgery and he traveled back to Ireland to be with her. I’m hoping that he returns before you leave for the States. I’d like him to meet you,” she stated. “He’d love to show you the hospital.”

“I’ve seen it. Or should I say, some of it?” I pointed to the stitches on my head. “I need to stop in there after our meeting. Nurse Meri warned me that if I didn’t come to her, she’d come chasing after me.”

Reesa nodded. “Nurse Meri wasn’t joking. She really takes care of her patients seriously. I have a great idea. Why don’t I have her come by here, and you and I can continue our

discussion while waiting for her?” she suggested. “This will give us time to get to know each other better.”

Seeing Meri again appealed to me, but I’d much rather she come to my suite. Bennett told me that she was hands-off, but he’d said that about many women I’d dated, and I never listened. It wasn’t like anything was going to happen between us. But hell, she was easy on the eyes, and I wouldn’t mind enjoying her company.

I didn’t even need to look at Bennett to know he wasn’t a fan of Reesa’s suggestion. He obviously didn’t want me alone with Reesa. Funny, because he was the one who had mentioned Reesa needing my help. Did he think she wasn’t going to want it? *Sorry brother, but I know my shit and she has figured that out too.*

“I can bring him to the hospital if she needs to examine Ryker again,” Bennett stated.

“There is no need. I’m sure Nurse Meri can give him a ride back to the resort once we are through,” Reesa stated. “It will also give me a chance to touch base with her and see if she is encountering any problems that I need to be aware of.”

I didn’t care about the reason behind it. Time with Meri alone sounded good to me.

“I can wait while you have your meeting,” Bennett stated.

“That’s ridiculous. We might be talking for hours. Besides, I heard you might have a lead on the man you’ve been searching for,” Reesa stated

“Not sure. I have someone looking into it,” he replied.

“You’re looking for someone?” I asked.

Bennett nodded. “A man who was involved in the murder of a young woman in Tabiq more than a year ago.”

I would’ve thought the police would be handling that. Should’ve known that Bennett would be involved. *Haven’t found anything in Tabiq that he doesn’t have his hands in.*

“And also one of your men,” Reesa added. Bennett nodded but said nothing. “There needs to be justice for his death as

well.”

I was right, since coming here I had been learning a lot. But the fact that one of Bennett’s own men had been killed, blew my mind. He never mentioned anything about any of that. By the look in my eyes, he knew I was going to be asking a lot of questions when we were alone.

He got up and said, “I have no problem returning to give you a ride back.”

“I know you don’t, but as Reesa alluded to, it seems like you have more important stuff to be thinking about. Don’t worry about me. I’m sure Nurse Meri can do it. It’s not that far from the hospital,” I said.

“She practically has to pass the resort to get here, so it’s very convenient for her,” Reesa stated. “So, it’s settled. Bennett, you go find that bastard, and Ryker, you’re going to help me win this election.”

It was more like I was going to try to help her win because I couldn’t guarantee anything. Yet I was glad she was so confident. That was going to make my job easier.

Bennett knew there was nothing more he could say. Reesa had made the decision for both of us. It just happened to be in alignment with what I wanted.

Finally, something goes my way. I was starting to think Tabiq was going to be as difficult as my brother Bennett. All I needed was an ally, even if Reesa didn’t know she was being that for me.

The next few hours were all about business. I listened to Reesa talk about her plans for Tabiq, and I realized just by listening to her, that I no longer wanted to help her just to gain information for myself. She was the right candidate and Tabiq needed her. Now it was up to me to make sure they all knew that.

CHAPTER 5



Meri

I knew Ryker needed to be checked on today. It had been three days since he was discharged from the hospital. Never had I imagined that Reesa would request I come to her office to do so. But she didn't want me to just examine him, but also give him a ride afterwards.

I'd given up trying to guess what Reesa was up to. She was full of puzzling behaviors. I chalked it up to her being pregnant. Hormones affect people differently. But as long as it didn't affect her running the country or the baby, then none of it was my business.

"Hello, Nurse Meri. President O'Connor is expecting you," her secretary said as I entered. "You may go right in."

"Thank you," I said, carrying my medical bag with me.

This wasn't the first time I'd had to travel to visit a patient, but usually, it was because they were bedridden, and it was impossible or very difficult for them to come to me. If it weren't for the request of the president, I would've insisted Ryker get his perfect butt to the hospital like everyone else.

I placed my hand on the doorknob and took a deep breath before turning it. Why was I so nervous? Maybe it was the location or just the fact there was so much pressure on me this week that I felt overwhelmed. There wasn't anyone I could

speaking to about this without it getting back to Finn. He would lose confidence in me, and I didn't want that to happen.

"Nurse Meri, you can go in," the secretary said again.

Nodding, I cleared my mind and opened the door. I found Ryker and Reesa sitting side by side reading something. "Hi. I hope I'm not interrupting."

Reesa looked up and said, "Not at all. We were just finishing up." She turned to Ryker and said, "I can't believe how much progress I have made in just a few hours. Thank you so much for helping me organize this."

"It's a good start. We'll have to meet again in a couple of days after I put together some more information. And I think you are correct. Social media isn't the right avenue for you. It's old school, but the billboard should accomplish what you want."

"Billboard?" The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Reesa looked up at me. "Ryker is helping me prepare some campaign material."

"He is? Why?" Once again, I was overstepping my bounds. Who was I to question what she did? But for some reason, I wasn't shutting my mouth. *Very unusual for me.* "Sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's not my place."

"It's fine. I know it is...unexpected. But Ryker has given me some excellent suggestions," she said. "I was looking for a campaign manager, but in the meantime, I thought I might take Ryker up on his offer to help."

Campaign manager? I had suggested that to her. Wow. She took my idea seriously. I was honored. But that still didn't explain what Ryker had to offer. He wasn't from Tabiq. He knew nothing of our ways.

I needed to get out of the middle of this. "That's great." Holding up my medical bag, I said, "If I can steal him away for a minute, I'd like to take a look at his wound to make sure everything is healing well."

Reesa got up and said, “Why don’t you use my office? Please take all the time you need.”

“We only need a few minutes, thank you,” I said.

Once she was out of the office, I opened my bag and pulled out some latex gloves.

“Are you planning on ripping out any more of my hair?” he asked.

I snapped the gloves in place and looked at him. “It’s possible. I haven’t decided yet. Now why don’t you come and sit over here so I can get the exam over with.”

He stood up and came over but didn’t sit down. “Not sure I like that. Get it over? Sounds like you’re not happy to be here. Why? Did I do or say something to upset you?”

No. Just being next to you makes me feel...uncomfortable.

“I have a lot going on at the hospital. I just don’t understand why you asked me to come to you instead of coming to the hospital as I had directed. This is a great imposition, not just for me, but for President O’Connor too,” I stated.

“I hope you believe me, but none of this was my idea. Reesa, I mean, President O’Connor suggested you come here. Not sure why. I never asked. Guess she was trying to make it more convenient for me, or she just didn’t want us to stop working. Does it really matter? Because if it does, you can go and we can just pretend as though you examined me,” he offered. “Hell, I’ll walk back to the resort if I have to.”

“Absolutely not! You’re my patient. You’re my responsibility. If something happened to you, I’d never forgive myself,” I stated firmly.

He chuckled. “And here I thought you didn’t care. I’m touched.”

I glared at him. “As a *patient*.”

“I’ll take it. “He smiled and took a seat in front of me.

“Good, because there is no way you are walking alone anywhere in Tabiq. It’s not...safe,” I stated, not wanting to say too much.

“I spent hours learning about what Tabiq has been through. Can’t imagine it was easy for you growing up here. But as a man, I don’t think I would have an issue. I actually worry more about *you* traveling alone,” he said in a tone I wasn’t used to hearing from him.

He was serious. Not sure what Reesa had told him, it couldn’t be the truth, could it? Did he know about the human trafficking that took place? Did he know how young women feared turning eighteen because it was the age when you might be taken from your family?

I looked into his eyes and saw something very unexpected. Compassion. Maybe even a little understanding of something that I still struggle with, and I had lived through it.

“It was...a very painful time for Tabiq. But things are better.” Not perfect by any means, but not as they were.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“For what?” I asked.

“For giving you such a hard time at the hospital when you were just doing your job.”

“You mean like I’m trying to do now?” I asked, not wanting to talk about his...casual flirtation during his half-naked state. He didn’t need to know that I liked it, and that was what had been bothering me so much.

“Point taken. I guess I better let you look at the cut because I don’t want to be the cause of any additional stress in your life.”

He was right. The tension in my body was almost unbearable. It wasn’t his fault, and I shouldn’t let him believe it was. But dealing with his joking manner now seemed easier than this new version of him. How could I be angry, or push him away, when he was practically admitting to being worried about me? It felt...nice.

As I cleaned the wound, with much more tenderness than I had at the hospital, I explained what was going on. “Mr. Stone, I...”

“Ryker,” he reminded me.

“Ryker, I shouldn’t have accused you of anything. I’m sorry. I’m not sure if President O’Connor has mentioned it, but the CEO of the hospital is her husband and he’s traveling out of the country. He put me in charge until Logan Henderson arrives in a few days. I...I just don’t want anything going wrong on my watch,” I stated honestly.

“You should’ve told her. I’m sure she wouldn’t have wanted to add more stress onto you than you already have. When she mentioned having you come here to me, I was surprised. I honestly just think she was trying to make things easier on me, and not thinking of what it would do to you.”

“She has a lot more on her plate than I do. I have no right to complain,” I replied. “And as far as your wound, it looks like you are healing well. I’d like to see you in two more days.”

That cocky grin appeared on his face. *Darn it.*

“Can’t stand being away from me from for too long?” he joked.

There was no beating him at this. Smiling back at him I said, “Nope. Just can’t wait to get my hands on you again.” I grabbed the cuff of my rubber gloves and snapped it. “I will be taking your sutures out. Hopefully, it doesn’t *hurt* too much.”

“If I promise not to complain much, will you agree to have dinner with me?” he asked.

I choked in surprise. “Dinner?”

“Yes. It’s a meal that many people eat at the end of the day. And before you tell me that you have too much on your plate, I’m not suggesting you leave your responsibilities. I’m offering to bring dinner to you at the hospital. All you need to do is take a break and eat it with me. So, what do you think?” he asked.

He had no idea how badly I wanted to accept his offer. It wasn't a date, but dinner with a gentleman wasn't something I'd done much of lately. Since becoming the nurse-in-charge at the hospital, it had been my career that held my full attention.

And here you are, distracting me.

"I think you should concentrate on getting better and not worry about me," I replied.

"Trust me, I can do both. How about I come by at five?" he suggested.

"You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?" I asked. He shook his head. "Why?"

"Maybe I am just being nice. Or maybe it's my way of saying thank you for giving me a ride back to the resort today. Unless you've changed your mind on that," he said, raising a brow.

"No. I meant what I said. There is no way I would ever allow you to travel in Tabiq without an escort."

He laughed. "Not that I'm a chauvinist, but isn't it my job to protect *you*?"

"You do not know the dangers that are here. Just ask your brother. I was on duty when TJ was brought in and pronounced dead."

"TJ?" he asked.

Oh shit! It was evident Ryker had no idea what I was talking about. I could send him to ask Bennett about it, but what was the point, it would only delay the same information I could give him.

"TJ had been here in Tabiq for a few years. He'd been helping Bennett with security, and I'd even seen him driving President O'Connor around. I'd crossed paths with him on several occasions. Not much of a talker, but he was nice enough. I wasn't sure what they were working on, but what I know is from when he was brought into the hospital, and I overheard Bennett telling Dr. O'Connor what happened."

"And, what did happen," he prodded.

“That he’d been in a vehicle and ran over an explosive device. He wasn’t alone. He was with Draven Blaze, who was also injured. Draven survived. TJ didn’t.”

Even more than a year later, I still couldn’t forget that horrible day. I’d taken care of people who had died before. It was a part of the job. Not everyone recovered. But TJ was different. It wasn’t a car accident. It was an intentional attack on another person. Someone had wanted them dead. That ripped my heart in two and reminded me that no matter how far Tabiq had come, evil still lurked.

He reached out and touched my hand. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I asked. “I hardly knew him.”

“Yet his passing affected you deeply,” he stated.

How could he tell? I’d never let anyone in like that. I was about to tell him he misread it, but his eyes were searching mine so closely, it was as though he was looking into my soul.

“Ryker, it’s not who that passed, but the situation around it. And now I can’t help but wonder what will happen next. If Reesa doesn’t win the election and the wrong person becomes president, then Tabiq is in serious trouble. What happened to TJ could happen to a lot more people. My country could be riddled with bloodshed and cruelty all over again.” I swallowed hard and then squeezed his hand. “I don’t know if you can do anything, but if you can help Reesa in any way, I’d be eternally grateful. All of Tabiq would be.”

Ryker smiled, and still holding my hand, he said, “I’ll settle for dinner with you.”

I shook my head but smiled. He was persistent. “After she wins the election.”

“I won’t be here that long. And you know that. I’m talking about my first offer. Dinner at the hospital,” he said.

“Fine. I’ll have dinner with you. But only because I trust you to help Reesa,” I said firmly.

Reesa must’ve opened the door because she added, “I’m trusting him too.” I turned around and she said, “Nurse Meri,

if you're through examining your patient, I'd like a few minutes alone with you to talk about what's going on at the hospital."

Ryker got up and said, "I'm almost good as new. I'll wait outside and give you two your privacy. President O'Connor, I'll talk to you again very soon."

"Thank you so much for everything today," Reesa responded as she closed the door behind him. When she looked at me, she said, "I figured that while you're here, you can ease your mind and check out the baby."

Now I understood why she wanted me here. It wasn't about Ryker at all. *She wouldn't admit it, but she's worried about the baby. About her health.*

"Please sit, and I'll take your vitals." As she went to sit, I asked, "How have you been feeling?"

"I...I've had a lot more morning sickness. Actually, it's been going on throughout the entire day. My energy level is so low. I have hours of work left, and all I want to do is lie down and nap."

"Would you mind if I drew some blood samples and ran some tests?" I asked, knowing that stress was also a factor in having a healthy pregnancy.

"Please, do what you think is best. Just as long as no one knows anything about it. And that includes Ryker," she warned.

"Why would I tell him anything?" I asked.

"I saw how you two were looking at each other. You like him."

That was true, but Reesa didn't need to know that. Heck, I thought I had done a great job of hiding it. Guess not. I'd need to be more careful going forward.

"He's my patient. That's all," I reminded her. "And this is not about Ryker and me. This is about you and your baby."

"Exactly."

I listened to the baby's heartbeat. It was strong, just like her vital signs. "Everything sounds good. But you need to eat and rest. I know you have a lot going on, but I must insist that you nap. Ryker and I are leaving now. You should tell your secretary that you are busy and not to disturb you for an hour. Lay on the couch. Close your eyes. Sleep. Listen to your body. It's important. And I will come back and see you in a few days," I said.

"I thought we agreed on once a week?"

"We agreed I would keep your secret. But you're my patient." Placing a hand on her abdomen, I added, "And so is this little one. Let me do my job and take care of the two of you, and you do yours, taking care of Tabiq."

Reesa smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, go rest. I will see myself out."

I left her in the office and found Ryker outside by my car.

"How did your meeting go?" he asked as I approached.

"It went as I expected. We will need to meet again. She's very...supportive of me." *As I am of her.*

"Good. I hope she can count on your vote," he grinned.

I shook my head. He knew better than to even suggest I would vote for anyone other than Reesa. "Get in the car. I have to get back to work."

He laughed. "So, do I."

"Yes, you have a campaign to help with," I reminded him.

"And a dinner to plan too."

I rolled my eyes and started the car. He was impossible but in the cutest way. I had no time for such distractions, but goodness knows, I needed one. He might be just what the doctor ordered for me to destress.

I need to take my own advice. I have to rest. Take a break. And I'm going to take mine with Ryker.

CHAPTER 6



Ryker

I needed Bennett to tell me what had gone wrong and how he lost TJ. I'd given him a chance to tell me last night when I got back from my meeting with Reesa. We ate dinner together, talked about what I was doing with Reesa, and then he made some excuse and rushed off.

That worked last night, but this morning, I was going to get some answers from him. If he refused, then I was going to ask Reesa. Meri told me what she knew. If she'd known more, I believe she'd have told me.

Instead of wondering when I would see Bennett, I opted to show up at his door. I knocked on the door and he opened it. As usual, he was on the phone but invited me inside. He pointed to the coffee craft, and I walked over and poured myself one.

"Let me know if you need me to join you there," Bennett said to the person on the phone. A moment later, he ended the call and walked over to me. "I wasn't expecting to see you this early. Is everything okay? Is your head hurting?"

"My head is fine. I will get my stitches out tomorrow. Which reminds me, I need to borrow a vehicle to go to the hospital."

"I can bring you," he replied.

“It’s not far. I know the way. You seem to have your hands full at the moment anyway. Want to tell me about it?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said.

“Want to tell me what happened to TJ?” I prodded.

“How do you know about TJ?” he questioned. Bennett didn’t look pleased one bit. But I wasn’t giving up.

“I don’t ask questions. Just do a lot of listening. And I’m listening now. What happened?” I asked again.

He poured himself a cup of coffee, then walked over to the couch and sat down. “We were searching for someone.”

“Is that someone the same person you seem to be looking for now?” I guessed. He nodded. “And he’s the one who killed TJ?”

“Yes. I wish they would’ve waited for me. But Draven and TJ insisted on acting before he got away,” he stated.

I could see that their decision not to wait still bothered Bennett. Did he not trust them to do this without him, or was it survivors’ guilt because TJ worked for him, and he couldn’t save him? There was only one way to find out which it was. Keep listening.

“None of us suspected that he would have booby-trapped the road leading to him. Draven said he recalled seeing him standing there, looking directly at them as they approached. That asshole knew what was about to happen and wanted to watch them die.”

I could see his fist clench and his eyes darken as he spoke. The utter hatred he had for that guy was more than I’d ever seen in him. Not sure he wanted to bring him to justice or to kill the bastard. But I had my answer. Bennett hated the fact he wasn’t there to protect TJ and Draven. And I didn’t think he would be able to move forward from this until the guy paid for what he’d done.

“I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell us?” I asked. “I mean, we’re your brothers. Whether you know it or not, we’re here

for you. We might not have chosen the same path as you, but we're still family." *We would still listen.*

"There was nothing to tell. The guy got away and we have been searching for him ever since. Whenever we think we have a valid lead, it ends up being nothing," he stated.

"And this time?"

He rubbed his forehead in frustration. "I don't fucking know. It makes no sense, but we were told he was on his way back to Tabiq."

"He's coming here?" That surprised me. Why come back to the place where you're wanted for murder? Didn't sound wise to me. Then again, I'm not a cold fucking murderer.

He nodded. "I think so. Just don't know why. He had no family, and we couldn't find any friends. Don't worry. You are safe as long as you don't leave the resort."

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm not worried about myself."

"I am. You're not going anywhere without me. You're lucky I left you with Reesa yesterday."

"And I made it back here safe and sound. But I'm capable of taking care of myself," I reminded him.

"TJ had served in the Marines with me for eight years. He's dead," he snapped.

"Bennett, Meri drove me here and had to drive back to the hospital alone. Tell me, which is more dangerous? Her or me out there?" I glared at him, and he knew I was right.

"It's not ideal for either of you, but I can't protect everyone. I've already lost a friend. I don't want to lose you too." I'd never heard him speak like that and didn't question his honesty. This was the first time I'd ever seen Bennett worried. Usually, he was the rock, or maybe that was just the way he wanted us to believe he was.

"You won't. I promise you that. But I need to know. What did that guy do? I mean to make him go to such extremes to get away," I asked.

“He killed a young woman. Eighteen years old. It was horrible and brutal. He almost got away with it too. If it wasn’t for a witness that had been tracked down, we might not have ever found him the first time,” Bennett explained.

“Wow. That witness must be scared shitless right now. I mean, if he’s coming back, he must know that someone out there ratted him out.” Maybe it was all the crime shows I watched for hours late at night, but a criminal always tried to cover their tracks and eliminate anyone who could identify them.

“She’s safe.”

“You have people watching her?” I asked.

“We sent her to the US. She’s being watched over very closely,” Bennett stated.

“Don’t you need her back for the trial when you do catch him?” I asked.

“This is not the States, Ryker. They are not going to have him in a courtroom in front of a twelve-person jury. He’s already been proven guilty. Now it is time for him to pay for his crime.”

I didn’t want to know if he meant corporal punishment or not. He killed a young woman, so whatever the law decided to do with the asshole was fine with me. I couldn’t stomach anyone mistreating a woman. Our parents raised us to respect women. If any of us even raised a hand to a woman, my father would’ve beat our ass. And rightly so, too.

“Does this asshole have a name,” I asked.

“Mombo.”

Odd name. “And a picture of him?”

He scanned his phone, then turned it to me. “This is the latest one we have. He easily could’ve changed his appearance.”

He looked more like a caveman in this photo. Missing a tooth, long hair that hadn’t been brushed in a long time.

Mombo obviously had been living off the grind which was why Bennett had a difficult time locating him before now.

I made a mental note of what I could grab. “What can I do to help?” I asked.

“Stay out of my way. Don’t leave the resort.”

“Yeah. That’s not going to work for me. I agreed to help Reesa. And from everything I’m learning about Tabiq, she needs to win. This country can’t lose someone like her.”

“I’ve got my men watching over her 24/7,” he stated.

“Then there should be no problem if I go to meet with her,” I stated.

“Guess not.”

“And the hospital must always be a safe place,” I said.

“It is. What’s your point?” Bennett asked.

“That I am going to meet with Meri for lunch and to have my stitches out. And before you say that you’re bringing me, you’re not,” I stated firmly.

“You do know that you signed a contract with the resort when your room was booked,” he reminded me.

“That’s for guests. I’m not one. I’m working for the president, thanks to you,” I smiled. “And if that guy is back in Tabiq and kills again, it will reflect on Reesa. She will appear to be weak, and it will be used against her by her opponents.”

Bennett’s eyes widened. “Fuck. That’s it.”

“That’s what?” I asked, feeling lost.

“Mombo is back because one of them knew where he was. They are bringing him back. And we couldn’t find him because one of them had been protecting him.” Getting up and pacing, he swore again. “Fuck. Why didn’t I think about that?”

“You really think one of the running opponents is capable of that?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, I do. And if that is true, then we have bigger problems than I first thought. We need to loop the

Hendersons in on this.”

“Why them?” I asked. “They’re businessmen. You need an army.”

“I have all the men I need, but they need to know what’s going on,” he replied.

I asked again, “Why?” It made no sense to me. Granted, he was married into the family, but as far as I knew, he didn’t report to any of them.

“There is so much you don’t understand.”

“For good reason. You haven’t told me. In fact, you have kept us all in the dark as to what you have been doing here in Tabiq. Reesa told me a little, but I have a feeling that it is only a part of the story. There is so much you are both holding back.” As I looked at my brother, my gut said, it had to do with the Henderson family. But how? They were not from Tabiq any more than Bennett was. Yet, they all had planted some sort of roots here.

The puzzle just gets more complicated.

“They are invested in making Tabiq a better place.”

I already knew that. “Great. Why here?”

He let out a heavy sigh. “You don’t need to know everything about them. Some things are not your business.”

“But you want me to help Reesa win. I can’t be blindsided by information that the public here might know, and I don’t.”

He snarled. “Do I need to remind you that you’re *not* her campaign manager?”

“I think it’s Reesa who makes that decision, not you. But I am aware of my role. And I only have a little more than a week here, so I have no time to waste playing guessing games with you. Is there anything about the Hendersons that might come out during the election that could negatively affect her?” I asked.

Bennett paused and said, “It’s a long story.”

“And I have plenty of time,” I stated.

“But I don’t. I have to meet with some of my men in regard to security. We can finish this conversation later,” he said. “Can I trust you not to do anything stupid until we talk?”

“By stupid, do you mean not bringing lunch to Meri at the hospital?” I asked.

“Lunch? I thought you were having stitches removed or something tomorrow,” he stated.

“I am. But I need to make sure she is okay,” I replied.

“She is. As I told you, I have men there watching the hospital.”

“That’s a building. I’m talking about her. You know she’s got a lot on her shoulders right now with Finn traveling to Ireland,” I reminded him.

“I’m aware. She can handle it. If not, he’d never have left her in charge.”

She was, but what she couldn’t handle was a killer who might be in Tabiq. She already knew what he was capable of. Hell, Meri was the one who had to treat TJ and Draven after his attack on them. If Bennett wasn’t going to tell her, then I was. Meri needed to know so she could watch out, even more than she had been doing before.

“I’m going. Only one question left.”

“What is that?” Bennett asked.

“Are you driving or am I hotwiring a car?”

He snarled. “Fine. Give me a couple of hours to handle some stuff. Then I’ll bring you to see Meri.”

I smiled and poured myself another cup of coffee. “I’ll be working on a presentation for Reesa. Just let me know when you’re ready to go.”

The distraction of the campaign was going to help, but my mind wasn’t going to be at ease until I knew Meri was safe. Not sure if that was even possible here, after everything I learned.

I can't protect everyone, but I sure in hell am going to try to protect her.

I wasn't sure how the hell I was going to pull that off when TJ, a Marine who'd been trained in combat, died. Not that I wanted it, but I needed Bennett's help. Fucking it up meant risking Meri, and I wasn't willing to do that. Time to set my arrogance aside. I was still going to do whatever I needed to do but couldn't do it alone.

This need to take care of Meri was...unfamiliar.

While I sat there thinking about Meri, Bennett had been texting someone. He once again seemed fine with not keeping me updated on what was going on. He turned to me an hour later and announced, "We're leaving in ten minutes."

"For?"

"The hospital."

He had my full attention now. "Good. You agree Meri needs protection."

"We're meeting with Brice. As I mentioned, we need to make them aware of what might happen," Bennett stated.

Unlike me, who has to figure everything out for myself.

I was glad he was asking me to join him, instead of me insisting I come along. Maybe we were making progress. Or maybe he was figuring out that I was not going to back down. Stone men are known for being stubborn, and he excelled at it.

I'd been hoping we could talk on the drive, but as usual, he was connected to someone else, and they were responding in her earpiece. At least I got half of the conversation. Bennett hadn't lied. He was checking on each member of his team. Some were being relocated, and others were being told to keep as they were. Where that was, only Bennett knew.

Between calls, I asked, "How many men do you have working for you?"

"I have people who are working for me full time, and others, as I need them," he replied.

“You mean in situations like this? Or are you talking about when you and your team overthrew the government here?” I questioned.

“You know nothing about what happened.”

“But I’d like to. What made you get involved? I mean, this was after you left the Marines, so you weren’t sent here by the US government. And I have a feeling the Tabiqian people didn’t hire you as a mercenary either.”

He snapped. “I’m no mercenary.”

“Then why were you and your team here?” I asked.

“We don’t have long before we get to the hospital. We can talk about this later,” he stated.

“That seems to be your standard answer. And what I have learned is that later never seems to come with you. So, tell me, why was your team brought to Tabiq all those years ago?” I asked again, this time in a firmer tone.

“The Hendersons were here. Ziva and Alex were taken hostage.”

“Alex Henderson. Damn. What did they want? Money and his family brought you in because they didn’t want to pay the ransom?”

“Not even close,” Bennett stated. “His wife, well she wasn’t his wife then, had been what the government called, a rebel. She was fighting for the rights of women. Protecting and hiding them in any way she could. It was very risky for her to do that. When Alex came to Tabiq, he met Ziva. While trying to help her, they pissed off the wrong people and were held captive. There was no ransom. They weren’t going to be released.”

“They were going to be held prisoners indefinitely?” He shook his head. *Fuck*. “You mean, they would’ve been killed.”

“Exactly. It was a covert operation to rescue them, but in the process, we also took that opportunity to crush those in power. That included the government and the so-called police of that time.”

“Wow. And yet you stayed,” I said.

“If we didn’t, someone else, maybe someone even worse would have stepped in and taken control. We had no choice but to stay and act as the law until we could stabilize the country. It’s been a long hard road, and a lot of progress has been made. I thought...”

“That enough had changed, and you could go back to your old life?” I asked.

“That will never happen. I’m not the same person I was years ago either. But I really thought with Reesa as president, and everything my in-laws had done here, that Tabiq might be able to stand on its own. Now, I’m not sure that will ever happen. If someone is running for president and willing to work with a known murderer in order to win, then the evil that we once fought wasn’t crushed, and just hiding,” he stated.

“Then Tabiq is lucky to have you and your men here to watch out for them.”

“Men and women,” he said.

“Really? You have women here working for you too?” I said surprised.

“I do. Several of them,” he said.

“Would one of them happen to be Meri?” I asked, hopeful. That would explain why he felt she didn’t need extra protection.

“No. She is not.” *Damn it.* It would’ve made things a lot easier. He continued, “I have people who are obvious, and then others you wouldn’t ever guess., but none are nurses. Each has something different to offer. Weapons or communications. Both vital at a time like this.”

He was so focused on securing the country, that he didn’t even pick up on why I was asking. A good thing, I guess. We were making progress on communicating, but like Tabiq, we had a long way to go.

We arrived at the hospital. Brice met us at the door and said, “We can use Finn’s office.” When we got inside and the

door was closed, he said, “You must be Ryker. Nice to meet you.”

It was weird because my brother had been married to his sister Zoey for over ten years, and this was the first time we’d met. Extending my hand, I said, “It’s been a long time coming.”

“Yes. And I should apologize for that. When this is all over, me and my wife Lena will be sure to have you and your family over. But I know there are more pressing things we need to discuss,” he said, taking a seat.

I sat beside Bennett who proceeded to lay out the theory we’d talked about. If I thought Bennett was good at holding his emotions, Brice was impossible to read. If he was stunned, I couldn’t tell.

“Have you told Reesa yet?” he asked. Bennett shook his head. “Good. Let’s keep this quiet as long as possible.”

“Wait. I’m confused. You don’t want the president of the country to know what’s going on in *her* country?” I questioned. “Why?”

“We don’t know who is running this,” Bennett stated.

“And you think Reesa could be involved?” I had a hard time believing that after our meeting.

Bennett shook his head. “There are too many people who are connected to her in that office. Any one of them could be feeding the opposition information that could endanger her. Until we know exactly what is going on, no one else can know any of this information.” Peering directly into my eyes, he said, “You know what I mean.”

“Yes.” He was talking about Meri. I didn’t need to tell her what was going on. I just needed to make sure she was safe. “So, what’s the plan?”

Bennett replied, “Flying in more support. They will be landing tomorrow morning.”

“And until then?” I asked.

“We keep our eyes open,” he stated.

“And who is here watching the hospital?” *Watching Meri?*

“There is no reason to believe the hospital is under any threat. It is Reesa we are concerned about,” Brice stated.

“So no one is here?” I asked again.

“We have two men who are stationed close by. If anything seems out of the ordinary, or there is trouble, they can be here very quickly,” Bennett stated.

That wasn't good enough for me.

“Well, looks like I'm staying the night,” I announced.

“No. That will bring suspicion,” Bennett stated.

I pointed to my head. “No, it won't. I can't help it if I've been having headaches today and felt...dizzy. I might need to be in the hospital for observation. Don't you agree?”

“Brilliant,” Brice said.

“Ryker, I already told you that I don't want you in the middle of this.”

“And I already told you, it's too late. I'm here. I'm staying. And if necessary, I'm fighting whatever pieces of shit are trying to ruin everything you all have been working hard to create,” I said firmly.

“You're not trained in this,” Bennett stated.

Before I could respond, Brice said, “But he can be trusted. And that is what we need right now. I say, let him stay the night. He can be the eyes and ears here. I'll stay as well.”

Now what, Bennett?

I could tell he was pissed.

“I'd rather have my men here,” he stated.

“Good. When they arrive tomorrow, I'll tell them I'm feeling better, and head back to the resort,” I said.

“And I'll go with you. I will call Logan. I don't want him coming here with his family until this is settled,” Brice said.

Bennett nodded. “I agree. It’s settled. You two, keep me updated.” When he got up, he reached behind his back and laid a Glock on the desk. “Don’t use it unless you need to. And if anything looks out of the ordinary, call me immediately. My men will be here within minutes to check it out. Don’t do anything foolish,” he warned.

I got it. TJ didn’t wait, and Bennett didn’t want a replay of that last time. Neither did I.

Brice grabbed the gun and locked it in the desk drawer. I thought it would be better if it was closer, but Bennett was right. Neither Brice nor I had been trained for this. But I knew we’d both do whatever we needed to protect the people here.

I got up and said, “Guess I better head to the emergency room and get myself checked in.”

Bennett said, “I better go with you.”

“Why? I know where it is,” I replied.

“You want them to believe you or not?” he asked.

“Why wouldn’t they?”

He chuckled. “I think Nurse Meri would question whether or not you’re *really* feeling dizzy.

Brice cocked a brow. “Why would she question it? She’s very professional from what I’ve been told.”

I smirked. “Aww, but I’m not.” Turning to Bennett I said, “Come on. Let’s get this over with. You have other things to attend to.”

“That I do.”

I really hoped this would work. No one else seemed overly concerned about the hospital, and hopefully, they were right.

CHAPTER 7



Meri

“Hello, Nurse Dedra. Is there a problem?” I asked when she had come to my office.

“I’m not sure. We have a patient in the emergency room who is complaining of a headache and dizziness, but all his vital signs are normal.”

That was possible. “Did the ER doctor look at him?” She nodded. “And what did he find?”

“He didn’t see anything either. But...but I thought you might want to go and look for yourself,” she said.

“Me? Why? The doctor already said he was okay.” Dedra hadn’t ever questioned a doctor’s decision before.

“Mr. Stone brought him in. It’s...it’s his brother. You know the one who was here several days ago.”

Ryker was here. He had wanted out of here so badly that I couldn’t imagine he had come back willingly. “I’ll come with you. Thank you for letting me know.”

“Of course.”

We rushed to the ER, and Ryker was the only patient there. I pulled back the curtain and he was lying on the gurney. I looked at Bennett and asked, “What happened? He was doing so well yesterday when I examined him.”

“I’m not dead. You can ask me,” Ryker replied in a snarky tone I’d become used to.

“I figured your head might be hurting too much to talk,” I said. *But maybe it’s not hurting at all.*

“It’s uncomfortable. The dizziness is what has me concerned.”

I walked over to him, pulled the light out of my pocket, and looked into his eyes. “And when did this start?”

“I woke with it early this morning.”

“And is there anything else besides a headache that I should be aware of?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I’ve followed your instructions.”

“And have you been spending a lot of time in front of your computer screen or on your cell phone? Screen time can cause issues when you have suffered a head injury,” I explained.

“Not really. Nothing compared to what I usually do,” he stated. “I didn’t want to come back here, but Bennett said if I don’t then he’s putting me on a plane and shipping back to the States. Can you tell him that there is nothing wrong with me, please? I just want to go back to the resort and sleep.”

“So, you’re tired as well?” I questioned.

“Yeah. Exhausted. I don’t know why. Probably it’s the headache making it difficult to sleep well,” he said, yawning.

If I didn’t know how badly he wanted out of here, I’d think he was faking it. I looked at Bennett and he said, “I’ve never seen him like this. He never complains. Hates doctors. I practically had to drag him here.”

That was enough for me. “Okay. I’ll talk to the doctor, and I think we should keep you overnight for observation again. It might be nothing, but I’d rather you are here if there is a problem than at the resort.”

Ryker grumbled, and Bennett said, “Listen, it’s what is best, so shut up.”

I left the room and updated the ER physician. He said he still saw nothing that concerned him but respected my judgment based on my personal experience with the patient. That was a stretch, but I went along with it. The only thing I was worried about was if Ryker truly was having a lasting effect after his head injury.

When I returned to the room, I said, “Looks like you’ll be enjoying dinner with us again. Hope you’re in the mood for soup and biscuits.” We didn’t have anything fancy here.

“Not what I planned when I said we’d have dinner here together,” he stated.

I blushed, and I had no idea why. “Mr. Stone, you are a patient here. We are *not* eating together. I’ll have a tray brought up to your room once you’re settled in. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other patients to check on.”

As I pulled the curtain to leave, I heard him laughing. “She likes me.”

I snapped the curtains closed and stomped back to my office. If I wasn’t truly concerned about his well-being, I would have considered inflicting a little pain on him myself.

When I came across Dedra she asked, “What did you think?”

“I believe Mr. Stone is going to be a difficult patient again tonight.”

“So, you had him admitted to the hospital?” she asked.

“Yes. Even though he is not showing any signs of distress, I don’t believe he would be here unless there was a problem. I would like you to watch him closely and if you need me at all, whether he is sick or just bothersome, you come and find me. Understood?” I asked.

“Yes, Nurse Meri.”

“Good. Now I’m going to make the rounds and check on all the other patients before going to get a little rest. You know where to find me,” I reminded her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

As I made my way from one patient's room to another, Brice came down the hallway.

"Hello Nurse Meri. How is your evening going?"

"It is fine. The patients are all being taken care of. Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked.

"I'll be spending the night here. Is there a room where I can rest if I need to?"

"You're sleeping here? Why? I see no reason for you to do so," I stated.

"I believe you are doing the same thing if I am correct," he stated.

Couldn't deny it. I'd spent all my time here since Finn left. I was too afraid to leave the nurses here alone without someone watching out for them.

"It is my job. I'm the head of nursing."

"And I have work to get done and would like to be here if you need me," he said.

"But I thought your wife and children had traveled with you. I'm sure they would like to have you with them as well. I promise that if there is an issue, I'll call you," I stated, honestly.

"They are enjoying the resort right now. So, where is that room for me?" he insisted.

I pointed to the third door on the right. "You can take that one. I'm staying right across the hallway."

"Thanks."

He walked back down the hall but didn't turn into the vacant room I had shown him. Maybe he just wanted one in case he grew tired. Maybe he was testing me to see if I was unsure and needed him close by. I had no intention of disturbing him.

As I walked by my room I resisted going inside and laying down. There was one last patient I needed to check on. One that wasn't here.

I stopped by the lab and asked for the test results for Mrs. Como. A name that I made up to use for Reesa. Even though no one knew who Como was, I wasn't about to read the report while I was in the lab. I slipped the paper into my pocket and headed towards my office. But my energy level was low. I needed something to eat. One last stop. The kitchen. I grabbed a bowl of soup and then headed straight to my office. I closed the door and sat at my desk. I was almost too tired to eat, but I forced myself.

When I was finished, I pulled out the lab report. All of Reesa's levels were within normal range except for her iron level. That was an easy fix and also good news. I just hoped she was taking my advice and resting during the day. I'd planned paying her a surprise visit, but with Ryker here now, I wasn't sure that was a good idea. If she wasn't aware he was having issues again, I didn't want to be the one to tell her.

My visit would need to wait one more day.

I pushed my empty bowl to the edge of the desk and rested my head on my folded arms. All I needed was to close my eyes for a few minutes, and I knew I'd get a second wind. I wasn't comfortable, but it didn't matter. Just having my eyes closed and the office quiet, felt great.

Somehow, I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke and looked at the clock my eyes couldn't believe it. It was almost ten at night. Three hours had passed. My body ached due to the horrible position I had slept in. I opened my desk drawer and took some pain relievers.

I needed to go and lay down but was tempted to peek in on Ryker on my way. But doing that was only asking for trouble. It was better that Dedra monitored him. She hadn't mentioned him flirting or being inappropriate, so I assumed that behavior was only brought out for me.

How did I get so lucky?

CHAPTER 8



Ryker

There weren't a lot of staff members at the hospital, especially at night. I wasn't sure if that was standard or not. The last time I was here I actually had felt like crap and my only thought had been getting out of here and back to the resort where I could heal alone. Either way, with hardly anyone around, it made it easy for me to sneak out of the room and stroll the hallways. I'd have much rather done so in my clothes, but they had insisted I wear their hospital gown in case there was a medical emergency. I believe Nurse Dedra intentionally hid my clothes from me after I had given her a hard time. But hell, they tell you that you need rest and then show up every hour to wake you up to see how you're doing.

I got it. It was their job. Mine was to make sure that Mombo didn't show up here. The only time I wanted to see his face here was when he was in the ER and Bennett had put him there. Wishing someone harm wasn't something I'd ever done before, but after learning what he'd done to that young girl, and to TJ, I felt differently. Not that I was seeking revenge, but there was an anger in me that I'd never felt before.

Bennett was angry because Mombo had killed TJ, and I was angry because I knew that it could've been my brother who would've died that day. I'd always known that danger lurked around every corner when he was in active duty in the Marines. Somehow, me and my family were under the false impression that he was safe now. Dabbling in cyber security

and being hired as security for the rich and famous so the paparazzi didn't snap any unwanted photos. Damn, we'd been so fucking wrong. He was still a hero, just to a different country.

As I made my way through another hallway, I couldn't help but wonder if the Tabiqian people had any clue about the sacrifices Bennett had made to keep them safe? It wasn't just me and my siblings that he didn't see much of, but his wife Zoey and kids probably wished he was home with them more often.

When this was over, I was going to have a talk with him. If our parents had any clue about what he was really doing, they'd age even quicker with worry.

Shaking my head, I turned to make my way back towards my room. Worrying was a funny thing. Here I was, unarmed, trying to protect someone that I barely knew from a known murderer. Maybe Bennett wasn't the crazy Stone brother.

"Ryker? What on earth are you doing?" Meri's voice rang out from behind me.

I chuckled. *Oh, I'm great protection. I get snuck up on by the cutest nurse I've ever laid eyes on.*

I slowly turned around and smiled. "Would you believe I couldn't sleep and decided to go for a walk?" She placed her hands on her hips and shook her head. "How about I was looking for my nurse and I got lost?"

"How about you just tell me the truth, because I am starting to believe the only thing you are suffering from is a bad case of lying."

You got that right.

"Why don't we have this conversation in my room," I suggested.

"Maybe we should have it in Finn's office. I believe Mr. Henderson would like to hear whatever you have to say as well," she stated firmly. "He is the one currently in charge and I'm sure he will not be any happier than I am that you wasted our time and resources."

“Yeah. About that. He knows,” I admitted.

Her face first filled with shock, then anger. “Are you telling me that...that Mr. Henderson is aware that you are here under false pretenses?”

Not only was I digging my own hole deeper, but I also just started digging one for Brice. This was not going the way I had envisioned this.

Looking around to make sure our voices hadn't drawn any unwanted attention, I said softly, “Please, Meri. I'm begging you. Give me five minutes to explain. If not for me, then for President O'Connor.”

The anger seemed to fade slightly, and she nodded. “Five minutes. And if I don't like what I hear, then I will have your ass tossed out of this hospital. Understood?”

“Totally,” I said, trying not to let her catch sight of my grin. She was even cuter when she was pissed. Her eyes grew so dark they were almost black, yet they also sparkled.

Maybe you're not as angry at me as you seem.

I was about to find out. We entered my room, and she slammed the door behind us.

Or maybe you are.

“Why don't we sit on the bed, and discuss this calmly,” I suggested.

“I'm fine where I am. But I believe you should lie down.”

“I'm fine,” I said.

“Yes. I am well aware of that now,” she sighed. “Tell me, Ryker, is this some game to you? I already told you that you're my patient. I will *not* date you. I agreed to have lunch with you only so you would return to the hospital to have your stitches out. Not for any other reason. And the fact that you brought Brice into this is...is totally embarrassing. I can only imagine what he believes is going on. I'm a professional, and this...this tells me that I'm not being taken seriously by my superiors,” she choked back tears.

Fuck.

She was way off the mark, but damn it, I think this was hurting even more than the truth. I needed to tell her even though I had promised Bennett I wouldn't.

“Meri, I...”

“Nurse Meri, please,” she demanded.

Oh, I was on her shit list for sure. And yet, kind of impressed that she thought through a plan of how I would manipulate things just to get a date with her. It had crossed my mind, but not this plan. Mine had been more like when she leaned over me to take my stitches out, I would wrap my arms around her, pull her onto my lap, and kiss her until she agreed to have dinner with me.

Which would probably get the same result. No. No way in hell.

“So, we're back to that, are we?” I asked.

“I believe it is better that way, Mr. Stone.”

“Fine. We will do it your way, for now. But maybe after you hear what I have to say, you will be...”

“Just tell me,” she ordered.

“No one can know about this. I mean it. Lives could be at risk if it gets out,” I warned her.

“You're being a little overdramatic, don't you think?” she said, her arms crossed.

“I wish I was.” I took a deep breath, and a long exhale. “Mombo is back.”

“Who is Mombo?” she asked.

That puzzled me. “You know, the guy who killed TJ.”

Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “Mombo. I...I never knew his name. No one ever spoke about the details. I just knew by his injuries that it wasn't just a car accident.”

I walked over to her and took her hands in mine. She was trembling and I led her to the bed and she sat down.

“It’s okay, Meri. I’m here. I won’t let him hurt you,” I told her.

“He’s really here?” she asked, and I nodded. “Why did he come back? I had overheard that he had fled the country. Why return now?”

“There are answers we don’t have. But I know Bennett and his team are searching for him. If anyone can find him, it’s my brother.” *Hopefully before he hurts anyone else.*

Meri must have realized that we were still holding hands because she slowly slipped hers away from mine. Instantly, I missed the contact. Another time and I’d have let her know. But that would need to wait.

“That doesn’t answer why you’re here at the hospital pretending to be a patient.”

“I’m here to make sure nothing happens to you,” I replied with more honesty than I had wanted.

“You mean everyone at the hospital,” she stated.

“Yeah.”

“Why you? I mean, not to sound...rude, but you’re... you’re...”

“I get it. I’m not my brother,” I said, frustrated that she was even comparing us. I grew up living in his shadow. I didn’t want to do so with Meri.

This time she grabbed my hand. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“What were you going to say?” I asked, needing to know.

“That you’re supposed to be in Tabiq to help Reesa, not... not me,” she said softly.

My stomach did flips with how she was looking up at me. “Meri, I am here at the hospital, because of you. Don’t ever doubt that. And I promise you that I’ll do whatever I can to keep you and everyone here safe.”

She nodded. “I don’t know why, but I believe you.”

Smiling, I said, “Good. Because I really hated lying to you. But if I had told you the truth, I have a feeling you’d have refused my request to stay. Am I right?”

Meri shrugged. “Maybe. But since you didn’t ask, guess we will never know. I am not happy that Brice also kept this from me. Dr. O’Connor left me in charge of nursing. They are *my* responsibility. If there is a threat or they could be in danger, one of you should’ve told me.”

Squeezing her hand, and looking her in the eye, I said, “You are right. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. But truthfully, we only know he is in Tabiq. We are not sure why.”

“And the hospital?”

“No threat that we are aware of,” I stated.

“And yet you are here.”

“Yes. Because there is a murderer around and...I don’t want you to get caught in the middle of whatever he has planned,” I said.

“Thank you, for caring. I don’t want to sound as though I don’t appreciate it, but it isn’t necessary. You have no idea what it was like growing up in Tabiq. We lived surrounded by men like Mombo daily. I was lucky and was never taken, but I have friends who suffered tremendously. Some were never seen again. Horrible is not a strong enough word. Not sure there are any words to describe it. So, you see, *one* man here in Tabiq who wishes harm on women, doesn’t scare me. It infuriates me. We won’t stand for it again. We won’t ever go back to the way things were. We are stronger and will fight evil with all we have.”

My heart broke as I sat just listening to her talk about her childhood. It was nothing like what I experienced. Nothing I could say would make it any better. It was ugly. She knew it and now so did I. Slipping my arm around her shoulders, I said, “And we are here to help in any way we can.”

Meri rested her head on my chest for a moment before pulling away. She got up and asked, “Ryker, why were you walking the halls in your hospital gown?”

“Oh, well, I guess I annoyed Nurse Dedra, and she took my clothes. Not sure where they are,” I admitted.

Meri burst out laughing. “She’s never done such a thing. You really must be getting on her nerves. What did you say to her?”

“Nothing. Just kept asking about you. That’s all.”

“Ah. Which is as good as telling her you don’t have faith in her as a nurse. Don’t worry. I’ll go and locate your clothes. I can’t have you walking around with your boxer shorts showing. And even if I tell you to stay in your room, I know you won’t,” she said.

“Guess we have something in common. We’re both stubborn,” I stated.

“Yes we are. And since you’re *not* a patient here, you might as well help me clean and prepare this room just in case it is needed by someone who *really* is ill.”

“I should be keeping an eye open for Mombo,” I reminded her.

“You can. After the room is cleaned,” she said, tossing the pillow to me. “The dirty linen goes in the laundry bag in the hallway.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” I asked.

She nodded. “Then the bed needs to be disinfected and made again. The floor needs to be washed and the trash emptied.”

“Don’t you have housekeeping to do this?” I asked.

“No. This isn’t America. In Tabiq, the nurse does a lot more than they do there. Trust me, I found that out when I went to nursing school in Boston.”

“I didn’t know you were in the States before.” There was a lot I didn’t know about her. Since I was stuck cleaning this room, might as well make the most of it and learn what I could. “Why don’t you tell me about it? What did you like best when you were there?”

“The education,” she replied.

“That’s it?”

“And the museums. But if I never see snow again, that would be okay with me. I wasn’t a fan of the winters there,” she said and shuddered. “Even thinking about it now gives me a chill.”

I know a good way to warm up.

“I’ve been to Boston once, during the summer. I have to agree with you. Snow is not for everyone. Not for me.”

She smiled and we spent the next hour talking about our likes and dislikes. Oddly enough we had a lot more in common than either of us thought.

Damn. Why did we need to meet here? Why now?

I was only going to be in Tabiq for another week and from how things were going, it was going to be one hell of a week. The time spent with Meri wasn’t going to be out on a relaxing date. It was going to be spent keeping her safe.

CHAPTER 9



Meri

I hadn't meant to share so much with Ryker. Granted it wasn't too deep, but even talking about my time studying in Boston, and my likes and dislikes was more than what I shared with most people. And Tabiqians never talked about our real history, especially with anyone from outside of Tabiq.

I'd been thrown off when I caught him walking the halls. But his reason for being there still troubled me. I had tried to hide my fear from Ryker. Tabiqians were extremely good at covering up their emotions. It had been a necessity before because weakness and fear would only be used against us. After years of such behavior, it was now a habit that had become hard to break.

It had left me feeling overwhelmed. I couldn't talk to Ryker about it, and Brice wasn't from Tabiq either. They would have compassion and sympathy for me but would not understand. I had seen that in Ryker's eyes when I shared the past of Tabiq with him.

He was a good man, and I was so glad he was in my life, but I wasn't ignorant of the fact he wasn't staying. The countdown had begun and in eight days, he would fly back home.

Ryker wasn't the shoulder I could lean on. I...I had no one. If Reesa hadn't been pregnant, then I would already be on my way to meet with her so we could discuss how we were going

to keep the people safe, and how the hospital should prepare, if we couldn't.

I couldn't even reach out to Finn for questions. He needed to concentrate on taking care of his mother right now.

For the first time in ages, I sat at my desk, buried my face in my hands, and cried. I was in charge, and all hell might be about to rain down on us. No matter how confident Finn had been in my ability to handle things while he was gone, I was sure even he hadn't expected what might be coming.

Letting emotions take over wasn't going to help me or the staff members. I needed to be strong and think clearly. Even though I wished there was another way, I had to go and meet Brice. Wiping my cheeks, I got up from my chair and headed to his temporary office.

The door was open, and I peered inside. He was at the desk typing on his laptop. Without even looking up, he said, "Come in. Have a seat. I've been waiting for you."

Doing as he instructed, I sat and waited for him to finish what he was doing. When he closed his laptop, I said, "I take it Ryker spoke to you?"

"He did. I hope you understand why we didn't tell you why he was really here yesterday," he stated.

Does it matter? It's too late to change it.

"He explained what was going on. But I have concerns that I need to be addressed as well," I said. "I'm not sure if any of you have even considered the fact that the hospital is running with a skeletal staff at the moment. We have several nurses in the US for training, as well as a few here who don't seem to be able to show up for work."

"And it is becoming difficult to maintain right now?" he asked.

Shaking my head, I tried to explain. "I know you weren't here, but long ago, before New Hope Resort and President O'Connor, we were a country that was in turmoil. So many people who died didn't have to if things were better. But our healthcare was substandard. If you were even able to get to the

hospital, it didn't mean you would receive quality care. Some people died in the ER while waiting for a doctor or nurse to arrive."

"That won't happen again. Logan and Finn have made major changes. As you know, the nurses back then weren't properly trained."

"I'm well aware. But I still question whether or not they would be able to handle a flood of wounded arriving at the same time." There. I said it.

He stared at me for a few seconds, then addressed my concerns. "Bennett has more people arriving within the hour. They will be here to help secure Tabiq until we know exactly what is going on. This also includes medically trained individuals. You will have a few new people working here until further notice."

"Nurses?"

"Corpsmen. They have been trained to serve as medics in combat. Trust me, they can handle whatever situation they need to," he stated.

I was both relieved and scared that I wasn't the only person who had thought about what bloodbath could be coming.

"And is that all they are trained to do?" I asked, now concerned for the safety of our staff.

"No. All Marines are combat-trained. As I said, they will be prepared for whatever needs to be done at the hospital."

That was clear. They would be armed. Definitely not something any of us were. "One last question."

"Ask as many questions as you want. I'll answer what I can."

"Has the president been updated in regard to the hospital's preparation?"

"Bennett will be meeting with her immediately after his team is in place here," he stated.

She doesn't know? This could be bad. The added stress on top of everything else wasn't good for her or the baby.

"I need to go with him," I stated firmly.

"Your time is best spent here. And the less that you're traveling, the safer you will be," he said.

"Brice, I appreciate you trying to keep me safe, but if she has any questions regarding the hospital and staff, then I'm the one who has the answers. I know each member of the staff here personally. I know their strengths and weaknesses. You can't speak to that."

He nodded. "Okay. You accompany Bennett and Ryker. I will stay here and answer any questions the staff has with regard to the sudden arrival of new ones."

It was going to draw attention. With Finn gone, and Brice here, people were already beginning to talk. I had reassured them that everything would be back to normal within a couple of weeks. That wasn't going to explain foreign staff working in the ER.

"I have a suggestion. Let me inform them now."

"And what are you planning on saying?" he asked.

Thinking quickly, I blurted out, "That just like we went to the US for our training, you and Finn have made arrangements for them to come here and see how foreign countries run their ER. It will give my staff the boost in confidence they need, and also the help, we hope they won't."

"That is brilliant." He looked at his phone and then looked back at me. "You don't have much time. They have landed and will be here shortly. Do you need my help gathering the staff?"

I shook my head. "No. It will be faster for me. I'll stop at the ER first, and then from there, I can gather the nurses as I cross each floor. I will be through and ready to leave within a half hour." Meeting his gaze I said, "Please do not let them leave without me."

"I'll do my best," he replied.

As I left the office, I pulled out my cell phone and sent a text message to the one person I believed was thinking about what I wanted. What I needed.

I'M GOING WITH YOU AND BENNETT TO SEE REESA. PLEASE DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT ME.

Just before I entered the ER, I received his response.

YOU DON'T NEED TO.

Hmm. We might have gotten to know each other a little better, but there was a lot for him to learn. Now was a good time to let him learn a little more.

I WASN'T ASKING. I'LL UPDATE ON THE WAY.

One-word reply.

OKAY.

Was he bothered by my directness? I had no time to worry about that. I needed to update everyone and get ready to travel to see Reesa. I had Brice believing it was in regard to the hospital. That wasn't true. They were about to deliver Reesa some very troubling news. I needed to be there as her nurse. I needed to be able to monitor how she and the baby were doing. Hopefully, telling her that her bloodwork came back normal would help offset Bennett's news.

Once the last nurse had been provided with the information, I headed back down to the main entrance. There were two black SUVs sitting there, but both appeared to be empty. They had to still be in the ER making introductions. I really should have attended that as well. The chain of command had broken down. Unfortunately, I didn't feel in charge at all. There was a part of me that was relieved. Another part felt as though I was disappointing Finn and Reesa.

The problem was that no one asked my opinion. If I stepped aside, I think they would be okay with that as long as I stayed on as a nurse. But I wasn't doing that. I had something to do. Not for Finn or Reesa. Not even for Ryker. I had to do it to show myself that I was capable of handling this.

I have to be able to handle anything thrown at me, all by myself.

CHAPTER 10



Ryker

The meeting with Reesa went exactly how I expected. Bennett did the talking and Reesa asked a few questions. It was apparent that she trusted my brother completely. I knew why. He knew his shit when it came to protecting a country from attack. That's what this was beginning to feel like. Not an external attack, but one from within.

“Would you gentlemen excuse me for a few minutes? I'd like to speak to Meri alone,” Reesa said after our meeting.

Bennett shot her a questioning glance, but then got up and said, “We'll be in the SUV and give you a ride back to the hospital.”

“I can wait for her and ensure she makes it back safely. I know you have things that you need to take care of,” I offered.

“Fine. But I expect you back at the resort right after.”

I chuckled and said sarcastically, “Sure, Dad.”

Bennett glared at me but said nothing. Turning to Reesa he stated, “We will keep you updated on anything we find. Please do the same.”

“Of course. And Bennett, thank you.”

We left the office, and I closed the door behind me. I walked outside with Bennett. “Sure you don't want me to

wait? She said it would be only a few minutes,” Bennett offered.

“That’s what they said the last time and I was out here at least a half hour. You know women have no sense of time when they start talking.”

Bennett asked, “What other meeting did they have?”

“When Meri came to examine me at Reesa’s office. After I was all set, the two of them went back into the office while I waited for them outside,” I explained.

“That’s odd. I didn’t know they knew each other that well.”

“What? Something you don’t know? Wow. I’ll go and mark my calendar,” I joked.

“Do you see me laughing?” he asked. I shook my head. “I’m telling you that it is odd for Reesa to be meeting with Meri like that.”

“Meri said they talked about the hospital,” I replied.

“Reesa talks to Finn several times a day. It’s not that. There is something more.”

“I think you’re paranoid. There is nothing going on.” Meri’s explanation made perfect sense to me. I had no idea why it didn’t to Bennett.

“Did you notice that she was carrying a medical bag with her?”

I had. “She mentioned that I needed to have my stitches out today. She probably brought them just in case she had to remove them on the road. She already let me know not to blow her off regarding them. Guess she’s figured out I can be difficult.”

Bennett didn’t even comment, and I’d lined him perfectly to make a joke. Instead, in a serious tone he said, “That’s possible. Still think there’s more to it than that. I’ll ask Finn if there is anything going on with her that we don’t know.”

“Wait. I might not be married, or even in a relationship, but that sounds like a fucking horrible idea. Why worry her husband without any reason? At least not about that. Besides, once he hears about Mombo being back, the guy is probably going to board a plane and head back anyway. I know I would if there was a chance my wife was in danger,” I said firmly.

“Ryker, I would like to think you’re right, but I’ve known Reesa for a few years now, and this is not normal. Do me a favor.”

“Sure. What is it?” I asked.

“See if you can get anything out of Meri. Maybe she’ll be forthcoming with you in regards to Reesa.”

“She won’t. Meri had made it *very* clear that she is a professional. That means whatever those two are discussing in there, stays in there.” I must admit, it felt good that Bennett thought I could pull that off. It was possible that I still could. But did I want to? If Meri was willing to share something personal with me, and I broke that confidence, hands down, she’d hate me.

“Try.”

“Okay. I’ll spend as much time as I can with her seeing what I can learn,” I replied.

“I have a feeling you were planning on doing just that but for different reasons,” he stated. “Should I remind you that you are leaving in seven days?”

“Yeah. I know. Not a lot of time to get to know a person,” I replied.

“No. It’s plenty of time but use it wisely. Don’t let her get emotionally attached to you.”

“We’re not dating. Hell, if you’d have seen the look in her eyes when she’d caught me in the hallway last night, you’d be worried for me, not her,” I said, trying to make light of our connection.

There was no doubt we had some sort of connection. When it was just us, and we were talking about anything other than

Tabiq, we actually got along. Would I date her? In a heartbeat. Would she go out with me? Earlier I'd have said no. Now, I'm not so sure. The one thing standing in our way now was time. We didn't have enough of it.

Bennett left and I spent close to an hour waiting outside. She came out and said, "I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting. You could've gone and I could've called for a ride back."

The hell I'd have let that happen. "I think you know I wasn't going anywhere."

She smiled. "I do. And I'm glad. It's been a long day and it's not even dinner time yet. I better get back to the hospital and check on how the new nurses are doing."

"I'm sure they are fine. You, on the other hand, look tired and hungry. When was the last time you had something to eat?"

"Toast this morning. Soup last night," she said.

"I'm talking about real food," I said.

"That is real food," she replied as we got into the SUV.

Slipping in beside her in the back seat I said, "You're working a lot. You're stressed. That is not enough to sustain you. I would think as a nurse, you'd know to eat better."

Meri huffed. "I know exactly what I need to do." I didn't say anything and just looked at her. "Fine. I'll eat something better for dinner."

"Good. Where should we go?" I asked.

"Excuse me?"

"For dinner. Where should we go? The only place I know is the resort. The food there is amazing, but I don't think you want to accompany me there. Am I right?" I asked.

"You are. And I don't think I agreed to go anywhere with you. Except for the hospital that is," she reminded me.

"I've had the food there. It...it is horrible. Bland. One might as well eat paper," I stated. "I didn't have the soup, but I bet it wasn't any better."

“It’s...edible.”

I laughed. “Yes. That is what the hospital food is. How about we strive for tasty food? I’m not saying we need to stay out long. We can stop at a place along the way.”

“Ryker...I...”

“I told you that I’m going to make sure nothing happens to you. That starts with making sure you’re taking care of yourself too. Now, are you going to tell the driver where he’s going, or do I let him pick for us?” I asked.

“You’re being difficult again.”

“Get used to it. I’m always difficult,” I replied.

She sighed but gave the driver the name of a place and he pulled out of the parking lot. It wasn’t far, and soon we were seated at a table in what looked like someone’s home. When the woman came out to greet us, she smiled and spoke to Meri in their native language. Meri smiled and the only thing I understood was my name being tossed around. Obviously, we weren’t discussing food yet.

I figured the woman didn’t speak English, but I was wrong. “Welcome to my home. I will bring you your food in a moment. What can I get you to drink?”

No menus? Odd. Maybe Meri ordered it for me. We hadn’t talked about food yet, so I wasn’t sure how she knew what I liked. Not going to complain. I got her to come out with me. That was more than I thought would happen. Turning to the older woman I said, “Coffee, please.”

Not sure I’d ever get used to how they make it here. It was so strong that I didn’t bother putting creamer in it. It only changed the color from black to brown.

When we were alone, I asked, “So, what are we eating?”

She shrugged. “We’ll find out when she brings it.”

“Huh? You mean you didn’t order our food?” I asked.

“No. This is a special place. We are eating what she made today. That’s all there is,” Meri stated.

“No choices?” She shook her head. “How does this place stay open?” I asked.

Meri snickered. “It’s her home. She has opened her front room to welcome guests who would like a home-cooked meal. There are no options. You eat what she has or go somewhere else. But trust me, whatever she makes will be delicious.”

I must take her word for it because I also didn’t know any place else. “Do you come here often?”

“On my days off I try to visit, but that has become a rarity now.”

She used the word visit. Also, odd. “You mean eat, not visit.”

“No. Visit. She is my aunt. This is her home. I come to check on her whenever I can. Coming here is kind of a house call as well as getting something to eat.”

I laughed. “You really don’t ever stop working, do you?”

“There are a lot of people who won’t come to the hospital and that means I must go to them. Sometimes, it’s the only exam they ever get. There are many that don’t even get examined, ever. All I can do is just talk and listen to see if you can detect anything wrong.”

“Nursing here is so different from what it is like in the States,” I said.

“Yes, it is. We are not doctors and don’t pretend to be, but we go to people’s homes, and sometimes deliver babies there.”

“Serious? You’ve delivered babies?” I said, stunned.

“Until recently, all women delivered their babies at home.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? I mean for the mother and child,” I asked. Her eyes grew sad, and she became quiet. “Tell me. What did I say to upset you?”

“It’s not you. It’s our...history. Never easy to talk about, or think about.”

I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. “Meri, I’m always here to listen, but I understand if it is too

painful to discuss.”

She looked me in the eye for what seemed like an eternity. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Was my holding her hand bothering her? I went to release it, but she started to hold mine in return.

This was nice. I could sit here all evening staring into her glorious brown eyes. I could forget everything. Where we were, why we were there, and that I was leaving in a week. This was nice. We didn't need to talk or eat at all. But she decided to tell me.

“Women didn't want anyone to know they were having a baby in case it was a girl. It meant the family had to live in fear that one day once their daughter turned eighteen, she might be taken away from them and sold to the highest bidder. So as a nurse, there was also an oath of secrecy,” she explained.

“That was a horrible way to live. But I thought those days were over,” I said, going by what Bennett and Reesa had told me.

“They are, or should I say, we hope they are. With Mombo back, it could open old wounds. I know it has for me. I barely slept at all after leaving your room last night.”

I wished it was because she couldn't stop thinking about me, but I knew that wasn't the case. “I'm sorry, Meri. I can't imagine what you're going through.”

“I'm afraid that the evil that once plagued us is trying to return. Tabiq won't survive going through that again. I know I couldn't,” she said.

I knew she was fighting back tears. Bringing her hand up to my chest, I held it there. “Meri, I promise you, me and my brother are going to do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen.”

“Thank you, Ryker. I don't know why you care so much, but I'm glad you do,” she said softly.

“I care more than you know.” *More than I thought I was capable of.*

She was so close that kissing her would be so easy. Bennett's warning echoed in my mind. I needed to tread carefully. I leaned over and kissed her on her cheek. Even that probably wasn't wise. Yet she didn't pull away. There was no slap across my face. Maybe it was welcomed.

I really hoped so. Just looking into her eyes, I knew she needed someone that she could talk to. I wanted to be that person for her.

The woman came back into the room carrying a tray filled with food. Instantly, Meri snatched her hand away from me, and the moment we shared was over.

"Thank you so much. It all looks delicious," Meri said.

"You are welcome." She turned to me and said, "I hope you enjoy your food. It is not like what they cook for you at the resort. This is Tabiqian cooking. Nothing else like it. The best in the world."

It smelled good, and she stood there waiting for me to take a bite. I still had no idea what it was. I could see different vegetables and some kind of meat. Asking would be an insult, so I picked up my spoon and took a good-sized bite. Instantly I realized it was spicy as hell. I swallowed and forced a smile up at her.

"Very good. Thank you," I said, trying not to cough. Surprised that I still had vocal cords. Damn, it was hot. I'd had spicy food in the past, or so I thought. Hell, growing up, me and my brothers used to dare each other to eat crazy hot peppers. But this was beyond anything I could imagine.

Her aunt was pleased that I appeared to be enjoying the food. Without another word, she turned and left the room joyfully humming to herself.

Meri said in a low voice, "You don't like it."

"I didn't say that," I replied, not wanting to offend Meri either.

"You don't have to. I can tell," she said.

Barely a whisper I asked, “Do you think your aunt knows?”

“Absolutely not. I haven’t seen her so happy in a long time.”

“Then would you do me a favor and eat mine too?” I pleaded with her.

Meri shook her head. “No way.”

“Why not? Too much food?” I asked.

“No. I don’t eat anything this spicy. My aunt is the sweetest woman ever, but she forgets that I like my food more on the mild side. So, I guess you’ll have to eat mine for me,” she grinned.

“Me?”

“You did say you’d do anything to protect me. If I eat this, I’ll be up all night with heartburn. You wouldn’t want that, would you?” she asked.

“I am a man of my word. Okay. I’ll eat yours too,” I said, reaching for her plate. I wasn’t sure I’d survive eating mine, but hell, after a couple of bites, I probably wouldn’t be able to feel anything because my tastebuds would be scorched off.

When I brought the spoon to my mouth, she grabbed my hand and said, “I was only joking. Don’t eat it.”

“But your aunt’s feelings will be hurt,” I reminded her.

She pulled out her cell phone and said, “No she won’t.” Then she got up and went into the back room. When she returned, she was smiling.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I told my aunt that I was sorry, but I had to get back to the hospital right away. She understood and said that you are welcome back to her home anytime. And Ryker, that’s a huge thing. She doesn’t let everyone come here. You must have really made a good impression on her,” she stated.

“That’s because she thinks I like her cooking,” I replied. “And for the record, what I could taste, tasted good.” I took

Meri by her hand as though we'd been doing so for years. With our fingers entwined, I led her back to the SUV. When we got inside, I said, "Where to now?"

I could think of a nice beach we could walk on, or maybe go for a drive. Any place. I just didn't want this to end. Even though we weren't alone, and had a driver, I enjoyed Meri's company.

"I told you that I have to get to the hospital."

"I thought that was just a story for your aunt," I replied.

"Well, it happened to work out in our favor, but it was the truth as well. As you know, I oversee the nurses, or at least I think I do" she sighed as we got inside.

"Of course, you're in charge. Who else would be?" I asked.

"Brice. Bennett. Heck, maybe even you. But when I am there, I don't feel like I'm the boss. I feel like I'm kept in the dark about so much stuff and it bothers me," she said.

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her fingers. "Meri, I can't answer for anyone else, but I can tell you, I'm not hiding anything from you." *The question is, are you hiding something from me?*

I knew Bennett wanted to push her for answers, but I couldn't. She'd told me things that I hadn't asked about. Painful ugly things about Tabiq. I couldn't imagine her hiding things from me. From Bennett, well that was different. I was hiding things myself. Like how much I liked and cared for Meri.

"Sweetheart, you can't go back to work. You haven't eaten," I reminded her.

"Don't worry. I'm looking forward to the bland soup tonight."

I chuckled. "You know that soup is sounding a lot better after the acid that is burning my stomach lining right now."

"And now you know why I eat it. Maybe when you come tomorrow to have your stitches taken out, we can have lunch

together,” she suggested.

“Hmm. Guess I didn’t need to push too far. “I’d like that. But would you be opposed to my bringing lunch from the resort for the two of us?”

“I guess you can, but just this once. We can’t make a habit out of it,” she stated.

With the clock of my departure ticking so fast, we couldn’t make it a habit even if we tried.

We pulled up in front of the hospital and I asked, “Did you want me to walk you in?” This wasn’t a date, but I was being considerate of her safety. Or so I told myself.

She shook her head. “I don’t need any rumors starting, thank you.” She grabbed the handle to get out when my cell phone rang. “Perfect timing. Sounds like someone else needs you.”

I looked at it quickly and said, “I’ll answer it later. I can guess what it is about anyway.”

“Really? What is that?” she asked, and I regretted saying anything.

“Mombo. Not that Bennett will tell me much, but he will remind me that I should be back at the resort where I belong.” I hated how he thought he could tell me what I could do. Unfortunately, the driver worked for him, so Bennett knew exactly where I had been and what I was doing. That needed to fucking end fast.

“Sounds like we are both only told what people want us to know. I don’t like it,” she said.

“Neither do I. I think I’m going to go back and see Reesa. Maybe I can get something out of her,” I stated.

Meri’s eyes widened. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t what? Go see Reesa?” I asked, puzzled.

“Yes. She...she has enough stress. She doesn’t need any more.”

That was true, but odd in a way. Reesa was the president. You couldn't get a job more stressful than that. "I wasn't about to harass her. Just ask a few questions."

"Please, Ryker. Let her get some rest."

This didn't make any sense. She was all about me helping Reesa to get reelected, and how qualified she was, and now she doesn't want me to go talk to her. Why the change of heart? I wanted to know more, but for some reason, talking about Reesa was upsetting Meri.

Fuck. Bennett was right. She knows something that we don't.

The only way I was going to learn what that was would be by keeping her trust. Taking her hand in mine again, I said, "Don't worry, sweetheart. I won't go or call her tonight. We can talk more about this during our lunch tomorrow."

She nodded. "Thank you, Ryker. Not just for Reesa, but for dinner. It was nice, even though we didn't eat."

"Yes it was. But I promise tomorrow, we eat. Have a good night, and call me any time if you need me," I said.

She nodded, and I went to kiss her on the cheek again, but she'd turned, and instead, our lips brushed. It was brief, but long enough for me to get a taste of those sweet lips of hers. Damn it, it was enough to make me want more. Meri blushed slightly and then slipped out of my arms and got out of the car.

Oh, how I yearned to go back to the ER and let them admit me overnight again. I wouldn't be lying. I was hurting right now, but this time it wasn't my head, it was my cock.

Looks like I'm not getting any sleep again tonight.

I wasn't going to tell Bennett anything. At least not yet. Really, I didn't know anything worth sharing. Just that Meri was being very protective of Reesa. Not a bad thing to be because I was pretty protective of Meri.

CHAPTER 11



Meri

With all the extra help in the ER, I seemed to have a lot of free time on my hands. Which would be welcome since for the past couple of months, I seemed to be doing the job of three people, instead of one. But with the circumstances that had brought in all the extra help here had my nerves working overtime.

Pacing in the front lobby, I looked at my watch. Ryker should've been here almost half an hour ago. He hadn't texted me or called to let me know if something had come up and he couldn't make it.

Please don't let anything happen to him.

My cell phone rang and I looked at the caller ID. I wasn't familiar with the number. Answering, I said, "This is Nurse Meri. Can I help you?"

"Hello. I found this phone and you were the last number called. I don't know who it belongs to. Do you want me to bring it to you?" a woman asked.

I didn't even know whose phone it was, but obviously, they knew me. They had called me. I couldn't remember talking to anyone besides Ryker, Reesa, Brice, and my nursing staff.

Guess I'll find out when I get the phone.

"Yes. I'm at the hospital if you want to bring it by."

She said, “Would you be able to meet me in the parking lot?”

Why not? It wasn’t like Ryker was here and I had stitches to take out. “Fine. How long until you’re here?”

“Ten minutes. I’ll be watching for you.”

She ended the call before I could ask how I would know who she was. There weren’t a lot of people coming and going so how hard was it going to be for me to find her?

As I looked out the glass entrance, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful it looked outside. I was about to head out when Brice came up from behind me.

“I was wondering where you were.”

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“None. Just checking on you. Is everything okay with you? I mean, I know having the extra...staff in the ER probably has interrupted your normal workflow.”

“If by interrupted, you mean given me space to breathe, then yes, them being here has been a change. In some ways, a pleasant one. But I can’t forget the real reason they’re all here,” I admitted. “I appreciate you being here, but I wish Dr. O’Connor was back.”

“He’s on his way,” Brice said.

“Really? Is his mother well? I mean she just had bypass heart surgery. I’d have thought he’d stay a little longer. I mean, isn’t Dr. Henderson arriving today?” I asked.

“Logan was, but that plan has changed as well.”

It appeared that a change of plans seemed to be the only constant around here lately. I chuckled softly. “I consider myself organized. But I’m having trouble keeping up with all of this. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

A car pulled into the driveway but didn’t enter the parking lot. Brice looked around me to check it out.

“Oh, that’s probably the woman who called me about a phone she found,” I said.

“A phone? Whose phone?”

“I’m not sure. But she said my number was the last call made on that phone. So, she dialed me hoping that I could find the owner,” I explained.

“You don’t know who the woman was on the other side of the phone?” he asked.

I shook my head. “She is Tabiqan. That’s all I know.”

“You can’t go out there,” he said firmly. Then he pulled out his phone and dialed a number. “Lobby. Now.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Get away from the glass window.”

“Brice. Tell me what’s wrong,” I demanded.

“Maybe nothing.” He pulled out a gun from behind his back and said, “Do as I say and get away from the entrance.”

I looked back at the vehicle one more time, but it was driving off, and a familiar black SUV pulling in. I could see in the front passenger seat that it was Ryker.

“You can relax. She left,” I announced.

“I’m not going to relax until we find out what they wanted,” Brice snapped.

Ryker got out of the SUV just as three of the ER nurses came into the entrance with their weapons drawn.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ryker asked, raising his arms.

The men looked past him. “What’s going on? Why the call?”

Brice turned to me and instructed, “Tell them what you told me. About the woman calling.”

“What woman?” Ryker asked, looking puzzled and extremely concerned. “Did someone come here trying to hurt you?” he asked, rushing to my side.

I shook my head. “No. I...I don’t think so. I don’t know. It’s all so...confusing” I looked around and the energy in the room was intense. “I...I received a phone call from a woman saying she found a phone and she didn’t know who it belonged to.”

“Did she call you from the phone she found or her phone?” Ryker asked.

I shrugged. “I think it was from the phone she found. But I didn’t recognize the number. Usually, if it is someone that I know I save the number in my phone with their contact information.”

One of Bennett’s team tapped something on his ear and then spoke. He repeated the information I just told him. Then he said to me, “Let me have your phone.”

I looked at Ryker who nodded. Then I handed my phone over. He searched through my phone, then rattled off what I suspected to be the number that had called me. I assumed it was Bennett he was giving that information to, but lately, my assumptions weren’t accurate. And one thing I’ve learned is asking doesn’t get me any answers either.

Ryker leaned in and whispered into my ear. “He’s reporting to Bennett.”

Hmm. It felt good. Not that I was right, but the fact that Ryker was still watching out for me. No matter how much I pushed him away, he was here.

Bennett’s men said, “The vehicle was gone before they could get here, but the phone was retrieved. They are searching for the vehicle now.”

“You’re not staying here,” Ryker stated.

“I know. I’m going to my office.” I needed to get away from all of this.

“I’m not talking about your office. You can’t stay here,” he repeated.

“You mean I should go home?” I asked. “Because that’s not happening. I must be here. It’s my job.”

“Agreed. But you have been constantly on your toes since Finn left. He’s flying back now. Brice can handle things until he arrives. There’s no reason for you to stay,” he said.

I pulled away from him. I didn’t like what he was saying. It didn’t sound like a suggestion. It sounded like an order. “May I remind you that I do not work for you?”

Brice interjected. “You work for the hospital. If that person means to harm you, then your being here puts the hospital in danger. Ryker is just trying to protect everyone. I agree with him. You shouldn’t be here.”

It appeared that I was outnumbered. Nothing new. *Has been happening since Finn announced he was traveling to Ireland.* But if there was a chance, even a slim one, that Ryker and Brice were right, I needed to go. I wasn’t afraid of what could happen to me, but I’d never forgive myself if something happened to one of my patients, or the nurses here, because of my stubbornness.

“Fine. I’ll go home,” I said. Ryker and Brice shook their heads simultaneously. “I can’t stay here. I can’t go home. Where am I supposed to go?” I asked.

Bennett’s man who had my phone, handed it back to me and said, “New Hope.”

“The resort? Why there?” I asked, slipping my phone in my pocket.

Brice said, “Security there is tight. No one is getting in there.”

“Trust me. It’s hard even getting out,” Ryker stated. “You will be safe.”

That’s great, but what they didn’t know was that I was monitoring Reesa’s health. If I couldn’t get out of there, then how would I make sure that she and the baby were doing okay?

Think. Think hard.

I turned back to the man who had given me my phone back. “Can I talk to Bennett?”

He nodded. “He said you can call him. He’s available to talk.”

Pulling my cell phone out I dialed his number. “Hello. I have been updated on what I guess is my only option. I need to go to New Hope.”

“Yes. It’s where you will be the safest,” Bennett replied.

“That’s great. But I’m not worried about myself. I worry about President O’Connor. She should be there, not me,” I explained. “I mean we don’t even know if that woman had even meant any harm to me. It could all be purely innocent.”

That was true. We were all acting on a suspicion. I’d like to know for sure before I panic.

“She is safe. My men are watching her.”

“Then let me go and be where she is. I don’t feel right staying at the resort.” I wasn’t even sure where she was staying.

“That’s not possible.”

“Why? Is she staying at her home?” I asked.

“No. And we can’t tell you where she is.”

Another puzzle, but the fact that Bennett was going to such lengths to protect Reesa made me feel better. And Reesa wouldn’t go anywhere if she didn’t trust him. That meant I just needed to think about what I wanted to do.

Ryker said to me, “Please, Meri. Come to the resort with me. I promise it will be okay.”

It wasn’t Bennett or Brice that convinced me. It was because of Ryker. I trusted him.

“I’ll go,” I said.

Bennett stated, “Tell Ryker I said that he will need to escort you there.” Then he ended the call.

Slipping the phone back into my pocket, I said, “Your brother said for you to take me.”

He smirked. “I wasn’t going to have it any other way. Do you need to get anything before we leave?”

“You should go now,” Bennett’s man said.

Ryker glared at him. “She’ll go when she is ready.”

I saw the man glaring at Ryker, but Ryker didn’t flinch. Was it wrong that I kind of found it sexy that he stood his ground fighting for me? Yeah. Not the time for such thoughts, but I was having them anyway.

“All I have here is a change of uniform, but it’s better than nothing. I’ll go grab it from my office,” I said.

“I’ll go with you,” Ryker stated.

I nodded and we headed towards my office. There was no one close by, yet I still kept my voice down. “Do you really think this has to do with Mombo?”

“I have no idea. That’s what has me so concerned. To me, the pieces are not fitting. But something isn’t right. I’m sure you feel it too,” he said.

“I do. And I have been thinking about Mombo a lot. And why would he come back now? It’s probably crazy, but I think it has to do with the election. I think he’s going to try to stop Reesa from running for a second term.” It’s the only thing that made sense to me.

“That’s what we believe as well.”

“But Ryker, what do I have to do with Reesa winning? I’m a nurse. Why come after me?” I asked.

“Sweetheart, I wish I knew.”

We arrived at my office, and I quickly grabbed my change of clothes. “I should tell my staff what is going on.”

“I think Brice will come up with some elaborate lie to satisfy their curiosity. Most likely tell them you were sick and went home.”

“They won’t believe that. I’ve never left during a shift before. He’s going to need to come up with something better,” I said.

“Maybe Finn sent you home because he’s returning?” he suggested.

I smiled up at him. “That’s good. Should I be scared that you came up with so quickly?”

Ryker shook his head. “You should never be scared of me, sweetheart.” Then he leaned over and kissed me on the lips gently.

I swallowed hard. I wasn’t scared of him. I feared the feelings that I was developing for him. I really liked Ryker a lot. I could deal with that, but this strong physical attraction was getting really hard to control. His lips on mine felt like heaven. They made me forget all that was going on and made me feel...at peace. Safe. Happy.

I slipped my arms around his neck not wanting the connection to end and I felt his body stiffen as he pulled me closer.

There was a knock on my open door, and I tried to pull away, but not fast enough.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know...I’m...sorry. I’ll come back later,” Dedra stammered.

“No. It’s okay. Is there something you need?” I asked, totally embarrassed to have been caught making out in my office. *So much for me drilling into their heads to always be professional.*

“Nothing that can’t wait until later,” she said.

“I’m actually taking the rest of the day off. Most likely tomorrow as well. But Dr. O’Connor will be returning. And Mr. Henderson is still here if you have any questions or issues at all.”

“You’re taking time off?” Dedra said, sounding shocked.

“I am,” I said, waiting for another question.

“About time. All you have done for months is work. I’m glad you’re taking time for yourself,” she stated, then looked at Ryker and added, “And now it makes sense why you kept asking for Nurse Meri.”

“I told you that it wasn’t anything personal,” Ryker stated.

Dedra snickered. “Oh, it looks pretty personal to me. Now I better get back to work. Enjoy your vacation, Nurse Meri. You deserve it.”

“Thank you,” I said as she left my office. Then I turned to Ryker and slapped him gently on the chest. “Why didn’t you tell me she was standing behind me?”

“Sweetheart, when you were in my arms, the entire world vanished. I totally forgot we were in your office,” he stated.

I knew exactly what he meant. “I think we better get out of here before anyone else comes looking for me.”

“I think we better get out of here before I kiss you again,” he warned.

As tempting as that was, I already knew I was going to be the hot topic of the hospital for a while. *Nothing this exciting ever happens here.*

There was no point in trying to address it now. And if they are distracted talking about me, maybe they won’t notice all of Bennett’s men carrying guns beneath their uniforms.

I needed one last thing, besides more of his kisses. Grabbing my medical bag, I said, “I’m going to need this.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Someone was late for his appointment for getting his stitches out. Looks like I’ll be doing them at the resort. Besides, you never know when I’ll need it. Maybe some other tourist will try knocking themselves out.”

He laughed. “Nope. I’m the only crazy one there.”

That I highly doubted.

“I’m ready to go,” I said.

“Damn. I was afraid you’d say that,” he teased. “But there is a bright side to you coming to New Hope.”

“That you and I can spend more time together?” I asked,

“That we can eat something other than hospital food together,” he smiled.

I rolled my eyes but was grateful that he wasn't making this any more awkward than it already was.

Going to the resort with Ryker wasn't wise. He was out to protect me, but who was protecting my heart? Definitely, not me.

CHAPTER 12



Ryker

With Meri settled in her room, it gave me and Bennett time to talk. I might have played along in assuring Meri that she was safe here, but the truth was, if Mombo was dead set on hurting her, was any place truly safe?

He was on my way to my room. There was a knock on the door, and I opened it to let him in. “About time. I thought you weren’t going to show up.”

“I’ve been busy,” he said, taking a seat on the couch. “Want to fill me in on what I don’t know?” he asked.

“I would, but I’m the one being left in the dark. What kind of security are you running where a woman almost got to Meri? I mean, if I hadn’t pulled into the parking lot when I did, she was going out to meet her.” A chill ran through me at that thought. “She could’ve been taken.”

“I’m well aware of that. And not too happy that she was leaving to meet someone she didn’t even know. I’ll address that with her later,” he said.

“Hey, chill out. She’s had a rough day already. You don’t need to jump down her throat about one mistake,” I stated. “Trust me, I don’t think she’ll do it again.”

“I’d like to hear that for myself,” he stated. There was another knock on the door. “Expecting anyone?” I shook my

head. “Might as well answer it. I have a feeling it’s just who I wanted to talk to.”

Meri had said she was going to lie down. But then again, that was more than an hour ago. “I’m not opening the door if you’re going to be on the attack. She’s a victim. Remember that,” I said firmly.

“I know how to talk to people. But it is my job to protect Reesa and the future of Tabiq,” he replied.

“And it’s my job to protect Meri. Sounds like we’re at a standstill. I’m not letting anyone hurt her. Not Mombo and not you,” I warned.

“I’d never hurt her,” he snapped. “I know what she means to you.”

Really? Because I haven’t figured that out myself yet.

There was another knock and I called out loudly, “One minute. I’ll be right there.”

I knew that there was something special about Meri. Denying that would be unfair to her as well as to myself. What I didn’t realize was that it was obvious to others. Going forward I was going to need to be more careful in public, for Meri’s sake. But I could handle Bennett.

Turning my attention back to him, I added, “Yet, here we stand. You are ready to tell her what she did wrong, instead of seeing how scared she must be. If that is what you’re planning, then you can get the fuck out of my room,” I said firmly, meaning every word.

His eyes widened. “Wow. I think I was wrong.”

“About?”

Bennett grinned. “She means even more to you than I originally thought. You have my word. I won’t say anything to upset her.”

“Good. Now, I can open the door.”

When I did, Meri was standing there in a clean set of clothes, but her hair was twisted up in a towel on top of her

head.

“Sorry to bother you Ryker, but I didn’t bring any toiletries with me. You wouldn’t happen to have a brush that I could use, would you?”

“Of course. Come on in,” I said.

She stopped when she saw Bennett sitting on the couch. “I didn’t know you had company. I’ll go and ask if they have one at the front desk.”

“Meri, please come in. You’re not interrupting anything,” Bennett said.

I was hoping he’d say he was just leaving, but he had no intention of doing that. Meri entered and I closed the door.

“Why don’t you have a seat while I get it for you.”

She sat opposite Bennett, looking nervous. I needed to make this quick.

In the bathroom, I searched for my brush. I knew I had one, even though I hardly ever used it. Then it hit me. I never unpacked it. I flipped open my suitcase and there it was, sitting with a book, I told myself I would read on this trip.

I grabbed the brush and headed back to the living room. Instantly I saw Meri’s eyes glistening with tears.

What the fuck, Bennett?

Rushing to her side, I wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and she leaned into me. I glared at Bennett, but softly asked Meri, “Sweetheart, what’s the matter?”

“We...we were just...talking,” she sniffed.

“About?”

“TJ. We were talking about that day that he was rushed to the hospital. Bennett hadn’t known that I was the nurse assisting Dr. O’Connor in the ER,” she said.

Not that I was glad she was upset, but I was thrilled it had nothing to do with what was going on now. But the two things were linked too closely as far as I was concerned.

It's all about Mombo.

"It must be painful to lose a patient," I said.

"It is. And you never get used to it. Even when they don't deserve to live, as a nurse or a doctor, you still feel guilty for not being able to save them," she said.

Don't deserve to live? I shot Bennett a questioning look and he nodded. He wanted me to ask her about that.

"What do you mean, someone who doesn't deserve to live?" I asked.

"We had a patient at the hospital. I don't know much about him, and I was the only nurse allowed to go in and care for him. Me and Dr. O'Connor. He was in bad shape, but even then, he was shackled to the bed. I remember being afraid of him."

"Why?" I asked.

"There was something in his eyes. I don't know what he was guilty of, but I could tell that he did it. Whatever it was." She shuddered, and I pulled her close. Then she added, "He died on my watch. His cold heart gave out."

"That's it," Bennett blurted.

I looked at him and asked, "What is?"

"I know why Mombo would want to go to the hospital. Why he might be after Meri," he said.

"Care to tell us?" I prodded.

He looked at Meri and said, "Are you sure you want to hear this?" She nodded. "I don't think it is a coincidence that you were the nurse taking care of his accomplice. He doesn't know how we were able to track him down."

"You mean that man that was in the hospital was working with Mombo?" she asked.

"Yes, Mombo had killed a young woman, eighteen years old. The man that died in the hospital, had been with him that day. He didn't kill her, but he helped Mombo transport the body and cover his tracks," Bennett said.

I could see the disgust on Meri's face. I was in shock myself because this was the first I'd heard about that. Bennett had tried keeping me in the dark, but I knew the truth now.

"It...explains why there was so much security at the hospital then. And why I was the only nurse allowed in. I'm glad I didn't know any of this when I was caring for him."

"Why?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Even though we take an oath not to harm, I would've wished him harm in my mind, and I don't want to live with that guilt either."

God, you're such a sweet loving soul.

A person like her didn't deserve to be living in fear. Even though she said she wasn't afraid, I knew she was. I gave her shoulder a little squeeze.

"It's in the past. You don't have to think about him any longer," I said.

"I wish that was the case," Bennett said. "The problem is Mombo doesn't know what you've been told by his accomplice."

"I wasn't told anything," she stated.

"And no one knows that but you," he replied.

That was a problem. "How are we going to let him know that without drawing more suspicion on Meri?" I asked.

"We can't. But what we can do is make sure he knows she's not at the hospital any longer. I have a plan. Though I am not sure you will like it," he said.

I couldn't even guess what was about to come out of his mouth. Meri wasn't.

"I'll do whatever you think is best for Tabiq. What do you suggest?"

"Be careful what you agree to," I said softly.

She said, "Ryker, this is my country. I know what I am saying." Then she turned to Bennett. "You understand, don't

you? You served your country in the military. You took orders and your life was on the line, but you did so for your country.”

“I did.”

Then she looked back at me. “I might not be a soldier, but I love my country. Whatever I can do to make sure Mombo and anyone like him is stopped and made to pay for the crimes, I’ll do.”

“Good. I want the two of you to go out in public together,” Bennett said.

“Are you crazy? You just brought her here to keep her safe. Now you want to send her out there as what? Bait for a trap? Cause there’s no fucking way I’m going to let that happen,” I snarled.

I could feel my entire body tense.

“Not as bait. As a statement. That she is *not* at the hospital and she is here with you. It will get the pressure and threat off anything happening at the hospital, and...”

“Bring it to the resort,” I said.

“A place that has such tight security, no one is getting in here, not even Mombo,” he said.

“I don’t like it,” I replied.

“I do,” Meri said. “If it means that he will leave everyone at the hospital alone, then I will do it. I can’t have my nurses’ lives in danger.”

“Good. Then I guess the two of you will be going out for dinner. I’ll make all the arrangements so that my men are in place watching everything. Maybe even a stroll down the main street so that you are noticed. Remember, the purpose is to be noticed. Make sure people know that you’re together like a couple, and reference the resort often,” he instructed.

“I don’t have anything with me but my nursing uniform,” she said. “Maybe we can stop by my home, and get something I could wear.”

“No. That is too dangerous. I’m sure he is watching your home. I am sure Ziva could bring you some things to wear while you’re here,” he said. “I’ll call her shortly so she can stop and pick a few things up. Do you have any other concerns?”

“Yes. You said you want them to believe we are a couple?”

That was something that had caught my attention as well.

Bennett replied, “Yes. Because Mombo will think that you are so happily involved with Ryker that you’re not even thinking about him. Not looking over your shoulder. He will have no clue that we are watching for you.”

Such a complex plan and I couldn’t picture how this was all going to work, but Meri seemed happy to do it. That surprised me. I asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I am, but I can’t answer for you. Are you willing to do this with me? Will you help me keep the hospital safe?” she asked.

Those beautiful brown eyes of hers pleading with me, she could ask me to walk on hot coals and I would.

“Count me all in.” It was a promise I’d never made to another woman.

She kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you, Ryker. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I feel the same way.

Bennett turned to me and said, “I’m going to make all the arrangements. Do you have any questions before I leave?” I shook my head. Before he left, he looked at Meri and said, “I have to ask. Why have you been meeting with Reesa?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied.

“Yes, you do.”

She looked at me and I could tell she was afraid to answer. “Please, sweetheart. Just tell us. All Bennett is trying to do is to keep everyone safe. And if there is something he should know, and doesn’t, it makes his job harder.”

“But it is not for me to tell,” she said.

Bennett asked in a soft voice. “Is Reesa sick?”

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

He didn’t take his eyes off Meri and I knew he was watching her responses closely. “Meri, I know you have gone to see her twice. Each time you were carrying your medical bag. Now, tell me. Is she ill?”

I hadn’t picked up on the second time, but now that I think about it, he was right. “Meri, is Reesa sick?” I asked, hoping she would answer me if not Bennett.

“Please, don’t make me tell you.”

Whatever the secret was, Reesa had chosen the right person to keep it. Meri, even under the pressure of Bennett and me pushing, still refused to share the information. Meri wasn’t just a fantastic nurse, but she earned my respect as an individual. But I knew it was taking a toll on her. And no matter how strong she was, eventually, she’d break. I didn’t want to be any part of that. I committed to protect her. *All* of her.

I stroked her cheek with the back of my hand. “Sweetheart, I wouldn’t ever make you do anything. Just know that you can trust us. If you want to tell us, we won’t tell anyone.”

“It’s so...complicated. If anyone finds out, they might not vote for her.”

I shot Bennett a look. We had some acknowledgment that something was going on. Now we needed the rest.

“Meri, you know I’m here to help her win. If there is something that could interfere with that, I need to know,” I told her.

“But you don’t understand. She made me promise not to tell anyone. Even her husband doesn’t know,” she stated.

Bennett got up from the couch. “Meri, you’re a good friend to her. We will not push you to tell us. But I do ask, that if something changes, and you’re concerned about her

wellbeing, you can always come to either of us. We are here to help in any way we can.”

She smiled. “Thank you for understanding. And I won’t forget all you are doing for us.”

Bennett left my suite leaving Meri and me alone. It was nice having this time together, and yet I found myself not knowing what to say. Being lost for words wasn’t something I’d ever experienced. Hell, being in marketing, talking was one of my strengths.

The silence was getting awkward, and I was about to break it when I heard a change in her breathing. It was slow and shallow.

She’d fallen asleep against me. Not wanting to wake her, I gently scooped her into my arms and carried her to my bed. Laying her down, I pulled the covers up and walked out of the room.

I was exhausted too, but the couch would have to do.

There was too much running through my mind to sleep. But I at least was close by if she needed me.

At least I’m for the next several days. After that, I have no idea what I’m going to do.

CHAPTER 13



Meri

I thought that waking up in Ryker's bed had felt strange, but this was far beyond that. This really felt like a date. The way he was looking at me made me feel...desired. Either he was an exceptional actor, or he liked me more than I had originally thought.

Over dinner I caught myself forgetting where we were and more importantly, why. Here in Tabiq, we didn't openly have such displays of affection. It wasn't as though I was sitting on his lap and we were making out in public, but him reaching across the table and holding my hand, or how we had walked to the restaurant and him having his hand on the curve of my back were more than what normally took place. There was no way we weren't drawing attention to ourselves.

That might be fine for Ryker because he was an American and no one expected any different from him. But I was head of nursing at the hospital. My behavior was going to stir up so many rumors that I was sure they would have me married off to Ryker before the end of the week. That was never going to happen. He was leaving and I wasn't.

But even with all that knowledge, I couldn't help myself. It was just that good being with him. Everything seemed easy and comfortable. I had no idea how he could crack jokes and get me laughing so hard that my ribs hurt when we both knew every move that we made was being closely monitored.

“Not that I didn’t enjoy meeting your aunt, but I must say, I am enjoying this dinner a lot more,” he said.

“You mean because you can actually eat it?” I teased.

“And live? Yes. Do you like to cook?” he asked.

“I love to cook. The cleanup, not so much. But I don’t have time to do much cooking though. Seems it’s like I’m spending more and more time at the hospital.”

There was no issue with that. I had no one waiting for me at home. It was just a place where I did my laundry and slept. Lately, not even that.

“You’ll never believe this, but when I was little, I used to dream about being a chef,” he admitted.

“Wow. That is not even close to what you chose to do. Why?” I asked.

“Well, there are a few reasons why, but one very important reason.” He sighed and said, “I think your aunt’s cooking is still better than mine.”

I burst out laughing. “Impossible.”

“No. Really. She puts too much spice and everything I cook has the same flavor. And texture too. My parents refused to let me in the kitchen any longer because they said they were spending too much money on food that was only going in the trash.”

“Why didn’t you take a cooking class? Maybe you just needed a little coaching,” I said.

“Are you offering?” he grinned.

“Well, I did bring my medical bag,” I replied.

“What does that have to do with teaching me to cook?” he asked.

“Nothing. But I like to be prepared. You know, just in case you ask me to taste it afterwards,” I joked.

His mouth gaped open and his hand over his heart. “Oh, the pain,” he said, being overdramatic.

Playing along, I said, “Don’t worry. It’s probably the heartburn from my aunt’s cooking yesterday.”

“Well then, I guess you and I should get out of here, and head back to the resort. Maybe a nice romantic walk on the beach would make it all better,” he suggested.

“Hmm. I’m not sure if the beach is safe,” I replied.

“Meri, I’m sure it is,” he said in a serious tone.

I chuckled. “I mean, I just removed your stitches earlier from the last adventure you had on the beach. There are only so many medical supplies I carry in that bag.”

“Any condoms?” he said jokingly, then immediately stammered trying to apologize.

Was I thrown by his comment? Heck yes. I’d never been around anyone who was so bold as to say something like that. But I wasn’t offended. “Ryker, don’t worry about it. I’m a grown woman. I know all about sex. But to answer your question, no. That’s not the kind of emergency I normally treat. But maybe I should reconsider what I pack going forward,” I said jokingly.

“Only when you’re with me,” he said.

That didn’t feel like a joke at all. Yes, we were playing the role of dating. Were we getting caught up in the feelings that went along with it? Maybe. But even if this was all an act, this had been the best date I’d ever been on.

“Maybe you were right, and we should get going,” I stated. We had fulfilled what Bennett had asked, but I wasn’t sure what the rest of the night had in store for us. Part of me was excited to find out if this was going to continue when we were behind closed doors.

When we left the restaurant, we walked holding hands back to the SUV that was waiting for us. “Is that a bowling alley?” Ryker asked.

“It is. I haven’t been. It only opened a couple of months ago.” Another thing I never had time to do, but was on my list of things to try.

“Do you enjoy bowling?” he asked.

“I never tried it?” I admitted.

“Not even when you were in Boston?” he said, sounding shocked.

“I was in nursing school. There was no time for bowling or anything else.” When I wasn’t in school, I was studying for extra credit courses. “My time in Boston was strictly business.”

“Then let’s go bowling.”

“Right now?” I asked. And he nodded. “Don’t you think we should go back to the resort? I mean, look at the time,” I said, reminding him of Bennett’s timetable.

“One game won’t take that long. Unless you’re afraid I’ll beat you?” he teased.

“I’m not afraid of losing. I totally expect to lose. But I thought you wanted to be back at the resort by a certain time,” I hinted again.

He pulled me into his arms. “I’ll go back now if you want but I’m not ready for this night to end.”

“Neither am I,” I said, my heart racing.

He escorted me into the SUV, and we headed back. The ride was short and soon we entered the gates of the resort. We were greeted by Bennett in the lobby.

“Did you two enjoy yourself?” he asked.

It was frustrating because we knew that everything we said or did had been reported back to him.

“It was lovely. We were just about to go to his room for a drink,” I said, making sure not to invite him. It wasn’t that I didn’t like Bennett, but I wanted this moment between me and Ryker to continue, and talking about anything serious was going to kill it, fast.

“Then I will talk to you both tomorrow. Have a nice evening,” he replied and walked away.

“That was easy. Maybe I should let you handle Bennett from now on. He never gets the hint when I’m talking,” Ryker said. As we entered the elevator, he asked, “Are you really coming to my room? Or are you getting off on your floor?”

I didn’t want the decision to be mine. But I really liked the fact he respected me enough to ask, and not assume. Although my stomach was doing flips, and I might kick myself later, I replied, “Yours.”

He pressed the fourth floor, and my heart pounded harder with each floor we passed. He looked down at me and when the doors opened he said, “Sweetheart, I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“I don’t. And I want to,” I admitted.

He took my hand as we walked down the hallway. This wasn’t the first time I’d be with a man. Even though we didn’t speak of such things, premarital sex was common in our country. I knew this because of the number of women who came to the hospital seeking birth control. It was frowned upon by the older generation. Like others, I’d had boyfriends in the past, but we just kept that very quiet. Good thing too, because they weren’t anything to brag about. Explained why those relationships didn’t last. Not only had they never gotten me so hot and bothered with something as simple as a kiss but they also never made me laugh. I got it, things were hard in Tabiq, but I didn’t want to be so serious all the time. Life was too short not to find joy in it.

But everything about Ryker was different. I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would be like to be intimate with him. I’d dreamt about it ever since that first time our lips accidentally brushed. The spark was undeniable and it only grew stronger as we spent more time together. I could only imagine what it would be like to feel that glorious naked body against mine.

Goodness. My country could be in turmoil soon and all I can think about is what it will feel like to make love to Ryker. There is something really wrong with me.

When we got into his room and he pulled me into his arms and kissed me, I realized there wasn't anything wrong with me, there was something so right with Ryker.

My body was hot and ready for him. But I realized I didn't have any condoms on me. Before things went too far, I needed to tell him.

“Ryker...I...I...”

“Changed your mind? That's okay. I already told you, I will never force you to do anything you don't want to,” he replied, pulling further from me.

“That's not what I was going to say,” I grabbed the lapel of his coat jacket. “Remember when you asked me about condoms?” He didn't seem to recall, and for me, it stuck with me because I had found it humorous. “You know when I was taking out your stitches and you asked if I had any condoms in my medical bag.”

He smirked. “And I believe you said you don't have any.”

“And I don't. I also don't want to risk a pregnancy.”

“I agree with that. Not that I don't think we'd make some beautiful babies, but I'm not ready for anything like that.”

“Neither am I,” I said honestly. “If I don't have time to cook, I definitely don't have time for a baby. Maybe we should...stop before things get too hot and we get caught up in...in all of this and we forget ourselves,” I stated.

He pulled me back into his arms. “Or we could use the one that I have.”

“You brought some?” My question would be why? He wasn't traveling with anyone. Did he come here with the intention of hooking up? Was that all I was? A convenient hookup?

“I always have one in my wallet. It's wrong for a man to think protection falls on a woman. It's a mutual responsibility.”

I wished more people thought of it like that. I could tell him or just be happy one of us was prepared. I chose the latter.

“Then I guess there is only one thing to do.” Meeting his burning gaze I said, “Put it to good use.”

I pulled him down to me and kissed him hard. Ryker scooped me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

Things were hot like I had known they would be. With our lips locked, I felt him stumble, and wince as he bumped into something, but nothing broke our embrace.

My back slammed against the wall with a thud, he spun around and now it was his back on the wall. We fumbled our way kissing and bumping into things until we both tumbled onto the couch.

Ryker adjusted himself so his weight wasn't completely on me. Of course, that landed him on his backside on the floor, and he was wedged between the couch and the coffee table.

Rolling onto my side, I looked down at him. “I'd join you but I'm not sure there is room.” With one shove, he pushed the coffee table a few feet away. Smiling, I said, “Well then, I guess I'm coming to you.”

I rolled off the couch and straddled him, and I could feel his erection even with our clothing as a barrier.

“At least in this position, we won't bump into anything,” I said, moving my hips. He groaned.

“Oh, sweetheart. We can start in this position, but if you keep doing that, we won't get to try any other,” he warned. His hands slipped beneath my dress and up my bare thighs. “I don't know about you, but I'd enjoy touching you much more without this.” He pushed my dress up higher.

Grabbing the hem, I pulled it over my head and tossed it onto the couch. “Is there anything else you'd like removed?”

He grinned. “Nothing I can do myself.”

His warm hands sent shivers through me as he reached around my back and unhooked my bra. I hated that I only had my cotton bra and panties set. If anyone would've let me stop at home, there was a cute pink lace set I would've liked to be wearing for him.

Any of those thoughts vanished as Ryker's hands came around and cupped my breasts.

Oh, damn. I knew his touch would feel good, but the need for more rushed through my veins and I arched my back grinding against his hard cock.

Ryker pulled himself up to sit and quickly replaced one hand with his mouth. As his teeth nipped my nipple gently, before sucking, I shuddered with delight. He did it again and again, and each time, my body's reaction intensified.

"Oh, Ryker. Please. I...you...I..." I wasn't sure what I wanted. But I knew I needed to feel him inside me. Moving my hips over him again, I silently pleaded for more.

With my eyes closed, I felt his hand between my legs. His fingers moved the cotton fabric and slipped between my folds. His thumb rubbed my clit while a finger entered inside of me stroking my G-spot.

I raised myself up off him slightly giving him more access. Instantly, his finger went in deeper, and then out again.

"Yes, sweetheart. Let go," he said, as he fucked me faster and faster.

My body was on fire, and my heart was racing. I'd never had an orgasm with anyone before. But I knew this feeling. I was about to come, and it wasn't by my own hand.

"Ryker, I'm...I'm..." I could barely catch my breath.

"Yes, Meri. Enjoy. Let go," he said, stroking my clit feverishly.

My legs trembled as my body soared to the stars. Powerful wave after wave flooded through me. I heard a scream and then realized it was my voice as pleasure overtook me.

I collapsed on him resting my head on his chest. With me still straddling him, he somehow lifted the both of us so he was sitting on the couch. I held him tightly, not wanting to break this wonderful connection.

"Sweetheart, I want you so much, but you must let go. My cock is aching to be set free," he said wiggling.

I raised my head from his chest and said, "I can help with that."

Standing, but still straddling him, I unbuttoned his slacks, and pulled the zipper down. He raised his hips so I could pull his pants down. Ryker kicked off his shoes and wiggled the pants the rest of the way off.

He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on top of my dress. "One last thing," he said. Tugging my panties down. His eyes focused on the small patch of dark hair. "Now that is better."

For the first time, I blushed. Maybe it was because no one had ever looked at me like that. Or the fact that the lights were all on, and nothing was blocking his view.

He turned away and reached over for his pants. *God, don't be putting them back on.* I saw him pull out his wallet and then knew exactly what he was after.

Ryker tore open the foil packet but I stopped him before he could sheath himself.

"Let me do it," I said. He handed me the condom, and I stepped back from him so I could kneel. Holding the condom in one hand, I took his cock in the other. He was beautiful to look at. Long and hard, and tempting. I leaned closer and placed a kiss on the tip of it. Then another down his shaft, and yet another even lower. I know I was supposed to put the condom on him, but I'd never been so up and personal with a man who wasn't a patient.

As I continued to kiss him intimately, he moaned. "You're killing me, sweetheart."

My arousal was peaking as well. How was kissing him, exciting me? I licked him and sucked him, turning myself on so much that I couldn't stand it any longer. I quickly sheathed him before climbing up and straddling him again.

Ryker cupped my ass and slowly I slid myself down the full length of his cock. We fit perfectly together. He began moving inside me, in and out, deeper, and faster. I placed my hands on his shoulders and rode him, his hips lifting to me, thrusting deeply.

“Yes, Ryker. Faster,” I begged.

He obliged. When I thought that my legs were going to give out, he grabbed hold of me and flipped me onto my back with him on top.

“You’ve worked hard enough. Now let me,” he said, plunging deeper into me again.

It was even deeper than before, and I experienced the sweetest pain and pleasure I’d ever felt. I opened wider, and he thrust again and again. He kissed me hard, and he continued to fuck me. Wrapping my legs around him, I pulled him closer to me.

Once again, my body was pulsing and I knew I was going to release. “Ryker...I’m about to come.”

“Meri...” he growled out my name.

My body tensed then began shuddering, I called his name, “Ryker! Ryker!” My fingernails raking down his back I clenched around his cock.

“Sweet Jesus,” he said before thrusting one last time and collapsing on me. Panting, we held each other closely, Ryker tenderly kissing my neck as he snuggled against me.

I noticed that he rubbed his head. “Ryker, are you alright? You’re not hurt, are you?”

He chuckled. “Sweetheart, I don’t think I’ve ever felt better.”

I smiled, “Are you sure? Because if you’re hurting then...I think we should get you right to bed, and stay there all night.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me. “Come to think of it, I might need to lay down. And I think it would be beneficial if I had a nurse with me, you know, just in case something comes *up*.”

I giggled and reached down and touched his cock. Instantly, it began to harden. “Oh, I agree, because something seems to be coming *up*, right now.”

He got up and took me to his bedroom. It was going to be another sleepless night, but this time, I was looking forward to it.

CHAPTER 14



Ryker

There was nothing better than waking with Meri still in my bed. If I had my way, we would spend the entire day repeating what our night was like. But Bennett sent me a text saying Reesa wanted to see us. That wasn't a request I could ignore.

He hadn't mentioned anything about Meri, so I assumed she wasn't included. That wasn't going to be a good way for us to start our day. But the conversation had to happen, and soon too.

Leaning over, I kissed her gently and she stirred, reaching out to feel for me. When she realized the bed beside her was vacant, her eyes fluttered open.

"You're dressed? What time is it?" she asked.

"Ten. But I have a meeting with Bennett. I know I could've let you sleep, but wanted to make sure you were all set before I left."

She yawned and stretched. "Since you have a meeting, then what I need will have to wait until you get back."

My cock twitched at her innuendo. Damn, how I wish I didn't have to go. Kissing her again, I said, "I promise not to be gone longer than I have to."

"I should get up too. There is something I need to take care of."

Why did I have a feeling that she was talking about Reesa? Probably because there was still that mystery as to what was going on with her. I really hoped that Bennett wasn't going to mention anything to Reesa today. It would appear as though Meri broke her word and told us. Even though we wanted to know, I wasn't going to allow it to be at the expense of Meri's reputation.

I opted not to ask Meri what she was going to do today. It would be best if we both left each other in the dark about certain things.

"Maybe once we are both free later, we can attempt that bowling date we talked about yesterday. How does that sound?" I asked.

"You just want to see how badly I bowl, that's all," she replied.

I laughed. "Those are the words usually used by someone who is about to hustle another. But I'm up for it. What do you want to bet?" I asked.

"I really don't know how to bowl," she replied.

"Good, then I am even more interested in betting coz I know I will win." Tapping my chin I said, "How about if I win, you cook me dinner."

"I'd be happy to do so even if you lost," she said.

"What do you want if you win?" I asked.

"I'm not going to," she stated firmly. "I'm not good at sports."

"It's bowling, not football or hockey. How bad can you be? You look at the pins and roll the ball to knock them down."

"While trying to keep them in your lane and not someone else's. See, I know what bowling consists of, but that doesn't mean I will be good at it," she said.

"I have a funny feeling that you're good at everything,"

"No one is good at everything," she huffed. I opened my mouth and she said, "Not even you."

“Oh, I’m far from perfect, trust me.”

“Well, there is one thing you won’t be good at and that is being on time if you don’t leave. It’s almost ten,” she said.

I kissed her again, and said, “I blame you. You are the sweetest distraction one could ever hope for.”

“Oh, well then, maybe I will win the bowling game.”

“I guess we will find out when I get back,” I said, leaving her alone sitting up in my bed, and went down to meet Bennett in the lobby.

“Thought I was going to have to come and get you,” he grumbled.

“Sorry. Something came up,” I said.

“Yeah. I don’t want to hear about it,” he said.

“You’re in a bad mood. What’s the matter?” I asked as we got into the SUV. “Is it Mombo?”

“Not right now. It’s you. I’m not thrilled with you,” he stated, flatly.

“It’s too early for me to have pissed you off this much. Hell, we haven’t even spoken since yesterday. So, what did I do?” I asked, not really caring. I was in such a good mood after spending the night with Meri. Not much was going to ruin it.

“You crossed a line that you have not thought through.”

“Are you talking about Meri?” I asked.

He turned to me and said, “Of course I am. Is there another line that you crossed that I’m not aware of? Because this one is pretty bad.”

“Bennett, you’re reading too much into this.”

“Am I? Funny. I was told that Meri didn’t make it back to her room last night. I wonder where she may have slept. Wouldn’t have been in your room, would it?” he questioned.

Now I was pissed. “Let’s get something straight. I don’t owe you an answer, and neither does Meri. She’s not a

prisoner here.”

“No she’s not, but you’re a guest in this country. If you have forgotten, you don’t live here. Sleeping with her was exactly what I warned you against,” he said.

“I don’t recall that. You told me not to hurt her, and I haven’t.”

“What do you think your leaving is going to do after this?” he asked.

It wasn’t that I hadn’t thought about it. Just not last night. She was a mature woman who knew what she wanted, and if I was correct, she went for it, just like I did. There was no hint of regret on either of our parts. If anything, we were looking forward to continuing where we left off.

Continue. That was a tough word. And it hit me what Bennett was saying. After this high that we were both on, there was going to be one hell of a low.

“Bennett, we are just enjoying each other’s company. She knows that I’m leaving Tabiq soon. I’ve never kept that a secret.”

“And you think that is going to matter when you board that plane for home and leave her behind?” he asked.

I couldn’t imagine her leaving Tabiq. Not with the way she talked about it. She was as loyal to Tabiq as she was to Reesa. I must commend such loyalty, but it was a wall that blocked us from having a future. At least one together.

“I think we need to focus on whatever Reesa called us here for,” I said as we arrived at her office.

“Agreed. She wouldn’t tell me what she wanted to meet us for. I know Finn arrived late last night. Maybe it has to do with my men at the hospital.”

“Maybe we should just go in and find out,” I suggested.

When we got into her office, Reesa asked, “Where is Nurse Meri?”

I grinned and looked at Bennett. *Ya. We should've seen this coming.*

“She’s safe at the resort,” I said.

“That’s good. I’ve gotten word from Mombo and wanted you to be the first to know,” she said.

She had Bennett’s full attention. “What do you mean you got word from him? Did he come to you?”

“No. This letter did.” She handed a note to Bennett.

“I don’t read Tabiqian,” he said and handed it back to her.

Reesa read it.

You have taken away everything we have built. It will be taken back. You cannot stop it. You are just one woman, and we will not stop until you are crushed, and we are back in power.

That sounded like a death threat to me. And I could tell Reesa was distraught even just reading it to us.

“Bennett, if you and your men stopped them once, you should be able to do so again, right?” I asked.

He didn’t seem to want to answer that question.

“Please, Bennett. Tell me what you’re thinking,” Reesa pleaded.

“I know you don’t have the facts from what happened the first time. But we knew who the enemy was. It was a clear-cut line between the good people of Tabiq and the ones who meant harm. They were bold and overly confident, so it was as though they wore a target on their backs. But this is something different. They are hiding among the people, pretending to want peace and growth, when in fact, they are just waiting for the opportunity to turn back time and instill fear all over again. We can’t wage a war on the people. Innocent people will be hurt. We need to know who they are, and only then, make our move,” he said.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was as though Bennett thought that they might lose. I’d never heard him talk

like that before. But if he was right, and Tabiq was about to fall back into the old ways, so many people would suffer.

Meri. You can't stay here. Not if that is about to happen. You've got to come with me. I can't leave you behind.

“Bennett, I must ask you a question. And I would like an honest answer,” she said.

“That is something I can give you. What is it?” he asked.

“Do you think I should step down as president? Will that keep Tabiq safe?” she asked.

“No!” I answered her. Bennett shot me a warning look not to get too involved, but I needed to. “You hired me to help you, then let me do that.”

“Ryker, you're not a soldier.”

“No. But I do know that when your competitor is feeling weak and beaten, they always take one last stab to bring down the leader before they fall. I believe they are afraid if they don't act now, then they won't have another chance,” I said. “That last thing you should do is cower. I know it's easy for me to say, but this is when you need to be your strongest. This is the time you need to make your speech to the people. Bring them together.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Because it might be just what sets them off even more.”

“Ryker, you're talking like these are products instead of people's lives. You can't gamble on a theory,” Bennett stated, firmly.

“Bennett, I wouldn't tell you how to fight a war. Hell, I can load a gun and shoot pretty well, but that doesn't make me an expert. But I do know what I'm talking about. I know there is a difference here, but my gut tells me, they are grasping at straws. They are hoping to rattle Reesa, so she loses the election. I am betting that Mombo knows one of the candidates very well. And that candidate would be the downfall of Tabiq. Since we don't know which one, we have no choice but to make sure Reesa stays in power,” I said.

Reesa turned to Bennett. “I trust you. What do you think about your brother’s idea?” she asked, nervously.

Bennett let out a long exhale before saying, “We have one shot to get this right.” He looked at me and said, “You’re sure about this? Because you know damn well what will happen if you’re wrong.”

Yeah. Meri’s life will be hell because I know she’ll never leave here, not even if her life depends on it.

“I do. Let’s get to work and make sure this election is a landslide and Reesa gets another five years in office,” I replied.

“Okay. What do you need me to do?” Bennett asked.

“First of all, we need to make sure security is tight at any speaking engagements she has. Secondly, I need you to make sure I have a room at the resort because it looks like I’m extending my stay.”

“You’re staying? What about your job back home? Won’t you be fired?” Reesa asked.

“I’m the boss. I’ll deal with what is going on back home when I get there. For now, you and I need to work on getting your campaign off the ground.”

Reesa nodded, but I could tell, something was off. Bennett picked up on it as well, and asked, “Is everything okay? You don’t look as though you’re up to finishing this meeting.”

She got up and said, “Can you excuse me for a few minutes? I’ll be back shortly.”

When she was out of the room, I turned to Bennett and whispered, “I think she’s calling Meri, because she definitely isn’t feeling well.”

“We need to learn what is wrong with her.”

“Agreed. If she looks this exhausted at one of her speeches, she’ll appear to be weak. That could cost her votes,” I said.

“Are you going to ask Meri again?”

I didn't want to, but I had no choice but to. "Yes. But unless I learn something that I think you need to know, I'm going to keep the information to myself."

"That's fair. Now, let's talk business, while she's busy."

For the next several hours I worked with Reesa and Bennett to line up each of the speaking engagements we'd discussed. The next two weeks were going to be very hectic for her. I'd never challenged Bennett on anything as important as this. I just hoped and prayed that my gut was right.

After hours of talking schedules, Bennett and I headed back to the resort. He turned to me and said, "You got a lot on your mind. Anything I can help with?"

"Debating what I am going to say to Meri."

"You mean about Reesa's health?" he asked.

"That too, but just what we spoke about today. I don't want her to panic, and at the same time, she's not stupid. She'll pick up on the fact that I'm hiding something from her." *Something I said I'd never do.*

"That is the problem with getting too close to the person you're *supposed* to be protecting," he said. There was something different in his tone. I shot him a quick glance, but his expression was as I'd come to expect, unreadable.

"You sound like you're talking from experience," I replied.

"I am."

Getting him to open up to us and share his personal life had always been difficult, but I think he and I have made a lot of progress since I'd been here. I wasn't going to stop pushing. I might be helping Reesa with her election, but I hadn't forgotten why I had come here. This trip might be the only chance I get to understand Bennett.

"Care to elaborate?" I prodded.

"Yeah. The difference is I married the one I was protecting. What are your plans for you and Meri?"

I sighed. That was far from what I considered to be sharing. “To make it so she is free to go back to the hospital, to what she loves to do, and not have her life in danger. The rest, I haven’t thought about. And until the election is over and I know Tabiq isn’t lost, I don’t have time to even think about it.”

It was true. Saving Reesa meant saving Tabiq. Maybe saving Tabiq would be a strong enough declaration of what she meant to me.

“It gets complicated when you’re in love,” he said.

Love? No. Not love...just...just very deep caring.

I don’t know why I wasn’t willing to think about how deep that caring went. Maybe because it wasn’t just Meri who was going to have a hard time saying goodbye at the end of all of this. I’d dated many women and even had a couple of what I would’ve considered serious relationships, which only meant that we were exclusive. None of them ever made me stop and think about what it would be like waking up next to them for the rest of my life. But with Meri, I’d had that thought, and I actually entertained asking her to come to the States with me. I knew she wouldn’t move, but maybe if we worked at it, we could pull off a long-distance relationship. Visit each other a couple of times a year.

Hell no. She deserves someone who can be here for her all the time. I can’t be that guy.

I wasn’t going to get the happy ending that Bennett seemed to have. Don’t know how he made it work, but my sister-in-law seemed happy.

Changing the focus off me, I turned back to him and asked, “You mentioned protecting Zoey. Why don’t you tell me how the two of you *really* met?”

I had expected the original story that it was at a charity event. I wasn’t buying that any longer.

“That’s a long story.”

“One I need to hear,” I replied.

Bennett proceeded to tell me all about Zoey hiring him, and the day it turned from being a job to becoming personal. Through it all, I learned yet another huge piece of the puzzle of why he and the Hendersons ended up in Tabiq. Something I never would've guessed.

They are half Tabiqian.

Now I understood why the Hendersons were all in when it came to saving Tabiq. I was just not sure why Bennett insisted on my not sharing that information with anyone.

That was a Henderson family secret and wasn't any of my business. As long as it didn't affect Meri, or risk Reesa's election, I was willing to keep my mouth shut.

I've got my own life and I need to figure out how Meri fits in it.

CHAPTER 15



Meri

I never thought Ryker would be gone as long as he was. He didn't call or text me. I could be angry with him, but since he was so agreeable when I asked him to swing by Reesa's office on our way to go bowling, how could I stay mad?

"I'll make it as quick as possible," I said to Ryker, hinting at the fact I needed him to wait in the SUV.

"Take your time. I'll get some work done while waiting for you."

This was such a pleasant change from before. He didn't want to leave my side for a second as though I was fragile. Maybe he was realizing that I was a lot tougher than he first thought.

Grabbing my medical bag, I went into the building, and she met me at the door.

"Hi, Meri. I'm sorry to have you come here like this. I'd have come to see you, but the resort has too many people watching."

"I'm glad you called. What's going on?" I asked, knowing she really must have felt ill to call me.

"I'm worried. I've never been under so much pressure, and I know it's not good for the baby. I feel like my heart is going to explode at any moment. This isn't good. I need something to help me relax," she said.

“Okay, let me take your vitals.” She sat down, and I examined her. “Reesa, everything is normal. The baby’s heartbeat is strong. What’s going on? Why are you so worried?”

“The election. I need to win this election,” she said.

“Ryker is helping you, isn’t he?” I asked.

She nodded. “I don’t know what I would do without him.”

I know exactly what you mean.

“He is one of a kind.”

“We worked on my campaign for hours today. I think that is what has me so exhausted. I need to find a way to sleep.”

“I thought Finn came home last night.” To me, that would help alleviate some of her stress.”

“He did, but he was needed at the hospital. I guess there have been some changes that I wasn’t aware of. Then again, maybe I was, and it slipped my mind. I don’t feel as though I’m on top of everything like I usually am. And besides that, I broke down and cried twice today for no reason at all.”

“I wish I could tell you that it will go away, but this is normal. Hormones are changing and your body is trying to adapt.”

“I can’t be this emotional in front of everyone. They will think I’m losing my mind. Who wants a president who is crying all the time?”

“I do. And if you time it right, you could use it in your favor,” I said.

“How?”

“Well, I’ve been listening to Ryker talk. And he mentioned that you want to connect with people deeper. If you’re talking to them about the past, the struggles we’ve been through, and the dreams for a better future, I think it’s okay to be emotionally connected to them. A few tears won’t seem inappropriate at that time.”

She chuckled. “I would agree, but you’re talking as though I have control over when I cry and don’t. Heck, it’s right up with my lack of bladder control. I have to run to the bathroom several times a day now.”

“Once again, normal. Reesa, I know you don’t want to tell Finn, but I think if you do, you won’t only have his support, but you’ll have stress off you as well,” I said.

“I’ve thought of that, but now he seems to be the one stressing. I don’t want to put any more on him either,” she said.

“Okay, so we are back to square one. I keep your secret and you try to stay calm.”

“I am doing my best,” she said. “But I am not sure that is going to be possible until after the election is over. So much is riding on me winning. More than I ever imagined.”

“And you’re going to knock the other candidates right out of the race. Trust me, Reesa. The people love you.”

At least most people did. I was sure there were those who still opposed everything Reesa stood for. But they had no power here and with Reesa as president, they never will again.

“Thank you for coming by and checking on me. I needed to know that the baby was okay,” she said.

“I told you that I’ll come any time. I’m always just a phone call away.”

“I don’t want Bennett and Ryker to suspect anything. They are very...observant,” she stated.

Yes, they are.

“Don’t worry. They have more important things to do than watch where I go and what I do.”

“I’m surprised they let you off the resort,” she said.

“Well, I was going out anyway. Ryker and I are going... bowling.” It sounded so horrible to say that when she was under such pressure.

Reesa smiled. “Bowling? Sounds like a date to me.”

“Not sure it’s a date. More like a competition. I told him I can’t bowl.”

“And can you?” she asked.

“Never done it before, but I’m a quick learner. There is a chance I might win,” I laughed. “But win or lose, I’m going to have some fun.”

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer. But I expect you to tell me every single detail next time I see you,” she ordered.

“It will be my pleasure,” I said, grabbing my bag and heading to the door. “Reesa, no one is here. Nurses’ orders. Go take a nap.”

“And I have an order myself,” she said. Reesa smiled and said, “Don’t let him win.”

I laughed, “I wasn’t planning on it.”

When I got back in the SUV, Ryker asked, “Must have been one heck of a meeting because you’re still laughing.”

“It was. She gave me some good advice,” I replied.

“What did she say?” he asked.

Leaning over and giving him a kiss on the cheek before whispering in his ear, I said, “It’s a secret.”

“Another one?”

“Maybe,” I replied.

“Funny, I thought you and I weren’t keeping secrets,” he said.

And I thought you were meeting with Bennett. Guess you forgot to mention Reesa.

“True. She told me not to let you win,” I said.

“Ha. So, you do know how to bowl,” he snickered.

“No. But I’m out to win, so get ready to pay up,” I said.

“Did we ever decide on what you get if you win?” he asked.

“A repeat of last night. Well, maybe a little different.” I leaned over and whispered in his ear. “We can start in the shower and then make our way to the bed.”

He kissed me hard and said, “I’ve never thrown a game before, but then again, I’ve never been so motivated to.” He pulled me to sit closer to him and added, “Are you sure you want to go bowling?”

“Are you afraid I’m actually going to win?” I asked.

“No. I’m afraid I will, and I really want to lose,” he said, running his hand up my thigh.

I wanted to cancel the date and head right back to the resort. Being naked in his arms sounded perfect, but he was only going to be here a couple more days. I wanted us to get to know each other on several levels. At the resort, it was just going to be more of the same. Great, mind-blowing sex.

There wasn’t anything wrong with that, but I wanted more. I wanted what every little girl dreamt of. A happily ever after. That wasn’t possible for us. All we had was here and now. If only for a couple more days, I was going to make memories to last me a lifetime.

I kissed him and said, “When you win, I will cook for you. But it will be breakfast, and I’ll serve it to you in bed.”

He grinned. “Sounds like I can’t lose no matter who wins.”

“And neither can I.”

CHAPTER 16



Ryker

It had been days since our last date, and even with everything else going on, I hadn't forgotten one second of it. Not the bowling, where she proved to me that she couldn't bowl, or even that evening when we made love all night.

She even sat with me while I worked on Reesa's campaign material. It was nice having someone who spoke and wrote the language. There were others who could've helped, but I trusted Meri not to let me fuck it up. The exact translation was important as we needed the message to be the same whether you spoke English or not.

Most of Tabiq spoke English, but the elders, not so much. Reesa needed every single vote she could get, and we couldn't afford another candidate slamming her as though she was disconnected from the past and only focused on the youth.

As we sat in the living room reviewing the latest flyer to be sent out to each resident, I realized what a difference this was not doing it alone. I had staff that worked for me back home, but not one of them who worked this closely.

This was nice. I could get used to it. But even if she were in the States, this wasn't what I usually worked on. I kept telling Bennett that selling her as the right choice was no different than any other product, but that was a lie. This was so much more intense. The worst thing that could happen if I

failed at home was that a business lost a lot of money or could end up closing.

That was bad enough, but if I wasn't successful in helping Reesa, so many people's lives would be in danger. Anyone who stood firmly with Reesa and her policies would have a target on their back. No one wanted to think what would happen to them then.

"I can't believe that you're leaving in two days," Meri said, leaning her head on my shoulder.

With everything going on, I had failed to mention my change in plans to her. I'd like to be able to say it was a slip of my mind, but it was intentional. My choice to stay was strictly about the election. How do I tell Meri that without sounding like an asshole?

Hell, even thinking about it, I felt like an ass. Delaying it any longer wasn't going to change anything. She'd figure it out when I didn't go.

"Meri, there's something I need to tell you," I started.

She lifted her head and asked, "What is it?"

Choose your words carefully.

"Reesa needs my help. We discussed options, but the only one we could agree on was my staying in Tabiq a little longer. If I go now, there isn't anyone prepared to step in and assist her with the campaign."

"That's wonderful news." She wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tightly. "You have no idea what this means to me, to Tabiq." Squeezing even tighter, she added, "Thank you."

I should have just taken her joyful response and dropped the subject. But nope, I had to put my foot in my mouth and fuck it up.

"I'm glad you understand why I'm here."

That's when her grip loosened, and I felt her pull away. Looking up at me she said, "Of course I do. What did you

think? That you were staying because of me?” Meri stood up and headed to the bedroom. I followed.

“Where are you going?” I asked as she picked up the belongings she had in my suite.

“To my own room so I won’t disturb you any longer,” she stated, stuffing things into her purse.

“Meri, that’s not what I said.”

“You didn’t have to. It was clear. You’re here to help with the election. Nothing is more important than that. Too much time has already been wasted when you should’ve been more focused.”

“Meri, I have time to do both,” I said.

She spun around and I knew that those weren’t the right words either. “Do both? I didn’t realize I was something you ‘do’. Oh, wait. Yes, I am. I’m someone you swore to protect. But do you know what? While I’m at the resort, I don’t require any additional protection. So, see, your problem is solved. You can concentrate on the campaign, and I can get out of your way.”

I grabbed hold of her wrist as she went to leave. “Please, Meri. You don’t understand what I am trying to say.”

She stopped and turned to me. “Please let go of my wrist,” she said firmly.

I dropped my hand, and said, “Let me explain.”

“No. Just answer one question.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“How long ago did you know you were staying?”

That’s something I didn’t want to tell her, but I also didn’t want to lie. “Since the day we went bowling. It was decided that morning.”

“And at no point between then and now did you think to mention it to me?”

Oh, I thought about it.

“I didn’t know what to say.”

“How about, I’m not leaving. I’m staying to help Reesa. Sounds very simple to me.”

I ran my hand through my hair and asked, “If it is that simple then why are you angry at me?”

“Because you consciously made the choice *not* to tell me. That makes me wonder what else you are intentionally hiding.” Her foot tapped on the floor as she waited for an answer. When I gave her none, she said, “Exactly. You still have secrets that you don’t trust me enough to share. And I don’t share a bed with a man that I can’t trust any longer.”

She opened the door to my suite and stormed out. But she didn’t slam it, because on the other side, Bennett was there.

Perfect fucking timing.

He asked her, “Is everything okay?”

She huffed. “Ask your brother. Maybe he’ll tell you, or maybe he’ll keep it a *secret*.”

I was forced to stand in the doorway and watch her walk down the hallway.

“Want to tell me what the hell that was all about?” he asked.

I stepped aside so he could enter “Not really. What brings you here?”

“I have some news that might interest you. Late last night, we received word on a spotting of Mombo. Me and my men located him.”

That was great news. “Where was that piece of shit hiding?” I asked.

“In a place we should’ve thought of. The old compound.”

“Whose compound?”

“Remember my telling you that Alex and Ziva had been held captive?” I nodded. “The bitch who was at the head of it all resided in this fortress. High on the hill, and what they

thought was impenetrable. It wasn't easy, but we were victorious then, and again now."

I had so many questions. It made the most sense to ask about the most current issue. Mombo. "When you say you were victorious, I take it Mombo is no longer a threat?" I asked.

"No. He's not."

"In jail?"

"Morgue."

I had no problem with that. He hadn't killed once, but twice that they knew of, and sadly, he was advocating more violence against innocent people. Nope, that guy shouldn't walk the earth. I wished that would be the end of it all, but what being there had shown me was that evil was trying to plant its roots here again. The fight wasn't over. Not for Tabiq, and not for my brother.

I'd never been so proud of him as I was now. He wasn't bragging or doing any of this for money. He risked his life, as his men did, to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. When I went home, I knew I couldn't tell them much, but I could tell them he was where he belonged. Making the world a little better than how he found it.

"Was he alone?" I questioned.

"No. And they had compiled an arsenal of weapons. They weren't just going to try to win the election, they planned on intimidating people not to vote for Reesa."

"How many people were involved?" I asked.

"There were fifteen at the compound. Six are deceased. Five were wounded and were rushed to the hospital."

"And the other five?"

"They surrendered. Now sitting in jail. Reesa will need to determine what to do in regard to them," he said.

"So, this threat is over?" I asked.

“Ryker, it will never be over. At least probably not for another generation. I’m not even sure if that will be enough, but we are doing everything we can to ensure that the older way of life doesn’t return.”

“I wished there was more I could do.” Asking him why he didn’t wake me, so I could’ve been there with them was ridiculous. My heart wanted to fight for Tabiq, but it was best that the men who were trained to do so did their job without my interference. “Your men. Are they okay?”

“Two have been wounded, but not life-threatening. Also staying in the hospital until ready to be transported back to the States.”

“I’m surprised Meri wasn’t called in to help,” I said, honestly. She was one of the best nurses the hospital had.

“My team was still on sight in the ER and were able to handle it. There were also strict instructions that no one was to disturb her. The last thing we needed was for her to be on the road.”

She was going to be very upset when she learned about that. Of course, right now she was too busy being angry at me. I didn’t want to be the one to deliver that news. If I did, I might need medical care myself.

“I’ll let you be the one to break that news to Meri.”

“Probably wise since you’re already in the doghouse,” he replied.

“That I am. But I’m not finished with my questions. You mentioned a woman. Some bitch in charge. What was that all about?”

“When human trafficking started, it was being run by her father. When he died, she saw the opportunity to continue in her father’s footsteps. She was at the head of it all when we first took down the corrupt government all those years ago.”

“A woman?” I said, shocked.

He nodded. “I still have a difficult time comprehending how a woman could sit back and not just let the young girls be

sold, but actually encourage it and profit from it. I don't think I've ever been so shocked as I was that day. It was proof that greed trumped all."

"Does Reesa know about it?" I asked. He nodded. "Meri?"

"I would assume no. Most people didn't know who was in charge. There were only a select few of her men who were basically her armed guards who knew the truth. I would suggest not sharing that information with anyone."

"I understand. It will only add more pain to what is already there." I haven't finished with my questions yet. "Does this mean Reesa and Meri are out of danger?"

"We still have no idea which one of the candidates that is running was linked to Mombo and his men. I'm sure one of them will talk. Until then, Reesa must be extremely cautious. And even once he's exposed, there are those who will always agree with him. Thankfully, that number is getting smaller each year," he said.

That made sense. The election needed to take its course in full before she was safe or safer than she was now.

"And Meri?" I asked.

"It was Mombo that we were worried about. I feel that she can go back to her normal way of life," he stated.

I wasn't ready for that. We needed to fix what happened earlier. If she left the resort now, she would shut me out and never know what she meant to me.

"Is that wise? I mean, she's here and safe. What's the harm in letting her stay here a little longer?"

"No harm. She's welcome as long as she wants to stay. But tell me Ryker, how are you going to convince someone to stay when it looked like they weren't even talking to you?" he asked.

"I'll think of something."

He laughed. "Ryker, I will admit, you are damn good at marketing. But as you said, you need to know your product. You're going to be a hard sell."

I glared at him. “Very funny.”

I know I had an uphill battle. I told her I would be honest, then I wasn't. Hell, here I am still contemplating hiding something else from her. I really should learn my lesson. But it was the end result that I was focused on.

Meri, I'm not ready to say goodbye. It's too soon.

“I assume that this means you're still staying another week or two?” Bennett asked.

“I'm staying. How long is yet to be determined.”

“Is that based on what Reesa needs or what you do?” he asked.

“Maybe a little of both,” I admitted.

“Then I suggest you go find Meri and talk to her now.”

“I thought it was best to let her cool off first,” I said.

“Take it from your married brother. Women don't forget, we do. She isn't cooling off. She's dwelling on whatever stupid thing you said or did. And the longer she sits there thinking about it, the harder it will be for you to fix it,” he warned.

“Once again, it sounds like you're talking from experience.”

“Hell yes. I've spent the night more than once on the couch. One thing about Stone men, we are good at saying the wrong thing at the worst time. How is it that any woman loves us, is still a mystery,” he said. “I know Zoey is an angel.”

I laughed. “Hey, that's something we finally agree on.”

He glared at me. “Then hopefully, just this once, you'll take my advice. Now I got to go and check on my men. And then I need to report to Reesa with their status.”

“How is she doing?” I asked.

“Don't know since no one wants to tell us what is going on with her.” He cocked a brow and asked, “Unless you know anything that I don't.”

“No. Meri hasn’t shared anything. But I can tell you that a few days ago, she stopped in to see Reesa.”

“You forget, the drivers are my men. I knew that,” he said.

Of course, you fucking did. Then why ask?

“Then you are aware she brought her medical bag.” He nodded. “You know as much as I do. Meri refuses to divulge anything. And honestly, I respect her for that. I mean, she’s extremely loyal to Reesa.”

“That she is. What surprises me is why Meri and not Finn. From what I gather, he has no clue that Reesa hasn’t been well.”

“I don’t get that. Why wouldn’t she want her husband, who is an amazing surgeon, to know that she is ill?” I asked.

“What is more puzzling is why confide in Meri. From what I know, they weren’t friends before this,” he said.

“Obviously they are now.”

“Is it me or is everything around Nurse Meri puzzling?”

I laughed. “You should be in my shoes. I can read most people, but not her.” And that frustrated and appealed to me. That’s what made my going to talk to her all the more challenging. The odds weren’t in my favor when it came to fixing this. Couldn’t blame her either.

Once Bennett was gone, I headed down to her room and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I tried again, but still no answer. Pulling out my cell phone, I called her. Same result. Okay. She was really angry and was avoiding me.

I needed to think about this. I could send her a text message. She could ignore that as well. But I needed help and I think I know just how to do it.

Sorry, Reesa. Your campaign material will have to wait one more day. I have something that needs saving. My relationship with Meri.

CHAPTER 17



Meri

There was another knock on my door, and I still wasn't going to answer it. What part did he not get? I was mad. Didn't I have the right to be mad? Granted, it had been a couple of hours, but I didn't get mad often. Maybe it took me longer to get over it than others.

I leaned against the door, feeling emotionally exhausted. Resisting my heart that said, *let it go, forgive him, and move on*, it was tiring. Logic said that he kept it secret for one reason only. He didn't want me to grow too attached to him.

Well, that was too late. I did care. I was falling for him and he was leaving. I was prepared for that. I counted down the days and nights knowing all we had was this short window of time. But that wasn't true. He knew he was staying. He didn't tell me because he wasn't feeling the same way.

"Nurse Meri, are you there?" a woman's voice called out through the door as she knocked again.

I should be thankful that it wasn't Ryker again. So why wasn't I?

Oh, sometimes I hate being a woman.

Opening the door I asked, "Hello. Is there something you need?"

"No ma'am. I am delivering something to you. There was a note left for you at the desk." I took the note, but she didn't

leave. "I was told to wait for a response."

It had to be from Ryker. What game was he playing now?

As soon as I opened it, I knew it wasn't. It was in Tabiqian, which he didn't speak or write.

YOU CAN'T STAY IN THERE FOREVER.

That's all. No signature. Nothing. It was meant to scare me. It was working.

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

"I am not sure. It was at the desk when I returned from using the restroom last night. I came to your room to deliver it at that time, but you didn't answer. The same this morning. I was beginning to fear that something was wrong, and you were ill."

Nope. I was feeling on cloud nine last night. This morning, well that was a different story.

"Is Mr. Stone available?" I asked.

"Which one, ma'am?"

"Bennett," I clarified.

"No. He just left the resort. Would you like to speak to the other Mr. Stone?"

Yes, but what could he do? Lie to me and tell me it would be okay? Because it was not. This told me that I was not as safe here as they thought.

"No. I'd like for you to arrange for transportation for me," I said.

"Guests are not allowed to leave the resort," she said.

I smiled. "That is for guests, but I am Tabiqian. This is my home. I know it better than any of them," I reminded her.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll make the arrangements and return shortly with the details."

"Thank you," I said and closed the door.

I wasn't safe here. Not at the hospital either. I had no idea where I was going, but I'd find one, even if it meant I had to leave Tabiq.

That was it. If I couldn't work, then why not take a vacation somewhere else?

As I packed, I thought of all the things I'd like to see but never had the time off to go. Paris sounded wonderful, but too romantic and it would only make me miss Ryker. Scotland looked beautiful but what a waste if I had no one to share it with.

There was no point going through a list when it always ended the same way. Traveling alone wasn't for me either. I could ask Dedra to go but she had a boyfriend. If she was going anywhere, I'd like to think it was with him.

Guess I'm not meant to go anywhere.

Even though I loved Tabiq, I'd always wanted to travel. And when I went to Boston to study, it only gave me the itch to do so even more. But that was the life of the rich, and that wasn't me. I wasn't poor. I had money put aside but not to see every place on my bucket list.

Dreams aren't meant to come true, or you wouldn't have anything left to dream of.

There was another knock on the door. That receptionist was so fast I hadn't even finished packing the items I'd collected since staying here. I opened the door to find someone standing there holding several dozens of wildflowers.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

Ryker's voice came from behind all those flowers. "Do you have a vase?" he asked.

I chuckled. "I think I'd need the bathtub to hold all of those. Where did you get them?" I asked, knowing that we had one florist in town, and he'd have to purchase the entire shop to get that many.

"Picked them."

"Yourself?" I said, shocked.

“Yes, and for the record, one flower is light, but you pick enough of them, and they get heavy,” he said, hinting for me to let him inside.

“Come in but I have no idea where you are going to put them.”

“I liked your idea. Where is your bathroom?” he asked.

“On the left.” I watched as he struggled to get them through the door. I could only imagine what the bathroom looked like with all the petals falling all over the place.

When he came back out, he said, “It was my way of saying sorry. Please forgive me, Meri. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“It’s hard to be angry when you do something so outrageous like this.” That was the truth, but it didn’t mean I was running back into his arms either.

“Does that mean you’d agree to have dinner with me?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I’m leaving,” I pointed at my bags on the bed.

“What do you mean, you’re leaving? Are you going back to the hospital?”

“No. I don’t know where I am going, but I can’t stay here,” I stated.

“I told you, I’m sorry. Please, don’t go,” he pleaded.

“This isn’t about you. I’m not safe here.”

His brow rose and he said, “Of course you are. No one is getting in here.”

I walked over, picked up the note, and handed it to him. He looked at it and then at me. I translated what it said.

“Holy fuck! Who brought this to you?”

I explained to him the entire situation as I knew it. It didn’t take him long to pull out his cell phone and call Bennett with the details.

“Put him on speaker, please. I want to hear what is being said. I mean you’re talking about me after all.”

Ryker did as I requested. Bennett said, “You can’t leave, Meri. Not yet. Not until I find out how the note came to be in the resort.”

“I don’t know. And the receptionist said it was there last night while she stepped away from the desk. Anyone could’ve left it there.”

“We have enough cameras in that place to tell us exactly who left it. Give me an hour and I’ll know more. I promise. One hour,” he said and ended the call.

“It sounds like he was at the hospital,” I said to Ryker. “I could hear a call buzzer ringing.”

“Yes, he went to visit someone,” he replied.

“That’s all you have to say. Just someone, not who?” He didn’t say anything, and I added, “I guess I’m busy for dinner because things haven’t changed. Something is going on and you’re still not telling me. I think you should go,” I said firmly.

“Meri, I’m not lying. I don’t know who he is visiting. I know it is a member of his team.”

“Is that all you know?” I prodded one last time.

“No. Mombo is dead and several of his followers or whatever they were, are in the hospital and others are in jail.”

“Mombo’s dead? When? How?” I asked.

“Last night. Bennett and his men attacked where they were hiding out. There was gunfire. Some people got hurt, some were killed, and a few were captured. But the bottom line is Mombo can’t hurt you or anyone else ever again,” he said.

Mombo was dead. But that left another question. “Then who left the note?” I said, my hands starting to tremble.

He stepped forward and said, “I don’t know, but Bennett will find out. Don’t worry, Meri. I’m not going anywhere until I know you’re safe.”

“Not now, but you will. So, thank you, but I’m going to take care of myself.” I was the only one I can count on.

“Meri, you can trust me.”

“I want to. But I’m afraid that you will keep things from me again,” I said.

“You mean like you are from me? You won’t tell me what is wrong with Reesa. And I have not shut you out because of it,” he said.

“That’s different. I had sworn to keep her secret,” I explained.

“And my brother has done the same, yet I have told you things I shouldn’t.”

He was right. I was holding him to a higher standard than I had set for myself. But there was one thing I knew Bennett didn’t tell him not to share with me, and that was his timeline for staying or going. That was all on Ryker.

“Tell me the truth as to why you didn’t tell me you were staying longer,” I demanded.

He paused for a moment, then said, “Things were so good between us. I was afraid that if I told you, and then changed my mind and left anyway, it would hurt even more. So, I waited until I was sure I was staying. Could I have told you earlier? Yeah. But I also knew that I didn’t want to give you false hope about our relationship. I’m staying but not for good. Just to help Reesa. And now with Mombo gone, I’m not sure how much longer I will be here. Maybe just a few more days,” he said.

I didn’t want to feel anything, but I did. “I...I know you have to leave. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Nor do I, sweetheart. Nor do I.”

I stepped into his welcoming arms, and he just held me while I rested my head on his chest. A moment later his cell phone rang.

“Sorry. I must get this. It’s Bennett.”

I wanted to know as badly as he did.

I didn't need to ask this time because Ryker answered the call using the speakerphone.

"Ryker is Meri there with you?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm here," I said. "Did you find out who left the note?"

"Yes, I did. And she has been apprehended."

"She? It was a woman?" I asked.

"Yes. And it was the same woman who was spotted at the hospital claiming to have found the phone. And that is not all either."

"I'm afraid to ask what else," I admitted, my head spinning, palms sweating, and heart racing. Yup, a full-blown panic attack. Something I had treated, but had never experienced, until now.

"She is the cousin of one of the men running for president. And would you like to guess who she used to date years ago?" Bennett asked.

Ryker and I said in unison, "Mombo."

"Yes."

Ryker asked, "How did she get the resort?"

"She didn't. There was a change of shift and she asked one of the maids if she could give this note to the receptionist. Because there was no one at the desk, she left it on the desk. So, no one actually made it on the property."

Thank God.

"This means that Reesa is not in danger any longer either, right?" I asked.

"My men are on their way to have him arrested. Now we have proof connecting him to Mombo, and with the letter Reesa received, we have a strong case against him. I see no reason why Reesa won't win the election by a landslide now," he said.

“Letter? She received a letter as well?” I asked, looking at Ryker. His eyes told me what I needed to know. This wasn’t the first time he had heard about it.

So many secrets. What is the truth?

I was beginning to think I didn’t know the real Ryker. Maybe everything I liked about him was just an act.

“Yes. And she told us not to tell anyone,” Bennett stated.

“Of course not,” I said looking directly at Ryker. He shrugged and I shook my head. “Is there anything else we should know that we’re not supposed to know?” I asked sarcastically.

“I’m sure there are plenty of things, but you know Tabiq. It’s a country that has more secrets than stories,” he said.

That was the truth. I guess I was just hoping for something different with Ryker.

“Thank you for letting me know. Does this mean I’m free to return to my home?” I asked, not sure what I was hoping he’d say.

“If you can give me one more night so I can make sure all loose ends are tied up, then I would say yes,” he said.

“Okay. One more night. And Bennett, thank you for everything.”

“Don’t thank me. Ryker is the one who insisted we keep you here and keep you safe. I’m glad he did. It could’ve ended badly for you if he hadn’t.” He ended the call, and I was left looking at Ryker who was smiling.

“See. I’m really not a bad guy.”

“I never said you were. And thank you for keeping me safe.”

“I know how you can thank me,” he said.

I placed my hands on my hips and snapped, “I’m not having sex with you tonight.”

He laughed. “I was actually going to say you can cook me that dinner that you bragged about.”

I blushed. “Oh. Okay. I can do that tomorrow if you’d like.

“Sounds good. Now as far as tonight, how about we let the resort cook for us?” he suggested.

“I will agree only if you promise not to talk about Reesa, Mombo, or anything to do with any of this crap,” I stated.

“Sounds good to me. We have much better things to talk about like learning more about each other.”

“Like what,” I asked.

“Favorite book, music, movie. A whole list of things,” he replied.

This was the man I was falling in love with. The one who could easily make me forget all the stress of the day. But how was he going to do that when he was thousands of miles away?

I’ll deal with it like I always do. Bury my feelings and pretend I’m a rock.

CHAPTER 18



Ryker

I'd like to think we made progress last night. We enjoyed a lovely dinner together without discussing anything that would put a wedge between us again. Could we do it again today? Did I want to? Granted, it was nice, but the spark wasn't there.

She was waiting for me at her house, and I had to show up, even though I was having second thoughts. I wanted to talk to her, really talk. Like we used to. Part of a relationship is having difficult conversations, not just shallow ones. And I had something I needed to talk to her about.

The driver announced we were almost there. I had run out of time, and I was going to have to do this face-to-face.

We pulled up to her house and I told him I'd call when I needed a ride back. This could either be a very short visit or with any luck, I'd only be calling tomorrow.

I knocked on her door and she opened it wearing an apron just like her aunt had on when we went out to eat.

"Just in time," she said. "Come on in. I was about to take the food out of the oven."

I followed her inside. It was a small house, built for one. Like myself, she said she hardly spent any time there. I liked living alone too, or at least I used to. Now, I wasn't sure. Even just one night without her in my bed felt different. Hence the talk I needed to have with her.

I sat down in the chair she pointed at. “Is there anything I can help you with?” I offered.

“No. Just be prepared to eat a lot,” she said, pulling a roast out of the oven. It had all the fixings around it, potatoes and carrots. I smiled when she placed it in the center of the table. “What do you think?”

“I think it feels like home,” I admitted, inhaling the wonderful aroma.

Meri’s eyes gleamed. “Thank you. I looked up the recipe when I got back to my room last night. I have homemade biscuits coming out too.”

“You made this all for me?” I asked, stunned.

“Yes. I wanted you to know how much I appreciate everything you did for me,” she said, going back for the biscuits.

Appreciation wasn’t what I was looking for. But it was better than her hating my guts. When she sat down, I said, “You really shouldn’t have gone through so much trouble. You must have spent the entire morning cooking.”

“I found it therapeutic. Also cleaned my house, and did laundry,” she replied.

“That doesn’t sound like a fun way to enjoy your first day back home,” I said.

She shrugged. “There were a few times I was afraid that I would never see this place again. It might not be much, but it is mine. No one makes the rules here but me. I can come and go as I wish.”

“Sounds like you enjoy living alone,” I stated.

“It is better than living with someone you don’t get along with, don’t you think?”

“Yes. There is nothing worse than being with the wrong person. But have you ever thought about how it could be with the right one?” *With me?*

“Of course, I have. But sometimes things don’t end up the way we want them. Some things are not meant to be,” she responded. Sadness filled her beautiful brown eyes.

Reaching across the table, I touched her hand. “Don’t give up on what you want. Some things are worth fighting for.”

She looked down at my hand on hers, then pulled hers away. “Or sometimes they are exactly what they appear to be. Hopeless.”

“Is that what you think of us? Hopeless?” I asked.

Meri became uncomfortable and started to fidget in her seat. “I don’t think about us at all,” she said. I knew that was a lie.

“That’s unfortunate because I haven’t stopped thinking about us.”

She looked at me, eyes wide, then turned and avoided my gaze. “You should eat before it gets cold.”

“Even though your food smells amazing, I didn’t come here to eat. I came here to talk to you,” I said.

“Ryker, I...I think we have said enough.”

“No we haven’t. What we did was avoid talking, which is not the same. But Meri, I don’t want to leave without talking about us.”

“I already told you, there is no us.”

“Hmm. I don’t recall that at all. What I remember was how damn good it is with you. And you can tell me that you don’t feel it, but I won’t believe you,” I said.

“What you believe doesn’t matter to me,” she said.

“Why are you pushing me away?” I asked.

“I’m not pushing you, you’re leaving,” she said.

And here it was. The wall that I needed to break through. “Meri, I’m not leaving you, I’m leaving Tabiq. That is entirely different.”

“Maybe to you, but not to me,” she said softly. “Now if you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Because it hurts thinking about it?” I prodded. She nodded. “I know exactly what you mean. I hate thinking about leaving and not seeing you every day.”

She looked back at me and said, “Then don’t.”

“Don’t go?” I asked.

“Don’t think about it.”

I laughed. “Meri, are you purposely trying to be difficult?”

“I’m not being difficult. I have spent all day cooking a special meal for you. And you haven’t even taken one bite. I even asked nicely, yet nothing.”

I picked up my fork, stabbed a carrot, and put it in my mouth. “Yum. Very good. Thank you. Now, can we please talk? I’m trying to tell you that I don’t want this to end.”

“Ryker, I know what you are saying, but it’s what we are avoiding that I am afraid of discussing,” she said.

“Meri, you are one of the strongest woman I’ve ever met. Heck, I bet you can even give Reesa a run for her money. I can’t imagine you being afraid of a conversation,” I said.

“I...I’m afraid that we will talk and then after everything, we will end up in the same place. Going our separate ways.”

“But you won’t know unless you take the chance. Because there is another side, where we talk and work things out so we can still be together. I’m not here to tell you what I want. I’m here so we can talk about what *we* want. So together we can devise a plan that works for us both,” I explained.

“And you really believe that to be possible? Or are you using your marketing skills on me to talk me into something that I don’t believe will work?”

“Oh sweetheart, I can sell a lot of things, but not myself.”

“Fine. Let’s talk. But dinner will not be the same when it gets cold.”

Neither will our relationship.

“Thank you, Meri. So can I start?”

“That’s fine,” she agreed.

“I spoke to Reesa and Bennett earlier today. Things have really changed. She has all the campaign materials that we prepared together, and she’s all set.”

“That’s great. She has my vote when the time comes,” Meri replied.

“I’ve always known that. She is lucky to have you as a friend. You are a very special person, Meri.”

“No. I’m just myself, nothing special,” she replied.

“I disagree. I’ve not only seen how you are with everyone you interact with, but I know what you have come to mean to me. It’s something I should’ve talked to you about when we were together in my suite.”

“We were...preoccupied,” she reminded me. *Oh, I can’t forget any of those nights.* “I’m not talking about sex. I mean with worry over Mombo,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Yes, that too. But even though we have only been together for two weeks, I have come to care for you a great deal. More than you know. And I don’t want to leave Tabiq without a plan for us to continue exploring what we have together. I think walking and saying goodbye will one day fill us with a lot of regret.”

“I don’t know how we are supposed to work on something when neither of us has any time to ourselves now. A relationship takes a lot of work, Ryker. You told me what a day in the life of Ryker looks like. You get up early, go to the gym, then work long hours and grab take-out food on the way home only to do the same the very next day. Where do I fit in all of that? We not only both work a lot, but we are in different time zones. When you sleep, I work, and when I sleep you work. See what I’m trying to tell you. We don’t work.”

“Meri, that is our lifestyle that doesn’t work. We can find a way around that. I’m talking about feelings.”

“And if you let your heart rule your life, then you risk getting hurt,” she said.

“And if you let your head rule your life, then you risk missing out on the greatest thing life has to offer.” *Love.*

“I have achieved so much by following my head. It hasn’t let me down yet,” she stated.

“And have you been in love before?” I asked, hoping I was right, and she was in love now.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“How you feel has everything to do with this. If it will make it easier for you, I’ll tell you how I feel first,” I offered.

“Ryker, I’m not sure about this,” she said.

“But I am. Meri, you had me falling for you the day you treated me in the ER.”

“I hate to tell you this, but people fall for their nurses all the time. It’s because you’re in pain, and we are there to provide some TLC.”

“I’ve been to the ER many times. Never have I fallen for my nurse or doctor. But what I want to know is, are you falling for me too?” I asked bluntly.

She looked down at her hands that were folded on the table and slowly lifted her eyes to meet mine.

“Yes. Yes, I’m falling for you. But that doesn’t change the facts. I won’t see you again and admitting how I feel now, only makes it more painful.”

This was progress. My feelings were reciprocated. This was something I could work with. Yet, I hated the fact that telling her how I felt caused her pain. This should be a joyous time. We should be kissing and making love. Instead, she looked like she was about to cry.

“Sweetheart, love is worth fighting for. And the woman I am falling in love with, is one hell of a fighter. Don’t give up on us.”

The tears started streaming down her cheeks. Once again, not the response I expected. I got up, walked around the table, and pulled her up into my arms. There were no words to be spoken. I let her cry on my chest for as long as she wanted.

When her sobs stopped, I wiped her tears away. "I'm sorry. I don't know what is wrong with me. I don't cry like this. I'm known as *the rock* at work."

"But when you're with the one you love, you shouldn't need to be the rock. You should be who you are at any point in time. Sometimes the rock, and other times, a priceless piece of China. And just because you're crying, doesn't mean you're not strong. Just means that you're comfortable with me to let me see the parts of you that you hide from everyone else." I brushed the strands of hair that covered her eyes. "I want all of you, Meri. And for the first time in my life, I am ready to give all of myself as well." *Not sure you'll want it, but I'm yours.*

"Ryker, you're not going to take no for an answer, are you?" I shook my head. "Then I guess you leave me no choice."

My heart skipped a beat. Was she going to ask me to leave the house again? *I've tried everything and still have no agreement to try.*

"What are you saying, sweetheart?" Holding my breath, I waited for her answer.

"My answer is yes. I'm willing to give a long-distance relationship a try."

It felt like a huge weight was lifted off me. Pulling her high into my arms, I swung her around in the air before kissing her hard. I would love to carry her to the bedroom and seal this with a lot more than just a kiss, but I needed to hear her say it again.

"I love you, Meri."

She started kissing my face again and again. "I love you too, Ryke. I love you too."

Tomorrow we will eat the leftovers from the dinner I had no interest in eating tonight and talk about how we will make

this work. Convincing her to give us a try was the hard part.
Loving her was easy.

Tonight, we celebrate.

CHAPTER 19



Meri

“Everything is great. The baby’s heartbeat is strong, and your vital signs are perfect,” I told Reesa after examining her. Ever since Mombo and his men were taken out of the picture, Reesa’s health had improved. But there was one thing that still bothered me. “Now there is just one last thing for us to talk about before I go back to work.”

“What is that?”

“When are you going to tell Finn?” I asked.

She grinned. “I...I told him the night that he returned from Ireland.”

“That was more than a month ago. Why didn’t you tell me?” I’d been avoiding looking Finn in the eye whenever he spoke about Reesa because I was afraid he’d see that I was hiding something from him.

“We decided to keep it quiet until after the election.”

That was taking place next month, so it wouldn’t be long before everyone knew the wonderful news. That didn’t answer why she had kept me in the dark about Finn knowing. *Probably the same reason you don’t know that I told Ryker the last time he came to Tabiq for one of your speeches.* Even though Ryker had gone home three weeks ago, he had come back several times since then. This long-distance relationship wasn’t so long distance so far.

“Yes, I know what we agreed to, but I mean, why not tell me that Finn knows? He could do what I’m doing for you. Heck, he’s a doctor, and I’m just a nurse,” I reminded her.

“Don’t you ever say just a nurse. You’re so much more than you give yourself credit for. And that is why I asked you to come to my office today.”

I was lost. “I thought you asked me to come so I could examine you like I have been doing twice a week,” I said.

There was a knock on the door, and she said, “Come in.”

When it opened it was Finn. I wanted to crawl under my chair. I felt as though I had just got caught lying and the principal was coming in to talk to me.

“Dr. O’Connor. I didn’t know you were coming,” I said.

“I’m aware of that. But don’t look so nervous. Reesa and I wanted to talk to you, and the hospital wasn’t the right place.”

It is the place where I should be right now.

“What is it that you wish to discuss?” *My lying?*

“I have told you before how impressed I have been with how you are handling the nurses at the hospital.”

“You have. And thank you. I am glad to be of help.”

“Now I would like to help you,” he said.

I wasn’t aware that I needed any help. “I am doing okay.”

“Not that kind of help because I know you don’t need it,” he said.

“Then what are you talking about?” I asked.

“We need more nurses. I’ve been trying to recruit some here in Tabiq, but so many of the young women are afraid to travel to the US for the training. Without it, I can’t hire them. This is a modern hospital, and the old days of old-fashioned medicine are over.”

“I’m aware of that, and grateful that we can provide quality care that wasn’t available before,” I said.

“I am wondering if you would be willing to be the liaison for these women?”

“By doing what exactly?” I was no recruiter.

“By traveling to the US with them and staying in Boston while they get their schooling. You would also be there to support them in their studies. In a way, you’d be the one helping them to achieve their dreams.”

“You want me to...move to Boston?” I asked.

“Move? Not sure if that is the right word, but you would be there for at least two years while they do their studies and internship. All expenses will be paid as well as your regular salary,” he said.

“I just want to make sure I understand. You don’t want to hire anyone from outside of Tabiq who already has the skillset you need?”

Reesa replied. “This is about giving Tabiqians the skillset they need. If this works, we want to try it for other positions at the hospital as well.”

“But if I’m there, then who will run the nursing department while I’m gone?” I asked.

Finn said, “I have a person in mind, but I’d like to hear who you would suggest as a temporary replacement.”

There was only one person who came to mind. “Nurse Dedra.”

Finn smiled. “And that is who I would recommend as well. Now there is just one thing needed. Your acceptance of this new role.”

“I...I wasn’t prepared to make such a decision today.”

Reesa said, “You don’t have to. But please, go home and think about it. We want to start this as soon as possible, and without you there, I’m afraid we won’t have as many nursing applicants as we need. The hospital can’t keep running so short-staffed.”

No pressure. *Just the future of the nursing staff is on my shoulders.* I'm glad no one was monitoring my vital signs because I think my blood pressure just went up.

"Would it be okay if I let you know tomorrow?" I asked.

Finn said, "I figured you'd need time, but I know Reesa would like to announce this program at one of her speeches. Do you think you'll be able to decide within a week?"

It was something I'd like to discuss with Ryker. I knew he was flying in later tonight for another speech he was working with Reesa on. I hated spending our limited time together talking about work, but this would affect our relationship. I wasn't sure if being in the States would help or hurt it. We'd never talked about me being in the US for an extended period of time and what we had right now was working for us.

I looked at Finn and Reesa and said, "I'll give it serious consideration and have an answer for you in a few days. Thank you again for having such confidence in my abilities. It means a lot to me."

"Don't thank us. You have earned it. I've never seen anyone as dedicated as you are," Finn said.

"And if you do accept the position, then maybe you can work with Finn for some recruitment material too," Reesa said.

"I am not a marketing expert," I said.

"Maybe not, but Ryker told us how helpful you were in preparing my campaign materials with him.

"All I did was translate what he prepared."

"The fact that he allowed you to do so, shows me the level of trust he has for you. A smart man," Finn grinned.

"If he was really smart, he'd put a ring on that finger to make sure you don't get away," Reesa said.

I had tried to keep my relationship with Ryker private, but ever since that fake date to draw Mombo's attention, everyone asked me about Ryker wherever I went. Now I was even

getting teased by the president. So much for keeping it on the down low.

“Just think. If you take the position, you will be able to see Ryker even more frequently than you do now,” Finn said.

“If I take the position, it will be because it is what is best for Tabiq,” I stated.

Reesa said, “Meri, I love you dearly for your loyalty to me and to our country. But at some point, your loyalty also must be to your heart and your future. If you ever chose that it is with Ryker in the US, we would understand. No one would judge you for choosing love.”

Finn added, “I can tell you from personal experience, that leaving all you know isn’t as hard as not being with the one you love.”

I’d forgotten that he left his family and home in Ireland to marry Reesa. And from the looks of it, he didn’t regret it one bit.

Now I had a lot more to think about than just a job. I had my entire life to decide what direction I wanted it to go in. I loved Ryker, and I knew where my heart was. But I had already committed my life to Tabiq. It’s who I was. *Can I really leave it all for love?*

Does Ryker even want me to?

I got up from my chair and collected my medical bag. “I guess I better get back to work.”

“Take a few days off and let us know what you decide,” Finn said.

“I can work and think,” I said.

“Yes, but you can’t work and enjoy your time with Ryker,” Reesa smiled.

I should argue. It was my job. But I couldn’t say no to more time with Ryker. After the election, he won’t have a reason to come here so often. I wanted to enjoy as much of this time together as I could.

CHAPTER 20



Ryker

It didn't matter that I could conduct these meetings over the phone with Reesa. I needed to be here because Meri was here.

A month ago, when I talked her into giving this a try, I somehow thought that we'd quickly adapt to talking on the phone and video chats. It was better than nothing, but hell, how could I ever think that it was going to be enough? I needed to see her, hold her. Hence, why I had traveled back to Tabiq four times in the past month.

If Meri was miserable, she was good at hiding it. Me, not so much. My two brothers who lived in the States near me were beginning to wonder what was going on in Tabiq that I came here so often and somehow couldn't seem to stay away.

Like Bennett, I found myself being vague. But they had been with me enough times when Meri called to realize, it wasn't Tabiq that had gotten under my skin, it was a woman. A woman that I realized I couldn't live without.

Bennett picked me up from the airport as Meri was working. No problem. It gave us time to talk about how Tabiq was really doing.

"And there haven't been any further threats?" I asked.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Even back home, politicians received threats. No one can make everyone happy. But this is manageable," he said.

“That’s good because the election is in a couple of weeks. Things are going very smoothly at her speeches and unless something major happens, I can’t see her not being re-elected.”

“I would agree,” Bennett said. “Which makes me wonder what you’re going to do when the election is over?”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” I replied.

“We stopped taking any bookings for suite twenty-one as you seem to be the one using it the most. The Hendersons have no problem with that,” he said, but I cut him off.

“And they shouldn’t, because I pay for it,” I snapped.

Bennett chuckled. “This isn’t about the room. It’s not about the election. I’m just wondering what you’re going to use as an excuse to return here so frequently after the election. Guess you could always say you’re here to visit me. Not sure who is going to buy that.”

I wanted to be pissed at him, but he was only voicing what I was thinking. “I have no idea. This isn’t what I had planned when I came here the first time.”

“I know. All you were doing was recon for the family to find out why I spend so much of my time here. Apparently, whatever you told them has worked because Mom hasn’t left me a message trying to guilt me into spending Thanksgiving with you all.”

“I told them that you are here making a difference in people’s lives. Helping to rebuild a third world country into one that can stand independently one day.” He shot me a look and then turned back to focus on the bumpy road. “Yeah. I sang your praises. But don’t worry. There was no talk about their past, or even about Mombo. It was all geared around development and education. They were very impressed. And honestly, so am I.”

“Thanks. And for the record, I sent Mom a message that Zoey and I will travel with the kids to spend Thanksgiving with them.”

“Serious? She must be over the moon and already planning the menu,” I said.

“I wouldn’t doubt that. She’s under the impression that this will be the first Thanksgiving that we are all together. I didn’t want to be the one to tell her I highly doubted that was going to happen.”

“I haven’t decided what I am going to do. I was thinking about asking Meri to come and have Thanksgiving with us,” I said.

“You’ll need to get a visa for her, but that won’t be difficult. The Hendersons have good connections to expedite that if you need to. But that is just one holiday. What about all the others?” he asked.

“You don’t attend them all,” I reminded him.

“I’m not talking about the family. I’m asking about you and Meri. Have you talked about the future? Are you planning on relocating here, or maybe she will move to the US?”

I sighed. “No, we haven’t, but we need to. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this but being apart so much fucking sucks.” He nodded. I added, “I know I can’t keep traveling back and forth this often. I’m away from the office too much and I don’t feel as though I’m being as effective with managing my time as I hoped. But I can’t run my business from here. I’d have the opposite issue and need to be leaving Meri all the time for work, instead of leaving work for Meri.”

“So, you’re going to ask her to move to the US?”

It wasn’t so easy. “She loves Tabiq like Reesa does. I just can’t ask her to leave her home. Leave everything she loves.”

“You wouldn’t be. You’d be asking her to be with the one she loves. That is if you two are as crazy for each other as I believe you are,” he said.

I know I am for her. “I agree with you. We need to find a way to be together more”

We pulled up to the resort to find Meri standing at the entrance waiting for me. “What is she doing here? I thought

she was working.”

“Why don’t you get out and ask her,” he said, not looking surprised to see her there. I opened the door and he said, “Don’t worry about your luggage. I’ll have it brought to your suite.”

“Thanks.” Looking at Meri all dressed up, I turned to Bennett and said, “Just don’t have it brought up anytime soon.”

He laughed. “Text me when you want it.”

I nodded and went over to Meri. “This is a pleasant surprise. No work today?”

“I was working, but I had a meeting with Finn and Reesa. There is so much I need to talk to you about.”

“I have a lot I need to tell you too. But first, this,” I said, leaning over and kissing her. Each time our lips made contact, my body came to life, and I never wanted to let her go. “How about we go up to our suite and we can talk.”

I knew she had her own home, but she also had neighbors who didn’t miss much of what went on around them. She didn’t need them seeing me come and go on and off. Meri said she didn’t care about the rumors that would start, but I was. They all had so much respect for her, and I didn’t want to be the one to tarnish that.

When we got inside the suite, she led me to the couch. I could tell she had something serious to talk about. It was making me nervous. What if what she was about to tell me made it impossible for me to ask her what I needed to?

“Should I go first, or you?” I asked, hoping that she would let me.

“What I have to talk about will take a while, so maybe you should go first,” she suggested.

Now she piqued my interest. What had the O’Connors’ said to her that was so big that it would take time?

“Unless you aren’t ready to talk about your news yet. If that is the case, I can go first,” she said when I hadn’t talked.

“No. I’ll go first.” I’d been thinking about it the entire flight and probably wasn’t going to pay close enough attention to what she was saying until I talked to her.

“Okay. I’m listening,” she said, sitting up straight on the couch giving me her full attention.

“Sweetheart, this isn’t a business meeting. Well, not really. I am here to talk about a merger.”

“A merger? Are you acquiring something new?” she asked.

“No. A blending of two. I want to talk to you about...us. Meri, I know I told you that we could make this work. And we are both doing our best to do so.”

Her eyes watered and she got up from the couch. “Please, Ryker. Don’t tell me that you can’t do this any longer. I...I know it’s not easy, and I know if we can just try a little while longer, it will get easier,” she said, plopping back down on the couch beside me. “You told me that some things are worth fighting for. *We* are worth fighting for, Ryker. I’m not giving up on us that easily.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t understand...”

“Yes I do. The election is next month. After that we will hardly see each other. And you’re worried that...that...”

“That I won’t be able to be without you?” I asked and she nodded. “You’re right. It is painful lying awake in bed, not being able to kiss you goodnight. That’s why I travel here so often. To see you.”

“I thought you had meetings with Reesa,” she said.

“An excuse. Everything could be done online. Everything but what is most important to me.”

“What is that?” she asked.

“Holding you. Being with you. I come to Tabiq, for you,” I said clearly so she wouldn’t misunderstand why I was there.

“But your company. Your merger. You need to work on that as well,” she said, always worried about me.

“I am. Right now.”

“You’re merging with a company in Tabiq?” she asked.

“No. I’m hoping for a more personal merger. One that takes two lives and blends them into one.” She didn’t say anything and just looked up into my eyes. “Meri, I’m doing a horrible job at this, but what I’m trying to say is that I love you.”

“I love you too, Ryker.”

“Living away from you is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Funny, because I would’ve bet that I’d be a bachelor for many more years, but I don’t want to wait that long. I want a family. I want children. I want to spend the rest of my life showing my wife how much I love her.” Sliding off the couch and only to one knee, I took her hand into mine and added, “Meri, I know you love Tabiq, but I am hoping that you can love me just as much and become my wife.”

“Ryker, you’re asking me to marry you?”

“I am. I can’t picture my life without you. And if I have to move to Tabiq to prove my love, then I will do so. I’ll do whatever it takes for you to believe in us.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. “You don’t have to prove anything to me. I already know. And I love you so much. And to answer your question, I love Tabiq and always will. But I... I must follow my heart, and that is with you. I...I am willing to go to the US with you if you will have me.”

I stood up and pulled her into my arms. “Yes, I want you with me. Today, tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives. I love you, Meri.” I kissed her, and as it grew deeper, it hit me. I’d forgotten something very important. I never gave her the ring.

Pulling away from her, I dropped back down on one knee. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the ring I’d purchased a week ago. Holding it up to her, I said, “Let me try this one more time. The short version. Meri, I love you and want to know if you’ll do me the honor of becoming my wife and my partner in life. Meri, will you marry me?”

She nodded. “Yes, I’ll marry you. And I’ll grow old with you. I love you, Ryker.”

Slipping the ring on her finger, I got up, lifted her into my arms, and swung her around, kissing her.

She giggled as I carried her toward the bedroom. But I stopped. “Meri, there is something you wanted to talk to me about.”

“Oh, yeah. That.” I loosened my hold and let her feet drop to the floor. “Maybe we can talk after?”

“No. It was important to you before, so it is important to me now. Besides, we have the rest of our lives to celebrate.”

“That is true. Well, they offered me a job in the States. Boston to be exact. They want me to help with the transition and schooling of young Tabiqians who want to become nurses. So many start the training but drop out because America is so different from Tabiq, and being there alone is too much. We need more medical staff, and they would like me to be in Boston to help them adjust. Help with their studies. But...but I guess I’m not the right person for the job,” she said.

“The hell you’re not. I know how much you love Tabiq. Helping others fulfill their dreams is perfect for you. And I think, no, I know you’re the right person.”

“But it is in Boston,” she said.

“And I can work there as well.”

“It’s like the stars have all aligned and we are meant to be,” she said.

I nodded. “Love always finds a way. So, are you going to take the job?” I asked.

“I would like to.”

“Then I guess Boston is about to get two more residents,” I smiled looking down into her eyes. “What are you thinking?” I asked.

“That I’m glad you didn’t give up on me, on us.”

“Never, my love. You can count on that.” I pulled her close and asked, “Is there anything else we need to talk about right now?” Meri shook her head. “Good, then if you don’t mind, I’d really love to take a hot shower and make love to my fiancée.”

“I love the way that sounds.”

“Don’t get too used to it, because I can’t wait to make you my wife,” I said.

“Hmm. I think I like that even better,” she smiled as we headed towards the shower. “What about your meeting with Reesa?” she asked.

I laughed. “Had it on the plane during the flight here.

“You really are here just because of me.”

“And I would fly across the world every day if that meant I get to kiss your sweet lips.”

She tugged at the collar of my shirt. “I hope you’re going to do a lot more than just kiss me.”

“Oh, I plan on kissing you. Every lovely inch of you,” I said before claiming her lip.

This wasn’t going to be my last trip to Tabiq, but this is one that would forever change my life. Change it in an exciting wholesome way... that I never knew I even needed.

I had found my other half, my better half. And I officially was going to start showing her that every day.

EPILOGUE



Meri

“Thank you again for all that you have done,” Reesa said, shaking Ryker’s hand. “You helped me stay focused for all those speeches, and the material you created, had been spot on.”

“I was glad to be of help, but really, there wasn’t anyone who could do what you have here in Tabiq, and with the number of votes you received, the people obviously know that too,” Ryker replied.

“Guess I am, and I better get started. Five years go by too quickly.”

Finn said, “Let’s concentrate on the next six months. We have the baby’s room to get ready and a country that will want to celebrate the birth of our son with us.”

“You’re having a boy? Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

Finn laughed. “Hey, I had to be the first to know something, don’t you think?”

I shrugged. “I guess. But I do miss being her confidante.”

“Don’t worry. I hear how much you two are on the phone. I’m sure you still know a lot more than I do,” Finn shook his head.

Ryker chuckled and added, “I know that feeling, Finn.”

I thought that was hilarious because I heard him on the phone talking to his brothers, and I swear they talk more than we ladies do. “Just so the two of you know, Reesa and I are talking about the wedding plans. She is my sounding board for all the different ideas I have. It’s hard to plan two weddings.” We had decided to have the first one in the US and another here in Tabiq.

“You don’t sound upset about it,” Ryker teased.

Smiling, I said, “Not one bit. And I even recruited your brother’s help. Bennett already said that we can have *our* suite for the entire month when we get married.”

“Your suite?” Reesa asked.

I nodded. “We always get the same suite.”

Ryker said, “I told Bennett that they should remove the number twenty-one and just put our names on the door.”

“I am not sure about that. Ryker, mean it seems that twenty-one is your lucky number,” Finn joked.

He wrapped an arm around my waist and said, “I must agree with Finn because it brought us together.”

“That wasn’t luck. That was fate,” I said.

“So, the fact that our house number in Boston is twenty-one is just a coincidence?” Ryker asked.

He had a valid point too. “Okay. So maybe twenty-one is our lucky number.”

“I think so. We’re even getting married on the twenty-first,” Ryker reminded me.

Reesa chuckled. “I think you two are *lucky* that *fate* intervened and brought you together.”

Finn shook his head. “And this is why she wins all our disagreements. Now if the two of you will excuse us, I want to get my wife home. It’s been a long day, and I’d like it if we could do a little celebrating her victory alone.”

Once they were gone Ryker pulled me closer and said, “I think Finn is right.”

“About the arguments?”

“No. About getting out of here and going home to celebrate,” he said.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea. What are we celebrating?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” he replied.

Shaking my head, I said, “I think we should celebrate that we don’t have anything to celebrate.”

“Perfect Another night making magic in suite twenty-one. Maybe we can celebrate it a couple of times tonight,” he winked.

Linking my arm in his, I replied, “I already planned on it.”

Have you read Bennett and Zoey’s love story, [Virgin for the Fourth Time](#)? It’s amazing. Grab yours today!

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