

A photograph of a very muscular man, shirtless, flexing his right arm. He is looking towards the left. The background is a dark purple color with a faint, repeating geometric pattern. The man's physique is highly defined, showing his chest, abdominal, and arm muscles.

He'll protect her
from the dark.

MERCILESS
PROTECTOR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TERRIE E. LAINE

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First Edition

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



If you want to know when my next release will come out, please sign up for my newsletter. <https://www.subscribepage.com/terrielaine>

If you are a fan of this series or me, make sure you join my fan group. [Terri's Butterflies](#)

And you can join my reader group to talk books. [Terri E. Laine Reader Group](#)

CONTENTS

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

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Terri E. Laine

MY INTERNAL ALARM CLOCK WENT OFF, AND I BLINKED several times to focus. For a second, I didn't remember where I was. But the exposed brick walls reminded me I was back in my studio apartment in Chicago.

"Hey." The soft voice was another reminder that I wasn't alone.

"Hey," I said back.

"Don't sound so excited." My handler rolled to the left and gingerly got off the bed naked as the day she was born.

Inwardly, I groaned. It was true her cover was one of a long list of women to spend time in my bed. That didn't mean we had to fully act it out. Besides, the op was over. Nicolas Cortez, the kingpin of Chicago, was in federal custody.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked, undeterred by my silence. I shrugged because I wouldn't tell her my plans. "Maybe you should take a vacation, Shawn."

Shawn wasn't my real name. But I'd been called it so much I responded as easily as if she'd called me Matt. Her point, however, was to convey that the brass at the bureau wanted me out of Chicago.

"Things are hot in the city right now. I just might do that," I said, sticking to my cover. Though the kingpin was in jail, the extent of his reach was long. I swept for bugs daily, otherwise known as listening devices, but you never knew.

She giggled as if she were some silly woman instead of a deadly weapon. Her training was as extensive as mine. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she said teasingly, but I understood it for what it was—a warning.

“You know me.”

She didn’t exactly know me. We’d only worked together for about a year when she replaced my previous handler. What she hadn’t suggested was for me to move from the area. That meant I was to remain a cop with the Chicago PD. Technically, I was on suspension from that job. An internal investigation was pending regarding my involvement with the kingpin. I’d been his right-hand man. Chicago PD’s internal affairs department was looking into it because they’d caught me with Cortez when he was arrested. It was all part of my FBI cover, and the bureau would use back channels to clear me of that... eventually.

After my handler left, I checked my watch. I had an hour before a meeting I’d set up and headed for the shower. I’d made promises I had to keep. One I’d made to my brother-in-law, Connor King. Another to the man I was meeting.

An hour later, I walked into a dive bar on Rush Street and headed to a back shadowy corner that had been agreed upon. There sat David Royal. I almost didn’t recognize one of Chicago’s most eligible bachelors as he wore a White Sox baseball hat.

I slid into the booth opposite him just as a server dropped off two beers. It was a little early, but past noon.

“On time,” he said and took a swig of his beer.

“Always. I keep my promises.”

He nodded but didn’t look happy about it. “How’s Natalie?” he asked.

Natalie was the kingpin’s only daughter. She’d also been a bargaining chip David lost.

“Do you really want to know?” He looked away. “You really liked her?”

He met my eyes, and I held his squarely as he spoke. “It’s not often you find a woman like her. She was a breath of fresh air.”

I nodded, understanding what he meant. He had no idea how closely I could commiserate with him. He saw me as part of Chicago’s underbelly. Where I’d grown up like him, rich and privileged. Most didn’t know that because I’d walked away from my blue-blood life.

“You win some, you lose some. I lost a woman like her, a day late and a dollar short.” I took a pull from my beer, which had already begun to sweat.

What I said was more truth than I’d told anyone outside of my inner circle in a very long time. I could have fallen hard for my twin sister’s best friend since college. I’d kept Bailey at arm’s length, not wanting to corrupt her. She was sweet as homemade apple pie, and I hadn’t been ready for anything real. Much later, I’d changed my mind and gone back to New York, a few days after she’d met a man wealthier than God. She married that man because I’d been a fool.

“Regrets?” he asked, drawing me out of my musings.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” I tipped my beer in his direction. “But lightning can strike again.” At least, I hoped it would. “But I’m not here to walk down Lost Love Avenue, am I?”

“How can I trust you, Shawn? If that’s even your real name.” His posture was stiff. But given how we met, he shouldn’t be this angry. I wasn’t a choirboy.

“As real as it gets,” I responded. I’d been Shawn longer than any of my previous FBI covers. Some nights, I thought I was more Shawn than Matt, probably because, for so long, I’d been running away from the stigma of how I’d grown up. I’d wanted to be anyone but.

“Disgraced officer. Again, why should I trust you?”

It was a valid question. He’d been paying attention to the headlines about my shady link to a crime boss. “Don’t,” I answered with another casual shrug.

David had hired the best private detectives, or so he thought. None of them had been able to find his sister. He needed someone with their hands dirty to even have a shred of hope of finding her. When he visibly relaxed, I assumed he had come to the same conclusion.

Without words, he slid a picture across the table. I picked it up. A striking woman smiled up at me, carefree. A woman who could model on the cover of fashion magazines. One who would be eaten alive in the human trafficking world. She was just that stunning.

“Not much of a resemblance,” I said.

Besides their facial structure differences, she had more color to her than her brother, as if she'd been tanning on the beach.

“She's Dad's. A DNA test my mother insisted on proves it.”

There was a story there. “But you've only recently connected with her?” I guessed.

“After Dad took ill, I took over. Certain monthly payments led me to the truth.”

“How old is she?” I asked. She didn't look like a child, but young. Based on his statements, I couldn't imagine his mother would approve of her husband continuing to pay child support for an adult. Besides that, age was an important factor. It was sick to even contemplate, but some human traffickers only dealt with kids.

“She's not a kid. Mom doesn't know Dad's still sending money. And Dad's guilt is long,” he said, answering my unasked question.

“Have you met her?”

He nodded. “We spoke a few times. I met her in person only once.”

“What happened?” I wanted to know what he knew about her disappearance.

“According to her younger sister, who is twelve, by the way, she had been communicating online with another girl who shared her love for dogs. She was going to meet said girl at a park near the Magnificent Mile when Tayla caught and stopped her. She thinks Tayla went to the park as she left in a rush and never returned.”

It was a classic story. The internet had opened a lot of doors to predators and kids who didn't understand stranger danger.

“She's barely out of college,” he pleaded, speaking of Tayla, not her younger sister.

I nodded. “Do your brothers know?” *about her*, I didn't add.

David was one of three sons by the elder Royal. “No. Declan wouldn't understand, and Dean... well, Dean has no boundaries. Tayla wasn't exactly excited to meet me after the way my mother treated hers.” His face hardened. “Can you help?”

“I'll need some information from you.”

I laid out everything I would need, including the full names and birth dates of Tayla and her sister. I also needed Tayla's sister's email address. My brother-in-law was one of the best hackers. If we could trace the sender of the email, we might link him or her to whatever group was organizing the sale of children, as Tayla's sister had been the target.

He promised to get me that information as we ended our meeting. Not wanting to be linked with the likes of me, he left first. I called Connor and filled him in.

Less than two weeks later, I found myself outside of a warehouse where an auction of human beings was to take place. Everything in me wanted to go in guns blazing. Instead, I became my next persona, code name Rook, a billionaire with a taste for innocence.

Matt, the name I was born with, was shoved further into the darkness.

Later, when I set eyes on Tayla, I knew I was going to hell. What I would have to do to save her. Only God could save my soul because David Royal was going to kill me...

ONLY NOW DID I REALIZE THE LIFE OF PRIVILEGE I'D LIVED. I'd dumbly assumed that the bad guys couldn't win as I rushed into danger. How wrong I'd been. No amount of training could have prepared me for how things had turned out.

In chains, I sat at the feet of my captor like a modern-day Jedi princess, especially in the getup I was wearing. It was the sexier version of a cosplay outfit Princess Leia would have worn with Jabba the Hutt.

The man called Ruin was no Jabba the Hutt. He was a monster formed with handsome features and a cruel smile. He was the contradiction that left me feeling insane. His grooming game was working. The pressure cooker of wanting to save my life was slowly breaking me.

“What do you think, pet?” There was an edge to his tone that let me know this wasn't the first time he'd asked.

I hadn't heard the question, lost in my thoughts as I was most days. I opted to shrug.

His movement was swift. His punishment absolute. He fisted a hand around my right breast and squeezed. The pain was excruciating. I knew better than to cry out. My only reaction was a change in my expression. That couldn't be avoided.

“I could give you to my men. I don't know why I keep you around,” he said near my ear, but the men with guns that stood in his presence heard well enough. They laughed. “I suppose I

get a kick out of the headlines. They are still looking for you after all this time.”

Hope flickered in my heart as the double doors to the madman’s throne room opened and his right-hand man entered. The laughter died as the burn of tears threatened to spill down my cheeks.

“Boss,” the man said.

If I hadn’t been chained, I would have rolled to the right during the momentary distraction. I would have barreled into the guard who stood sentry over Ruin and taken his gun. I was a damn good shot and would have taken out at least six of the men in the room before they had a clue what was going on. But I was chained, leaving me zero options.

“You have a request,” the man finished.

He released his hold on my breast. I didn’t have to turn back to know Ruin was pulling out his phone and reading the request. Violently, he yanked my chain, forcing me back. My head landed in his lap.

“This makes me hard,” he said. My eyes were tearing up now from lack of oxygen as the collar tightened around my neck, forcing me to find my breath. I wouldn’t have long. “Suck my cock, pet. Just like I taught you.”

Gagging would be all I knew until his completion. If I ever lost my will to live, I would bite off the head of his dick. But there was still a tiny spark of hope that squashed that idea. My mind went somewhere else as he used my mouth while displaying my body in front of his admirers.

Ruin was perverse and didn’t care who saw the things he did. I was helpless to fight him or the desire he forced on me. I hated him more for forcing an orgasm I didn’t want as he touched me until I had no control over the outcome.

Later, as I lay at the foot of his bed, still chained like an animal, he continued his ruthless pursuit of my mind. “If you weren’t a virgin I could get top dollar for, I’d fuck you just to be your first.”

Ruin's perversions didn't run to just women or girls. He didn't care what was between your legs when it came to his sadistic needs.

I didn't respond. It wasn't in my interest to. If I said the wrong thing, it would be a long night. Though he hadn't fucked me, he'd done just about everything else. And his desires ran dark.

"Someone wants you." His chuckle was disturbing. "He didn't quite say it. But the request was too fucking close to your description to be anything but a setup. If he wants to play, he won't like the game."

And there it was again. Hope. Had my brother found me? Just as quickly, that thought tanked. I'd seen Ruin shoot a man for bringing him white toast instead of wheat. I may not have love for the brother I'd only met recently, but I didn't want him dead.

There was a flurry of activity the next day. A woman blindly loyal to Ruin, for whatever reason, came in carrying garments I assumed were for me. As much as I wanted to protest, I'd learned hard lessons early on about the punishments I would receive for noncompliance. All would end with me walking around naked wherever he wanted me to be.

No matter how much it physically and mentally hurt me to do what he wanted, I had to bide my time until I had a clear opportunity for a successful escape. It wasn't now. When the door had opened to let the woman in, there had been an armed guard just outside. There were likely more. I would survive whatever was happening. I would.

I let her dress me in an *Alice in Wonderland* getup surely made for a stripper. The simple blue dress was cinched at my waist. The ruffled hem barely covered my ass. And the white bib of the apron lay just slightly above my nipples. I was given long white socks and too-small Mary-Jane black flats. When she proceeded to plait my hair in two braids on either side of my head, I guessed what I was being set up for. Ruin wanted to capitalize on what some had called my baby face. I'd been

told most of my adult life I looked younger than I was. The style of my hair would likely make me look even younger.

A rap came at the door, and I was led out into the hallway, where I joined several other girls dressed just like me. My heart raced as a reminder of Ruin's words came back to me. *Someone wants you*. Had the time come when I'd be sold? It was both a fear and an opportunity. My guess was that anyone who bought me wouldn't have the same level of security Ruin did. It could be my ticket to freedom.

Only now, I had a bigger moral dilemma. I'd gotten caught while trying to save my little sister from a predator. The girls lined up with me looked her age, preteen. While it was possible one or more could look young like me, from the fear on their youthful faces, I didn't think any were of legal age.

As they marched us to the room where Ruin held court, I racked my brain for a way to save us all. Without backup or a weapon, I didn't think I would be able to do so, and it broke me.

We were filed into the main room of the compound. Gone was the raised platform and throne Ruin liked to sit on. Instead, a table was in the middle of the room. Men sat on either side of it. Without counting, I guessed the number of men matched the number of us females.

Most of the men were older, like my dad's age, except one. He had dark hair, was clean-shaven, and had eyes as cold as the arctic. Though he was very attractive, he had to be a sick fuck to be here for whatever was about to happen.

It was easy to surmise even if I hadn't ever seen one; I was more certain than ever we were about to be sold at a human auction.

3

MATT

PLANS HAD BEEN MADE. THOUGH NOTHING WAS CERTAIN. When the call came, my brothers-in-arms, the close circle that included the King brothers, Kalen and Connor, Kalen's best friend Griffin and me, didn't have a lot of time to account for every possibility. I would go in blind as any who'd attended one of these auctions never spoke a word of it. We had to guess at what to expect.

Because of Connor King's contacts and my deep-cover Shawn persona, I, rather Rook, had gotten in. The auction was tonight. I had no choice but to be more specific about the description of the type of girl I was interested in than I'd wanted to be. It was a risk, for sure. But I didn't want to go without being reasonably sure we'd find David's sister. All other potential human trafficking auction leads we'd gotten had been passed to the FBI anonymously.

What did one wear to an auction for people? Jeans and a T-shirt didn't seem appropriate. Full FBI riot gear would have been my choice, but it would have exposed my cover. So, I wore a suit. Black because the funeral look was what I was going for. If I happened to kill Ruin, it wouldn't be the worst outcome.

I rented a car and drove out past the city to docks off the beaten path. The parking lot had few cars in it and the boxy industrial building looked deserted. Only pale-yellow light lit the area just around the single gray door. I wasn't stupid enough to believe that the building wasn't heavily guarded unless someone had double-crossed me.

The sound of my rental car's door closing ricocheted around the area where the loudest sound had been the howling wind and lapping waves. I swiftly made it to the gray door and leveled three sharp raps on it.

A man who looked like he was a professional bodybuilder stuffed in a suit opened it. I held up my phone and flashed the QR code that had been sent to me. The man scanned it with a handheld device and ushered me inside. He waved his hand. No words were exchanged for me to understand what to do next, but I assumed the position for a pat down.

As much as I wanted to be armed, there was no way to sneak in a weapon. The man would have found it the way he thoroughly checked me for any. Then he took my phone before waving me forward with no further instructions. If I had depended on my phone, I would have been fucked. Luckily, Griffin, the security expert in my band of brothers, and his security team assumed I wouldn't have access to it.

I didn't glance at the watch that had the look of an expensive, traditional one. Its old fashion clock face with exposed gears was as costly as it was attractive. Griffin's team had taken it apart and added an emergency beacon to the watch crown. Two quick presses and the calvary would arrive. They'd made it two because no one wanted an accidental press to wreck the op.

From the hallway, I emerged into a room that was large and free of any furniture except for a large wooden rectangular table that sat in the middle. Apparently, I was late, as there was only one free seat left.

Connor knew the organizer and target. They'd gone to prep school together. The promise I'd made to David Royal lined up with the promise I'd made to my brother-in-law, which was to find the man of Connor's childhood nightmares. That man, Ruin, sat on the back of the chair with his feet in the seat without tipping over and urged me forward.

"Come in," he beckoned.

He sat shirtless, clad with a heavy metallic chain around his neck. Black leather pants on his legs, shit kickers covering

his feet, and sporting spiky short bleached-blond hair. He might have looked charming and even welcoming, but evil lurked in his soul based on Conner's allegations of abuse suffered at the hands of this guy.

Back then, Ruin and his pals had been rich kids at a boarding school, enabled by an adult to wield power over weaker kids. He disgusted me. I gave him a wolfish grin and walked forward, knowing I could play his game.

The open seat was the farthest on the right from Ruin, who sat at the head. Quickly, I glanced at the other men around the table. They didn't look like the creeps they were. They looked like ordinary businessmen, wearing suits like me. Most appeared older than me.

Ruin clapped his hands to draw our attention. "As I was saying. Bidding will be done on the device in front of you. Make your first bid count, as that is all you will get. The highest bidder takes the unriden pony home." He winked and my skin crawled. I fisted my hands in my lap before picking up the tablet. "Money must be transferred immediately in the form of cryptocurrency, as explained in advance."

Those instructions had come in the invitation. Of course, we were supposed to be buying fillies. Fillies being young female horses. Using the word unriden made it clear we were buying virgins. His play on words was foul.

It was unlikely, even if everything went according to plan, we would recover the money I'd put up and exchanged for cryptocurrency. The point of using crypto was to keep the senders' and receivers' identities hidden. It was a good thing for me but bad for us to trace. Griffin had hired a hacker who would be tracking the money along with Connor. But even the best would have a hard time getting the money back.

I touched the tablet screen, bringing it to life. A program opened up. The sophistication of the app told me the level this man had put into his business of selling people. My anger was next level.

A parade of girls entered the room from the right. They were all dressed in blue with their hair in pigtails. They were

young, for sure. Only one of them fit the description of Shawn's sister. If I hadn't known with certainty she was of age, I would have been mad at myself for the reaction I felt.

She was more beautiful in person than she had been in the snapshot I'd seen of her. Though she looked young, she didn't look as young as the other girls. Her alluring hazel eyes landed on mine for a second. An all-consuming fire burned in me. I had to swallow to hide my reaction.

I glanced over at Ruin and immediately wanted to wipe the smirk off him.

Ruin waved over the first girl in line. A tiny brunette who couldn't have been older than fourteen, by my guess, stepped forward. The poor girl wore a terrified expression. The crypto I had wasn't limitless. I'd exchanged what I thought I would need. Still, when Ruin announced for us to make a bid on the girl, I placed one.

Though we hoped to rescue all the girls in the end, I had many other reasons to place a bid, including playing the part of a sicko. I also needed to see how this bidding worked. I had no idea what amount would win me David's sister.

The app, as if driven by Ruin's voice, opened. On the screen, the number 374 filled the top half. A smaller box on the bottom appeared. I touched it, and a screen view of a keypad appeared below, allowing me to key in a number.

A quick glance at the girl revealed that while I'd been looking at my screen, Ruin or someone had written the same number in red marker or lipstick on the little girl's cheek.

I placed a modest bid of the equivalent of ten thousand dollars in crypto. With the rules of this bidding, I wouldn't have an opportunity to bid up. If this bid wasn't the highest, I'd lose. It was a good strategy on the part of Ruin. He didn't waste time with a bidding war, and likely, the person who wanted to win would overbid to ensure their victory.

"Bidding is closed," Ruin announced.

When he said nothing more, I looked back at the tablet. I hadn't won. There was a list of numbers from bidders one to

six, but not in order. I'd been labeled bidder five because the fourth line with that label was highlighted. I assumed that to mean that there had been three bids higher than mine.

A little blonde girl was next. She appeared slightly older, maybe fifteen or sixteen. This time, I kept my eyes forward and watched as Ruin wrote 672 on her cheek.

"Bidding is open," Ruin announced.

The screen on my tablet flashed with the number 672 on top. This time, I upped my bid to twenty thousand.

After Ruin said the bidding was closed, once again, bidders one through six were listed. My bid was dead last. Only this time, I was labeled as bidder number three. So, the bidder numbers weren't static. I wouldn't know who I was bidding against because our bidder number changed. The only thing I could think of was we were assigned a bidder number based on the timing of our bids. Thus, the first time, I'd been the fifth person to enter a bid. This time, I was the third.

The only confounding thing was my lower bid the first time hadn't put me last. My higher bid this time did. I couldn't begin to think what these creeps desired. My only desire was to put them all away and get these girls back to their families.

I didn't win the next bid, and I'd bid fifty thousand. Again, I was dead last. Nor did I win the next bid at two hundred thousand dollars. Only one other person had been less.

David's sister was up next. She was staring at the wall behind us as he wrote 888 on her cheek. I put in my bid. It was ten times higher than my last. I couldn't press the button on my watch yet. As of right now, no crime had been committed, at least by the men around the table. Money hadn't exchanged hands. Ruin could be caught, as he was in possession of underage girls. I wanted them all gone. So I had to wait until the end after the men had paid and the girls were in their clutches. It was a risk, but I had faith in my team.

I held my breath as Ruin announced that the bids had closed. I locked gazes with David's sister before glancing down. Though I was listed as bidder number one, my position

on the list was second. Someone had outbid me. I quickly glanced around and caught the smirk on the man across the table. A rage so primal caught me unaware as I wished a thousand deaths on the man.

The last girl was yanked forward. She was a tiny angel, most likely a preteen. Ruin wrote 255 on her cheek. Because Ruin knew all the bidders and bids, I didn't bid as much for this girl. I was still playing the character he assumed me to be as I planned my next move. I lost and was third on the bidding list.

"Gentlemen, the bidding is over. Pay your winning bids. You have five minutes."

I'd lost everything, so I moved to get up.

"Sit," Ruin commanded, rubbing me the wrong way. What he said next kept me in my seat. "If any payment doesn't go through, the next winning bid has an opportunity."

Ruin had a few more minutes, and then I planned to turn his world upside down. That left me nothing to do but observe. I spotted it when Ruin flicked his finger toward the table. Two men who'd been cloaked in shadows stepped away from the wall. They immediately surrounded the guy on the other side of the table, who I was sure had beaten me in my bid for David's sister. The two goons hauled the guy out of his seat as he protested.

"I can pay," the guy yelled.

Ruin didn't seem impressed. "You'll pay alright."

They dragged the man out of the room while he yelled promises Ruin didn't seem to care about.

My screen flashed to life, catching my attention. A log-on to the cryptocurrency platform we'd been instructed to use opened up. A timer on the corner let me know I had three minutes to complete the transaction.

I had a healthy trust fund from my parents, but that didn't mean I hoped to lose two million dollars to this asshole. Griffin assured me they'd hacked into the platform and would follow the money. It had to transfer to Ruin to be legit in his

eyes. They hoped to get it before he transferred it somewhere else or into some other currency.

The transaction was completed before a minute was up. Ruin grinned.

“Gentlemen, your fillies,” Ruin said, widening his arms.

Everyone got to their feet, and so did I. As we did, I double-tapped the button on the watch to activate the team into action. They, along with local law enforcement, should be here within minutes.

As the assholes took hold of the girls, I willed the team to be here sooner.

“You,” Ruin said, pointing at me.

Men with guns had come into the room as the buyers filed out with every girl in tow except David’s sister.

“I don’t know you,” Ruin said when it was just the three of us besides the goons that still lined the walls.

In my head, I was counting time. The team should be here any second.

“My money is good, right?” I asked, sounding confident, with a hint of ego. Something he’d expect.

“True, but trust is important. You need to prove yourself. You’ll go into the room just outside this one and take her virginity.”

I let out a dark chuckle. “I think I paid enough to do her where and when I want,” I said, my spine made of titanium.

“You’ll fuck her, or I’ll kill you and let my men have a go at her.”

Well fuck.

THERE WAS NO MISTAKING THE PLEADING IN HER EYES. HER fear was palpable, and I wanted to tell her it would be fine. Backup was on the way. Only so far, no one had come.

“What will it be?” Ruin, the sick bastard, asked.

She reached for my hand and took it. Her skin was soft, and she gave my hand a little squeeze.

I couldn't find the words and bobbed my head.

“She likes you,” Ruin said, and there was a hint of jealousy in his tone. I didn't take him for the type. To her, he said, “You know where to go, pet.”

She gave him a quick nod and began walking toward the opening to a hall deeper in the compound. It was a short trip as once we made it there, we turned quickly to the right and entered an open doorway a few steps to the left.

I surveyed the room as we walked in. There was only one exit. The one we'd come in. Two security guys had followed us and Ruin into the room. From the inconspicuous glances I dared to make, I noted they carried AK-47s and extra magazines on their belts.

My focus had been on egress and not the looming canopy bed in the center of the room with gauzy fabric that seemed ridiculous, given this auction wasn't in any way romantic.

Tayla led me to the bed before letting go of my hand and scooting to the middle of the covered mattress.

I tried to convey with my eyes that she didn't have to do this. Somehow, someway, I would come up with a plan.

The sounds of the AKs cocking caught my attention. I glanced at Ruin, whose left brow rose in question. I turned back to Tayla, who held out a hand to me. Buying time, I crawled slowly onto the bed.

"I don't have all night," Ruin finally said, sounding bored.

Tayla's countenance was fraught with apprehension. I didn't know if it was because of me, Ruin and his men, or both. I loathed the notion that she was frightened because of me. My intentions were just the opposite. As I crept forward, I said, "Get under the covers." I'd spoken quietly, but the room was devoid of sound. I might as well have yelled.

Though she wasn't naked, I didn't want the men seeing her on the bed. The outfit she wore did little to hide her curves. She drew her legs up to her chest and quickly moved to get under the covers. I'd hoped the cavalry would have arrived by now, but nothing. I made the mistake of glancing at my watch.

"See," Ruin tsked. "I don't think you're here for the right reasons. If you think you sent a bat signal or something, you'd be wrong. Once the auction was over, we turned the jammers back on. Any signal you think you sent went nowhere."

I wanted to snarl out that he was right from pure frustration. But I chose different words when I spoke. "I checked my watch because you are wasting my time. I had plans for this one in the privacy of my dungeon. Instead, you are forcing me to give you a show."

He sneered with a half grin and lifted a hand in my direction. "Well, get on with it, or my men will."

The "please" that came as a whisper from Tayla's lips snapped my head back in her direction. As a tear spilled down her cheek, I wanted to reassure her. But how could I? Yes, our plan included my guys coming in if they didn't get my signal. However, there was time built into that. We didn't know how long the process might take before Ruin and anyone else had

compromised themselves enough to prosecute. That time was longer than Ruin was giving me.

“Please,” she whispered again. “Better you than them.”

“You’re not convincing me,” Ruin snapped.

I glared at him before moving under the covers and positioning myself over her. I leaned down and pretended to kiss her neck as I whispered, “Trust me,” ever so softly. I wasn’t sure she even heard.

“If you think we will be fooled by any acting, we will require proof,” Ruin said.

In the next second, Tayla’s hand cupped my cock, and it jerked in response. I wanted to think of myself as a better man, but she was a beautiful woman in need of rescue. If I didn’t fuck her because of my moral compass, I would die, and they would rape her. I lifted my head to look into her wide eyes.

“Fuck me,” she mouthed, working to undo my pants and take down the zipper. At the same time, I mouthed, “Trust me,” praying like hell Ruin couldn’t read lips.

I closed my eyes when her soft hand wrapped around my shaft. I was fully hard in an instant. She tugged me forward, bringing our lips a whisper apart. If not for her determination, I might have remembered we were being watched. She rubbed the head of my cock between her thighs and against her opening. All I saw was her as a curse nearly bubbled out my throat with our eyes locked.

With one arm, she leveled up enough so that our noses touched. Then she pressed her lips against mine and sighed. I gave in to desire, seeing no other options. I kissed her and it was as if we were transported to another place. The other people in the room were forgotten as her body flattened against the mattress and her hand landed on my ass.

She opened herself to me when she curled her legs around my waist. Her intentions were made clear a second later when she used the leverage she had to propel me forward with one quick thrust. I punched inside her tight heat and could have died from the pleasure of it.

Though I held myself in place, I felt her muscles tense underneath me. “Move,” she whispered so softly I wasn’t sure I heard her. She wiggled and nature took over. I slowly began a backtrack, and she would rock forward. Our gazes held each other as if magnetized. She bit my lip and gripped my ass, and I was a goner. I moved like a man in search of one goal, our total all-encompassing climax.

My fingers strummed her clit as we were caught up in our own silent melody. It would be later I would consider my actions and the ramifications of them. I was too busy loving the feel of her pussy fisted around me to think beyond that.

When her cunt spasmed around me, I was there at the precipice of my own release.

“Freeze,” yelled someone, breaking the spell.

5

TAYLA

THE GIRLY YELP THAT LEFT MY THROAT WOULD HAVE embarrassed me in any other circumstance. A man shouted orders for us to stop, but it was far too late for that.

The god of a man's cock jerked inside me despite the fact that his thrusting had stopped.

Despite the man's orders for us to freeze while others were shouting "police," informing us of who they were, the man who'd taken my virginity sat up and quickly got out of his suit jacket before they tackled him. He'd managed to give it to me before they had him pinned on the side of the bed with his hands cuffed behind his back.

"He didn't do anything," I shouted back as I used his jacket to cover my outfit. It sounded crazy for me to say in my own ears, but my instincts said I should trust him.

An angry cop snarled in my face, "Was it consensual? Are you a prostitute?"

Never in a million years did I think any kind of rescue would pin me as a criminal. Before I could wipe the incredulous look off my face and comprehend how this must all look to cops, my savior spoke.

"No. She didn't have a choice. She was bought and paid for."

My expression morphed. I couldn't understand my savior. He wasn't police or FBI, as the cops shoved me around in a way that screamed brutality.

“Is that true?” the cop asked me, his tone less hostile with a dash of misgiving.

“Well, yes. But—” The cop’s brow arched, and I was at a loss for words as I watched my nameless lover be hauled out of the room.

“What’s your name?” I called after him.

He had one foot out of the door when our eyes connected again. He seemed to hesitate a second. “Shawn,” he said before he disappeared out into the hallway.

The cop turned when a female cop tapped him on the back. I heard some of what they said as they spoke in hushed tones over the word “clear” being shouted from other rooms in the compound.

“I don’t know. She claims not to be a prostitute but seems to have some sort of Stockholm syndrome with the asshole we just took out of here.”

“Let me speak to her,” the female cop said.

He nodded and left out of the room. The woman smiled at me, and I knew she was trying to gain my trust. It was Cop 101 when trying to figure out if someone was a victim or a criminal.

Once the room emptied, she sat on the bed. I’d wrapped the suit jacket around me, comforted because it smelled like him.

“Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“Tayla James,” I said. “I was abducted months ago, I think. I’m not really sure.” More words spilled from me before she could ask me any more questions. “My little sister, Tabby, Tabitha, that is. She was talking to someone online. I caught her and after I read through the messages, I knew it was a trap set up by a predator.” A sob burst from my throat. “I thought I was smarter. I was going to confront the bastard and then give all the information to the authorities. But they were smarter. There was a little girl there waiting. And when I sat next to her and confirmed that I’d come in place of my sister, I thought

maybe I'd misjudged the situation. Then I was pricked from behind and everything went black."

I took a breath, and the officer asked, "By the man we took away?"

Slowly, I shook my head from side to side. "No. Ruin," I said. Her face scrunched up in confusion. "They call him Ruin. My guess is for all the lives he ruins and likes doing it." Then it dawned on me. "Did you catch him?"

"Why don't you tell me more about what happened to you until this point?" she asked.

So I did. I'd woken up somewhere. I couldn't say if it was here. I was never let outside or even saw a window. I had no idea if it was morning, noon or night. Days became less important. The abuse I'd suffered and avoiding it had been the only mark of time. It took a while to explain how Ruin had abused my mind more than my body. He'd been saving my virginity for the highest bidder, though I'd done just about everything else with him.

"I need to know you got him," I finished.

She ignored my question. "What about the man we caught you with? Was he the highest bidder?"

Reluctantly, I nodded. "But he didn't want to hurt me. I know it sounds weird. But they made him do it. Ruin threatened to kill him and give me to his men to be gang-raped."

She gave me that *come on* expression. "He bought you, but he didn't want to have sex with you?" she asked sarcastically.

The sincere look on his face when he whispered, "Trust me," replayed in my head. No matter what anyone said, I believed him. "I know how it sounds," I said frantically. "But you have to believe me. If I were to guess, I thought he was working with you guys."

She briskly shook her head. "He's not one of ours. I'm sure of that. My guess was he was messing with you to get you to trust him."

Though what she said sounded more plausible, I couldn't shake my gut feeling. "People can't fake that," I said.

Her eyebrow arched. "Psychopaths can." She touched my hand. "Wait here."

I didn't want to believe that a psychopath had stolen my virginity. I just couldn't. Moreover, I waited, knowing the woman was going to check out my story. At least my name and if I'd been reported missing before deciding what they were going to do with me.

It was hours later when I'd been taken to a hospital. I declined a rape kit, and the officer and nurse were trying to convince me otherwise. All of that was forgotten when my mom came in.

The floodgate opened on my tears. I might have been twenty-four or twenty-five if my birthday had passed. I'd forgotten to ask the date as I repeatedly told the story and gave descriptions of all the people I'd come into contact with during my captivity.

Instead, I cried like a baby as Mom's safe arms enveloped me. I said sorry to her as many times as she said sorry to me.

"I was trying to protect Tabby," I said.

"I know, baby. I'm just glad you're safe," Mom soothingly said while rubbing circles on my back.

The annoying officer interrupted our reunion. "I hope you will encourage your daughter to do a rape kit."

It was the bottle of cold water thrown between Mom and me. I hadn't wanted her to find out like this.

Mom swiftly pulled back and held me at arm's length. "Are you okay, Tayla Serena James?"

I knew that voice. It was used when I wasn't to tell a lie. Not that I'd told her many of those over the years.

"I'm fine." Her eyes narrowed and carried the heavy weight of skepticism. "Really, I'm fine. I don't need a kit."

“I know you think you know this guy. But according to you, you knew him less than an hour. How can you be sure?” asked the female officer whom I’d first spoken to.

“Not here,” I snapped, glaring at the officer. I wasn’t a teenager that needed to be set straight by a parent.

“Please give us a moment,” Mom said to the officer and the nurse, who gratefully had remained silent. She understood the HIPPA rules that said my medical history was my business.

“Okay. I’ll come by later,” the officer said. My only response was a pointed stare.

The nurse added, “I’ll be at the nurses’ station if you need me.”

I nodded at her and only turned back to Mom when we were the only ones in the room.

Mom’s eyes were filled with unshed tears. She was trying to be strong for me. “I’m okay, seriously. Better to have happened to me and not Tabby.”

Then I flung myself back in her arms. No way would I burden her with the details of my captivity that I wanted to forget. So, as she held me and we cried, I folded those memories over and over in my head like a sheet of paper and threw them in a mental box with all the shielding I could.

The next time I opened that box would only be to recount my story to a jury when they got that bastard Ruin. That was my mission.

But the first thing I would do was search for any information about Shawn, the man I would forever call my savior. He’d been the light in the darkness that had surrounded me.

6

MATT

IT HAD BEEN THREE LONG MONTHS SINCE I'D BEEN PERP-walked out of that industrial compound and away from Tayla. What should have been in and out of prison turned out very differently. Instead of taking me to the secluded area where prisoners who were in danger of being killed inside like cops turned criminals, I'd been taken to gen pop, cell block C.

In other words, I'd been forsaken by the FBI. It had been a risk, me going into an op not sanctioned by top brass or anyone for that matter. But I hadn't thought they'd completely leave me inside. I hadn't done a day when I'd been arrested during the takedown of the kingpin. In fact, this time, I hadn't been formally charged at all. By law, I should have been taken to county jail, not prison, and formally charged with some crime. But here I was. And my three-month stay hadn't been a cakewalk.

A clang sounded at the front of my cell. The guard holding a baton. "Stanton, you have a visitor."

I might have stood there for a minute like a deer in headlights only because I hadn't expected anyone. As per my instructions, if on the off chance I ended up in jail, no one, including my sister or her in-laws, was to contact me. I couldn't risk any of them being tied to my criminal persona.

"Come on now," the guard spat.

A quick glance at my cellmate found him as curious as me. I turned back and walked up to the bars. They were opened, and I was let out. The guard pointed, as I hadn't done this

before and didn't know where to go. I headed in that direction with him behind me. Hoots and hollers followed me as I walked down the stairs and then to the end of the block.

I was led through several halls and corridors and ended up at a door with no window. The guard used keys to open it. I shouldn't have been surprised to see my handler on the other side of that door, but I was.

"You're here," I said, tongue in cheek with raised brows.

"Of course. I did as you asked and paid the guard for this visit," she said, with emphasis on visit.

What she meant was a conjugal visit, which wasn't allowed in the state of Illinois, at least right now. A glance at the guard and he nodded. Even though I'd paid for nothing, she obviously had.

"You have fifteen minutes," he said, holding out his hand to indicate for me to go inside.

Though I was more than annoyed by her presence, I'd been working undercover for too many years not to let this play out. I'd learned to school my features and play the role I needed to in order to survive. So I stepped inside. The door was swiftly closed behind me. The telltale clicking of the lock followed immediately after.

"Why are you here?" I asked, as coldly as I felt.

Her bright smile did little to lift my mood or the drab decor of the small room. The size in shape was much like my own cell, except the bunk was replaced with a single twin bed. Still, everything was gray and lifeless. I guessed it was a room used by guards for downtime or if they were staying overnight for whatever reason.

"Not happy to see me?" she said, without losing her high-wattage grin.

The saucy look in her eye did nothing for me. There had only been one woman I'd thought about for the last ninety-one days. "Three months too late," I said flatly, sounding bitter.

She took a step forward, but my narrowed gaze stopped her. She held up a hand. “I see someone’s bitter.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Three months in a hell hole gives one new perspective when you aren’t given the basic rights like due process.”

She folded her arms across her chest and her face went flat and businesslike. “Some lessons are hard earned when one goes rogue. As far as due process, you were out on bail, *Shawn*. Your freedom was revoked when you were found committing a crime.”

If she thought I’d been put in my place, she was wrong. “You can go the same way you came and I’ll get a lawyer,” I said, calling her out. She wasn’t here as a favor to me. That went away when I’d been left here. She, no, they, the FBI wanted something from me. “And next time, you can come during visiting hours, which I’ll deny.”

“I did it this way so we could have privacy.”

Everything a prisoner did was subject to scrutiny, from visitors to communication with the outside world. All of it could be read, recorded and used against me.

“You could have sent me a lawyer to explain my rights instead,” I groused.

“I came to offer you something,”

It was my turn to cross my arms over my chest and mirror her pose of not giving any ground.

“Tayla,” she began.

Unfortunately, I’d been unable to stop an eye twitch after hearing her name. Once I realized the FBI wasn’t coming for me, I’d worried about Tayla. Especially since the local cops acted like she was a prostitute. With no way to get information about her, because I hadn’t wanted to bring her to the attention of any of Shawn’s friends or enemies, I’d been unable to learn her fate.

“What about her?” I asked, hoping I’d come across as disinterested.

“You care about her,” she said perceptively.

Obsessed was a better word. The memory of her had been the light in the darkness that held me together when this place was trying to rip me apart. Prison was hell, and every minute was an act of survival. The things that I’d endured in these walls would haunt me for many years to come.

“Talk or go. Your choice,” I spat out.

“She’s missing.”

“Again?” I roared, not caring who heard.

“We don’t have a lot of time for your grandstanding,” she said. “She wanted to go after this Ruin guy.”

“And you let her?” I said, dropping my arms as my hands balled into fists. I wanted to pound on the wall for how helpless I felt in that moment, stuck in prison for trying to rescue her.

“For your information, she came up with the plan.” As my eyes closed to near slits, she pushed on. “It was solid, and she had backup. But the bastard was good, and he got her out somehow when we had the place surrounded.”

There were more details, but we were short on time. “So you let a civilian talk you into a bad plan, and you lost her again?”

She waved me off. “She’s not a civilian. She’s a rookie. She’d almost been done with training when she was snatched.”

I mulled that over in my mind, creating a million other questions I didn’t have time to ask.

“So what? You want my help after punishing me for doing the very thing you’re about to ask me to do?”

Hypocrisy, when called out, had a way of shutting people up. She gnashed her teeth before saying, “He’s searching for you.”

That clamped my mouth shut. “One of our techs found a search for you on the dark web. He’s inquiring if you, the

Rook, are still in jail or out. He's trying to make contact. We think because of her."

There was time for deals to be made, but not now. I had to get her back. "What's the op?"

THERE WAS NO FANFARE WHEN YOU GOT OUT OF PRISON. EVEN if you'd been freed due to an error on the part of the government. Earlier that day, I went to court, and the judge threw out the case against me because proper procedure wasn't followed and I hadn't been given due process. Everything I'd said to my handler had been their way of publicly setting me free without causing suspicion and alerting Ruin, or the kingpin, for that matter. I wouldn't look like a rat and my cover would still be intact.

I stepped out of prison in the same suit I'd walked in with, sans the jacket. I'd given that to Tayla to cover up with. My wallet, which held little outside of a fake ID and cash, had been returned to me. They also gave me my phone back. But without charge for three months, it was dead. I walked through the gates to the street.

A crappy little car was parked with my handler inside. "Hey babe," she said, false smile back in place.

Another car parked nearby caught my eye. Especially when the man got out and walked in my direction. Knowing what was coming, I stood still. It wasn't like I didn't deserve it.

David Royal didn't waste time throwing a punch he'd been dreaming about the entire time I'd been in jail. He'd been at the courthouse, too. I expected this.

"You asshole," he yelled.

I rubbed the ache. “That’s your only freebie,” I warned. “I did what I promised and now we are even.”

“No one told you to fuck her.”

I licked my lips, though I wanted to close my eyes and sigh. He would have tried to hit me again, which was probably his end goal. He wanted me back in jail and he was provoking a fight. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction because I needed to rescue his sister again.

“I’m sure she shared with you why that had to happen. No doubt based on your reaction, she isn’t speaking to you.” It was a calculated guess since it didn’t appear he knew she’d been taken again.

He pointed his finger an inch from my nose. “You touch her again and I’ll kill you. You Kings think you can have whatever you want.”

His feelings for Natalie hadn’t diminished since our last conversation. He was still smarting from losing her to Liam King.

“First of all, I’m not a King.”

“Who knows who the fuck you are? Your name isn’t Shawn. That much, I know. I will find out the rest. You can bank on that.”

I blew out a breath. “David, I’m not your enemy. I did what I had to do to protect your sister. Trust me, the other option was worse,” I said, trying to convince him.

“You should have called the police and told them where she was. You should have called me.”

I shook my head. “There was no way to know if the intel was good. I couldn’t spook the guy who had her by letting the cops swarm without confirmation. You may not like the outcome, but I got her out, just like I promised.”

What I should have done was throw in the fact that I’d paid millions for her return. I should have asked him to repay me. But for reasons I didn’t understand, I kept that to myself.

He stepped back, still pointing that finger at me. “You stay the fuck away from her, or you’ll be on the wrong end of a Royal. Kings be damned.” He stomped off, got back in his car, and pulled off.

I turned toward my handler. She laughed. Seconds later, before I made a move in her direction, a dark sedan pulled up in front of me. “Are you Shawn?” an attractive woman with brown skin and braids asked from the open passenger side window. “I’m the Uber you called.”

I glanced at my phone, and it was still dead. I nodded anyway and got in. That wasn’t the plan my handler and I discussed. But a manilla envelope with the name Griffin scrawled across it sat in the passenger seat.

Griffin was my sister’s husband’s brother’s best friend. Yeah, that was a mouthful. He’d also been half in love with my sister before she’d chosen Connor over him. But Griff was good people. A funny guy who acted like nothing in life mattered but life itself. There was more than met the eye. I hadn’t liked his best friend, Kalen, who’d stolen my sister’s best friend, Bailey, from me. Yet, I liked Connor, the man banging my sister, Griff was the brother I’d never had. He and I commiserated a lot about being the single half of my brother-in-arms pack. We’d come together with a cause, leaving our differences behind. It started when Kalen needed me to help him find Bailey. And it’s been the four of us ever since.

Clearly, my brother-in-arms was aware of my release. Not surprising, given he owned a security company, and he was likely following my situation at the same level or more than the FBI.

As we passed my handler, I gave her a two-finger salute as she lost that toothy grin she’d initially flashed my way.

“You work for Griffin?” I asked.

“Guilty,” she said with a glorious smile before telling me her name. “Kelsey.”

My boy was in trouble. She was the kind of distraction I would have wanted if my head wasn’t solely on Tayla. The

fact that he'd sent this woman to retrieve me showed the level of trust he had with her.

At a stoplight, not far from the prison but far enough away from that and any traffic, she handed me the envelope. Inside, I found cash, a fake ID, and a burner phone.

"I'll drop you off at a hotel. We didn't reserve you a room so as not to leave an electronic record that could be followed. However, we did confirm that there is availability. There should be enough cash there to book a couple of nights."

"Griff's always thinking."

She flashed me a bright smile. For the first time in many months, I felt a grin on my face. Griff was definitely in trouble with that one.

The drive was long, and I nodded off. Kelsey lightly tapped my arm to wake me up when we arrived. I jolted out of sleep and sat bolt upright.

"Sorry," she said gently.

"No worries. We're here?" I asked as I looked to my right and found the sliding doors that led into the hotel.

"Yeah. Griff will be in touch." She glanced at the empty envelope sitting next to me as a reminder of the goodies Griff had provided.

I nodded. "I'll leave a great review," I said, in a normal tone for any passersby. This was downtown and there were people everywhere.

The air was different here. Not cleaner but freer. I'd been caged for so long I'd forgotten what freedom was like. I walked into the hotel after responding to the porter. With no bags, I wasn't a future tip for him and he moved on to the next guest.

I waited in line at the reservations desk. When it was my turn, the woman behind the desk grinned as she asked me what she could help me with. The look she gave me was easy enough to interpret. She found me attractive. She wasn't so

bad either. But even after months of not touching a woman, I wasn't interested.

"I'd like a suite, please," I said.

"How many nights?"

"Two, maybe three."

The *click-clack* of the keys went as she searched her computer for my request.

"We do have a suite with a view—"

I cut her off. "The view doesn't matter. I'll take whatever you have."

She spouted off the price. "What credit card will you use?"

From my wallet, I peeled off the bills to cover the cost and handed them to her. "This should cover it."

"We usually take a card for incidentals."

I peeled off a few more bills. "Here's for incidentals. I'll settle up when I check out if necessary."

She looked confused, probably because these days, most paid with a debit or credit card. "I'll need ID," she added.

I handed her the fake one. It wasn't long after she issued my keys. I moved to the elevators and took it to the floor before the top one. The room was near the end of the hall and a corner suite. I opened the door and spotted the view. The first thing I did was use the remote for the window dressings to block it. If I could see out, someone else could see in. Right now, I was hiding from the FBI for my own reasons. They'd screwed me over and needed my help. But I didn't need there's.

After the blackout curtains were closed, I sat on the mattress. It felt like heaven. Then again, after sleeping on a two-inch pad for months, anything would have been better.

I took out the burner phone Griff had left for me and dialed. I hadn't asked the woman at the front desk for a charger for my phone because the FBI could track it. For now, I wanted off the radar. Though if my handler was any good,

she'd made note of the model, make and license plate of the car I'd ditched her in. But Griff would have that covered. It would be a while before they found me.

"What up, player?" Griff greeted when he answered.

It was the second time I laughed in months, and it felt good. Born and bred Scotsman, Griff used a different accent all the time. Typically, he liked the Southern drawl.

"I'm here."

"Good, give me the details," he said, dropping whatever accent he'd been trying out for his Scottish brogue. He was all business now.

I explained everything from my meeting with the handler to court. He told me they'd watched by hacking into the court's security feed. Then I explained the FBI's plan to use me to make contact with Ruin.

"I've got ye. We spotted that too but didn't act on it until we knew ye'd get out."

"Can we get to him without the feds knowing?"

I'd worked several years for the FBI in a secret group after accidentally being roped into an op when I was in college. Only I couldn't forget how easily they'd left me behind.

"I think so." There was a pause. "Ruin might be home for a party in honor of his father. I've secured you an invitation."

MY LUCK IN FINDING OUT ABOUT THE MAN I'D BEGGED TO take my virginity had been zero. I couldn't find any record of his arrest, which was weird. It was possible he was in WITSEC, otherwise known as the witness protection program. I didn't have access to that as it was run by the US Marshals Service, not the FBI. But I kept looking.

In order to finish up my training for the FBI, I'd been required to undergo mandatory therapy. I couldn't say it was a bad thing. What I'd been through had been fucked up at best. Talking about it helped a lot. Saying it out loud to my therapist, who didn't judge, was a big piece of that. That didn't mean I was over it. Occasionally, I still had nightmares. But things were getting better. I took it day by day.

Focusing my rage on putting Ruin behind bars was another driving factor in helping me get past the past. That was why I had to finish training and pass the final test to become an agent.

At night, when I'd wake up in a cold sweat, I'd picture Shawn and his earnest expression telling me to trust him. It soothed me in a way I didn't understand. Above all, I had a mission. I planned to fulfill it by any means necessary.

"Tay." I looked up from where I was sitting on my bed and saw my dad. Not my biological one, but the one who'd raised me when it mattered. He was a former cop, and it was his service that had inspired me to join the FBI.

"Hey," I said.

He held out a hand, questioning if he could sit next to me. I nodded.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m good.”

He looked at me like a father who knew his daughter. “It’s okay if you aren’t ready yet.”

“I am.” I gave him a smile with all the warmth I felt for him. “I’ll be gone a few days and then I’ll be back.”

“You be safe, Tay. You’ll never know how grateful I am for what you sacrificed for Tabby.”

The shimmer of tears in the big man’s eyes struck me. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.”

He took my hand in solidarity, as we both knew the same was true of him. “You don’t have to do this. You can come on vacation with us.”

Because I’d been impulsive in my previous decision to go confront Tabby’s predator, this time, I was honest with both of my parents about what I was doing.

“You know I can’t. Besides, Ruin knows my name, our names. Where we live. I’ll never feel completely safe until he’s behind bars.” I could sleep better once I knew he was put away for good. Part of the reason my family was going on vacation was because I’d encouraged it to keep them out of harm’s way if anything went wrong.

“I believe in you,” he said and glanced down at his bum knee. The knee that forced him into early retirement. “I wish it could be me.”

I squeezed his hand. “You need to keep Mom and Tabby safe.”

That conversation would play over and over in my mind days later as I absorbed my current situation.

As required, I’d completed my training and been cleared for work. I’d been assigned to the Chicago area, which surprised me. Most times, new agents were assigned

somewhere other than their home state, though they considered your choice of area. Here had been mine. On my very first day on the job, I'd sought out the special agent in charge. I'd laid out my idea on how to get Ruin.

Of course, my boss pointed out that it was too personal to me. I'd been ready for that question and explained all the ways it had to be me.

Ruin was careful. He wouldn't trust a stranger. To put someone in my place to do the same thing would take months for that person to earn enough trust to possibly be put in Ruin's orbit. I, on the other hand, already had that level of trust.

It would be easy for me to play up that I missed Ruin. You know, Stockholm syndrome. Ruin was enough of a narcissist to believe it. I could also come off as a junkie. I had been given drugs to keep me compliant at times during my captivity.

My boss was sold, but he put a team of senior agents in to put the op together. Things didn't happen overnight. It would be several weeks of careful planning and every contingency put in place before today arrived.

Though it wouldn't take me months to find him, it was going to take days or even a couple of weeks. I didn't know where Ruin was. The plan was for me to go to strip clubs and toss out Ruin's name to see if anyone bit.

It had been four days since my conversation with my dad when we hit pay dirt. I'd gone into a club on the south side of Chicago known to be frequented by criminals who would end up on the most wanted list. I'd made my pitch while looking stoned and sloppy drunk, asking for a score. When they predictably claimed they didn't sell that, I'd dropped Ruin's moniker.

"Ruin, huh," the older barmaid asked, with a gravelly voice as if she was a chain smoker.

"Yeah, you know him?" I slurred.

"The question is, how do you know him?"

I feigned being unsteady on my feet and gave a loopy grin. “I was one of his favorite pets.”

“Is that so? What did he call you then?”

This is how I knew I’d found an in. Only someone who knew Ruin would know he named his pets. “He’d say bring me my panther,” I whispered conspiratorially.

She nodded. “Why don’t we talk in the back?”

“Sure, let me text my mom first that I’ll be home late.” I was playing up that I was maybe as young as I looked.

I pulled out the FBI-issued phone and found Mom in my contacts. This wasn’t my actual phone and the contact Mom had nothing to do with my actual mother. Though a thread of texts had been created, it was all fictitious.

The barmaid came around. “Does she know where you are?”

I typed, *I’ll be home late*, which was the signal to the FBI I had made contact and said, “Of course not,” making sure to sound like a silly drunk girl.

I hit *send* just as the older woman took my arm, helping me, and led me to the back of the club. Clumsily, I dropped the phone on purpose. I knew they would never let me keep it. The phone was for evidence gathering. Likely, the phone would be destroyed when they realized they couldn’t access it. Face ID was not turned on. And I would fake being too incapacitated to unlock it. The SIM card would likely be removed. However, the phone had an embedded tracking chip inside, protected from the likely event the phone was smashed or stomped on.

So what was its purpose? The older woman who picked it up wasn’t wearing gloves. She likely didn’t see the threat. Now her fingerprints would be there, and maybe a trace of DNA. It would place her with me if needed in a future court case.

I held my hand out, but she shook her head. “I’ll keep it for you, honey,” she said sweetly. We ended up in a small,

cramped office. She sat me on a worn couch that lined the wall. "I'll be right back."

The door closed behind her. I guessed the door had two-way locking, and I was now locked inside. Since I wasn't sure if there were cameras there, I stayed where I was, leaving it up to the team that had positioned themselves near every exit to keep me safe.

When the door opened again, the woman wore a grandmotherly expression that should have inspired trust. "You're in luck. Ruin remembers you. We're going to take you to him."

She opened the door a little wider, and one of the bouncers from outside stepped into the room. He came over and scooped me up like I weighed nothing.

"Thank you," I said, looking at him as if I was forever grateful.

He only bobbed his head with a faint smirk on his lips.

Part of the reason for feigning drunkenness was to make me appear as little of a threat as possible. A side benefit was that they would hopefully not drug me. They would have no idea what I'd already taken, and if Ruin wanted me, they wouldn't risk giving me something that I could end up OD'ing on.

I was wrong. After going down a level and into the garage, we ended up at the rear of a car. The bouncer put me on my feet and opened the trunk. Before I could ask any questions, one beefy arm banded across my chest, leaving my arms tucked at my sides as his other hand covered my nose and mouth.

Struggling, I inhaled the sickly sweet smell and guessed it was chloroform. Unlike the movies would like you to believe, inhaling the chemical doesn't render you unconscious in seconds. It takes minutes, like five.

Given my mouth and nose were covered, I had no choice but to breathe it in. As I did, a white van pulled into the lane. I heard the grandmotherly woman say to the men, "Drive out. If

she's being followed, they will follow you. If they pull you over, cooperate. There's nothing in there that will land you in jail. They'll look like fools."

My heart sank as I slowly drifted off to dreamland. I felt myself being shoved into the trunk of the sedan before darkness overtook me.

THE SECOND CALL I MADE WAS TO MY SISTER.

“Hello, this better be dumbass,” she answered.

“Lizzy,” I said, happy to hear her voice.

“Matty, I’m going to kick your ass when I see you,” she spat. But then her tone gentled. “How are you?”

There was a bond created with your womb mate that couldn’t be explained. She knew me better than anyone ever would, including our parents. “Better now that I hear your voice.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

I could feel myself breaking, but I maintained my composure. This call wasn’t about me. “How’s my nephew?”

When Lizzy had gotten pregnant, Connor had made the choice to stop his personal quest to slay the dragon of his nightmares. Instead, I’d taken on the beast with an ego that had eventually been humbled. The sum of my experiences prior to that night had given me a hero complex. I was free of that notion after three months on the inside.

“Your nephew’s good. Babbling a lot. But tell me how you are. For real this time.”

If there was anyone I could unburden myself with, it was her. Yet it wouldn’t be fair. “I’m good, for real,” I lied.

“I’m going to let it go for now. But you know you can tell me anything, right?”

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "I know."

And for the next few minutes, she regaled me with everything that had happened to her over the last few months.

"Mom is asking about you."

It wasn't as if I was surprised by the admission. The subject of our parents came up in almost every conversation we had. And because I hadn't shared all the details behind my reasons for keeping my distance from them.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"The usual. You were fine and not much else."

I hadn't expected my sister to betray my trust. But me being locked up for so long was something different. Then again, Lizzy knew Mom couldn't contact me. As much as I had my reasons for keeping them out of my life, I also didn't want to bring harm to them.

"Is Connor around?"

"Yeah, let me grab him," she said.

There was a rustling of fabric as she moved. "Babe," I heard her say softly as if she had the phone at her side.

A second later, there was a muffled conversation before Connor took the phone.

"Matt."

Though Lizzy called me Matty, hearing Connor call me Matt came as a shock. Not because he'd ever called me anything else. It just was different not being called Shawn. I'd known Lizzy all my life. It would have been a shock if she called me anything but Matty. I hadn't known her husband that long. Hearing him call me by my birth name was a reminder that I wasn't Shawn.

"Connor."

"It shouldn't have been you," he said.

"I knew what I was getting into."

“You shouldn’t have been in there. Hell, Griff and I were working up a way to break you out.”

I chuckled at that. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

“It couldn’t have been easy.”

I let that hang in the air. If anyone could relate to my experiences, it was Connor. Hell came in many forms. Just because his prison had been his prep school didn’t mean he hadn’t gone through hell and back.

“It’s done,” I said.

“I owe you everything.”

He hadn’t exactly replied the way I thought he would. I stared into space a second before replying quietly, “He got away?”

“Damn local police were focused on the men leaving with the girls. They didn’t listen and go inside in time.”

That time had been me taking Tayla’s virginity and losing myself in the act. Hell, I hadn’t noticed Ruin leaving. “I made mistakes too,” I admitted.

“We all did.”

Before the silence that followed became awkward, I said, “I’m going to get some sleep. Tell Lizzy I’ll call her later.”

“I will,” he said, a beat before adding, “Thanks.”

We ended the call after that. I lay back on the bed with the phone between my hand and chest. For the first time, I feared closing my eyes, not for my safety, but for fear of the nightmares that would come when I did.

Staring at the coffered ceilings, exhaustion bound, chained, and dragged me into slumber against my will.

The nightmare began with something I should have noticed on the walk to my cell that first day. A prisoner I hadn’t noticed because I’d been facing forward shouted, “That’s the one.”

It had been enough for me to turn and glance over my shoulder. The guard behind me nodded. I hadn't made anything of it because there were all kinds of lewd things yelled as I walked past the cells. I'd wrongly assumed the guard's nod was a form of acknowledgment, like a grain of salt.

Later that night, when my cellmate had given me the lower bunk, another thing I should have taken more notice of, the setup happened.

The click of the lock releasing the door gave me a second to ponder my situation before the small enclosure filled with inmates there to hold me down as the man who'd laid claim walked in.

I jackknifed up, dripping with sweat as I pushed the memory back down where it belonged. As I tried to take control of my racing heart, I wondered if I would ever have a good night's sleep again.

To chase away the bad, I conjured a different memory. Her face was that of the angel that rescued me from all that. Just like I had that night, I focused solely on her. As her lips parted and begged me to be her savior when she was mine.

Her name left my lips like a prayer. "Tayla."

TAYLA

FROM MY PERSONAL RESEARCH, THE SICKLY SWEET SMELL from the cloth was chloroform, I thought as I roused. Because I knew the effects could last anywhere from twenty minutes to two hours, I wasn't sure how long I'd been out.

I didn't immediately open my eyes. *Don't Panic*, I thought to myself while taking a slow, cleansing, silent breath. Instead, I listened for any sound. There was none. Slowly, I let my eyes open. I didn't recognize the room that I was in. What I realized rather quickly was that my hands were tethered above my head to a white metal headboard. The metal bent in whimsical, swirling scrollwork from what I could see.

Continuing my perusal of the room with my eyes, I found a small table on the opposite wall in the corner. There was a lamp with a scalloped edged shade that was feminine. A dim glow from the lamp chased away some of the shadows in the room.

What I didn't see was a window, and I knew instantly that I was likely in an underground room. This was because of the complete absence of sound except for what was created by me.

If I couldn't hear anything, then most likely no one could hear me. Thus, I didn't call out, not yet, at least. I also hadn't tugged on my bindings. I hadn't wanted to alert anyone I was awake until I could assess my situation. That done, I finally took note of what I was wearing and what I wasn't.

My jeans and shirt were gone. The silky material that lay against my skin and nearly skimmed my thighs wasn't mine.

But nothing felt weird between my legs, so I assumed I hadn't been molested in any way. This was a blessing as I did my best not to freak out.

This wasn't the first time I'd been in this situation. I could survive this. I'd done it before. I could endure again. It would have been easy to succumb to the nightmare that wanted to bubble out of my subconscious. It wouldn't do me any good. So, I took precious seconds to push it back into the shadows.

Shawn's face popped into my head. Though my personal Superman couldn't save me, thinking of him did bring a beacon of light into the darkness that was heavy in my heart.

Finally calmer, I tugged my arms to see if there was any way I could set myself free. Metal dug into my skin around my wrist. It was no use. The frame was sturdy, so I stopped as to not waste energy. I was well and truly fucked.

This had been a possibility. I'd accepted my superior's claim that my little experience didn't justify my worries about what Ruin could do. No one had expected to find Ruin at any of the clubs I visited. They wrongfully assumed, against my assessment of the man, that I would be told to come back or meet Ruin at another location at another time. They didn't think I'd be taken on the spot, though they had agreed to cover all exits.

Likely, what happened was my phone had been placed in the van based on the woman suggesting that if I'd brought company, they would follow it. That would have given them the diversion they needed to drive away with me in the trunk of the sedan.

Since I did not know how long I'd been out, they could have waited hours before they left. Of course, they would have had to drug me with something else. If they had pricked me with a needle while out, I wouldn't know.

At this point, I considered calling out. Yet, if I could be heard by strangers, they would have covered my mouth. Before I could contemplate the pros and cons of such an act, I heard the unmistakable sound of locks turning. There were likely cameras in the room, especially given the little-girl

decor. The pictures of bears and princesses on the pink-colored wallpaper were something I hadn't wanted to consider. Because that meant acknowledging what this room was for.

The door opened and in walked the monster I'd wanted to slay. Gone was the dyed-blond hair. In its place was a messy mop of brown hair going every which way, yet still worked for him.

"Pet," he said and came and sat on the bed beside me. My skin crawled like maggots covered them. "You asked, and I'm here. Tell me why."

I didn't mistake the placid smile on his evil yet handsome face. I licked my dry lips and began to give a speech I'd rehearsed in my head.

"I missed you," I said shakily. The tremor in my voice wasn't faked. If I didn't convince him of my sincerity, he would kill me, but not before he made me wish for death. "I missed—" I turned away like I was embarrassed. "I missed that feeling. I can't explain it, but I can't find it on the outside. I tried things, but nothing worked. I missed—" I tugged at my bindings as if I wanted to show him but couldn't. "I need—" I glanced away again and tears spilled from my eyes. They weren't faked, either. I thought of Shawn then.

He placed his hand high on my leg. I didn't flinch, even as he slipped his fingers between my legs and stroked my core. "You want to be used?"

It took everything in me not to clench my teeth or gag. I nodded instead. He shoved my legs apart so he could gain better access. "Have you been with anyone else besides *him*?" He asked with a sneer.

There was so much emphasis on that last word I didn't know what to make of it. Was he jealous of Shawn, or was that a warning to me that he would be pissed if I had been? I answered honestly, "No."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Good girl."

His fingers were probing my opening when someone came in. "Boss," the man said.

The guy didn't look like the bruisers Ruin usually handled. This one was much younger and clean-cut. His eyes traveled between Ruin and me. It was easy to read that he wasn't happy where Ruin's hand was. Likely, he was Ruin's latest toy. To Ruin, boys were toys, and girls were pets. Usually, the boys were willing, and the girls weren't. Either that, or he mind-fucked the boys more. Both were usually young or had the look of it.

"What?" Ruin snapped but didn't look back at the guy.

"You have a call." Ruin's expression grew dark, and even though the guy couldn't see it, he rushed on and added, "It can't wait."

Ruin turned with eyes that smoldered with promises I hoped he didn't keep and said, "I'll be back."

I took a chance and said, "Will he?" Ruin's eyes narrowed in response. I hurried on and said, "He does own me, right?"

It was a gamble. I still hadn't been able to find out anything about Shawn. The men that had bought the girls had all been caught, and the girls rescued. That was in the report in the FBI database I'd been able to find. That report didn't mention Shawn at all. I'd gone through the mug shots of all the men arrested, and nothing.

Because the arrest began locally, I was able to read their report as well. There was a mention of a man found with me, but nothing more. When I'd brought up the op to the special agent in charge, I'd asked if anyone had been undercover. He'd said emphatically no, there hadn't. It fit, as the FBI wasn't first on the scene. In fact, according to the report from the local cops, an anonymous tip had been called in. Minutes later, the FBI received the same tip.

It would be hard to see it had been an FBI op if they got a tip they acted on. Yet it didn't make sense. Shawn had tried to save me. My therapist wagered that I'd been so desperate to be saved I'd made Shawn into a hero. Because I'd wanted to be cleared for duty, I'd eventually agreed with her assessment.

Ruin got up and said nothing. His expression, however, said it all. He wasn't happy and left the room. The door clicked shut, and the lock snapped into place.

Bringing up Shawn might have been a mistake, but I felt as though it was my only chance. My gut told me he was the help I needed. However, I wasn't giving up hope that I could save myself. The truth of it was, as much as I wanted to put Ruin away for life, I also needed just as many answers about Shawn, the man that plagued my dreams.

MATT

A DOUBLE-TAP KNOCK AT THE DOOR BROUGHT ME AWAKE. I SAT up and scrubbed a hand over my face before I stood up and traversed to the door.

As if Griff could sense me, he said, “It’s me,” through the door.

His voice was unmistakable, regardless of the fake accents he used throughout his day. I shifted the security bar before using the knob to open the door.

Griff’s grin was a welcome sight. I stepped out of the way as he lumbered in. We exchanged a quick hug before stepping back.

“It’s good to see you, brother.” Though we weren’t related in any way, a bond had formed between us, which was as thick as blood. “I see you’re still a brunette,” he said with a chuckle.

Born with blond hair that matched my twin’s, I was fortunate that Griff hadn’t completely followed my direction for no contact while I was locked up. A lawyer had visited me in jail despite what I’d told my handler. Since he wasn’t my assigned lawyer, we met in the general room, where all prisoners met with visitors. When we shook hands as he introduced himself, he passed me a small vial. He thought he was giving me drugs. It was, in fact, hair dye. The man hadn’t stayed long because I’d refused his offer of counsel after he said my old lady sent him. Even if Griff and I hadn’t discussed this as a means of communication, I’d guessed he’d been the one to send him.

I matched Griff's chuckle with one of my own and said, "Thanks for that. You're looking like a rock star yourself."

His hair curled at his nape. Longer than I'd ever seen it. He ruffled it a bit. "You like?" he asked and did a little twirl.

I clapped him on the back. "Sometimes, man. I wonder about you," I teased. "Anyway, it's good to see you. You're a sight for sure."

He held up a bag I hadn't noticed. That just went to show me how off my game I was. Griff might not have been dangerous to me, but training meant I needed to know what was in someone's hands at all times. It was something that didn't turn off when work was over. Yet, I hadn't been aware. That bothered me, but I didn't say it.

"What have you found?" I asked instead as I took the bag from him. There appeared to be clothes inside and I set the bag on the floor near the bed.

Griff smirked and spoke in his normal Scottish brogue. "He hasn't responded to our messages yet." His hacker was on the dark web as me to make contact. "But we know where he'll be."

For the next hour, we hashed out a plan that included his hacker.

"So, what's up with you and Kelsey?" I asked Griff when we'd finished working out the details.

"Kelsey?" He asked with his face scrunched up as if that was a ludicrous question. I just raised a brow. His face relaxed. "Okay, fine. Nothing. She's an employee, and that's it."

"Are you sure about that? Because she's something, and I'm a bit lonely." It was a bluff, but I got the reaction I wanted.

A storm raged in his eyes as they narrowed on me. "Leave her be."

I held up my hands in surrender. "I'm kidding. I can see you've staked a claim, anyway."

Tongue in cheek, he repeated, "She's an employee and nothing more." I nodded, not buying it at all. "Besides, ye got

a thing Tayla. Don't ye, brother?"

There was no denying it. "When you admit you have feelings for Kelsey, I'll admit what I'm feeling for Tayla." As if there were words for what I felt. I'd known the woman for minutes, not hours or days. Yet that time was more intimate than some knew of people they'd known for years.

In silent agreement, we left what we both felt unsaid. "Tomorrow night," he said.

"Tomorrow," I agreed before he walked out the door.

Being alone again was a blessing and a curse. I hadn't had much alone time on the inside. But being left with only my thoughts to keep me company wasn't a great space to be in either. The anger and rage I felt for all that had occurred, I channeled into my new mission. Though David Royal hated my guts, I would save his sister again. Not for him, but for me this time. No matter how he may have poisoned her mind against me.

I ordered room service, and after eating, I took a very long, hot shower. Only after did I give in to more sleep. Something I'd been deprived of for months. As much as I didn't want to revisit my nightmares, I wouldn't be effective with a lack of downtime.

It took longer to sink into that darkness than it had the night before. I had to turn on the TV to some random thriller movie to quiet my mind before sleep took me.

Showers inside were nothing like the one I'd taken a while ago. They weren't clean or safe. It was probably the most vulnerable time next to sleep that you could have inside. You had to be quick and efficient and pray like hell the guard on duty couldn't be bought.

At the time, I didn't know what the vial the lawyer gave me was for. I couldn't even look at it until I got to a spot hidden from camera views and a place where the guards wouldn't take notice. Only then did I realize what it was. It had been weeks, and my blond hair was peeking out at the roots. Not enough that most would take notice. But enough

that I had to decide to shave my head or let everyone know I'd been hiding my true self.

Griff had anticipated my need and gotten me dye. I had to risk a longer shower and one without anyone or many in the area who would notice what I was doing. Over the years undercover, I'd become quite the hair guy. I couldn't go to a salon and have my hair done and risk the kingpin of Chicago finding out. So, all the dye work was up to me, including my eyebrows. But at home, I'd have a mirror. Inside, I had nothing but memory to get this done. There wasn't a lot of dye either. I had one shot.

Showers were open for use anytime when we weren't locked down in our cells except for mealtime and during head count. I waited until yard time and took a chance that most would want to maximize their time outside and the showers would be empty.

I was right, but not for long. I'd gotten the dye in my hair and worked it in, dusting my brows with my eyes closed when I heard footsteps.

Fighting was a normality inside. If not for the mixed martial arts training I'd undertaken, knowing that I was going deep undercover with a cartel and couldn't rely completely on weapons, I would have lost my life or mind many times over the past three months.

But not even that saved me that day. Someone had found out I was a former Chicago cop. And just after I'd finished with my hair, I closed my eyes for a second and it happened. I was blindsided by a blow to the head. A guard, an honorable one, heard the ruckus and broke it up. A few broken ribs, bruised kidneys and other things I couldn't bear to think about. I spent a few days in the infirmary and a few more in solitary. Solitary may save your life, but it can break your mind as you suffer through the replay of memories.

I woke to a dark room with the blackout blinds in place. I couldn't tell if the clock meant eleven in the morning or evening. It was the latter. Thank goodness for twenty-four-hour room service. I placed another order, and the food had

never tasted so good. The meal I'd wolfed down the previous night, I hadn't taken the time to appreciate how the flavors burst on my tongue. Now I did.

I spent the next several hours trying to keep my mind clear of memories by switching between news and shows with a nap or two in between. When the time came to leave, I was dressed and ready. The tux Griff had sent to my room fit like it was tailored for me. I didn't wait for Kelsey's call. She was my driver again tonight. I was just inside the hotel lobby doors when she pulled up in the same sedan from the other day.

She parked and came around to open my door like any professional car service. I got in and didn't speak until we were underway.

"Everything's in place?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she said pleasantly.

"Do we know if she's there?"

Kelsey shook her head, which caused her hair to glide across her shoulders in a tumble of cascading waves. According to Griff, she had a dress in the back and an invitation that would fool anyone if needed. She was my backup if necessary, and her makeup and hair were ready for the switch.

"It's just you and Griff?"

"Yep."

Griff's company, as one of the premium private security firms for the rich and famous, had other clients. What he was doing for me was pro bono. Apparently, one of his more famous clients had a thing in LA that required a team there pronto without warning. That left him short on personnel. Funny how he'd chosen Kelsey to keep close.

"Don't worry. We've got this. Griffin is already in place."

Griff was posing as the catering manager. He'd been on site since early this morning. He was feeding Kelsey the layout of the mansion where the fundraiser for the senator was happening. Ruin's father was a senator and came from old

money. The old man had sent his son to a prominent prep school where the boy reigned terror. It was that privilege that gave Ruin the idea that he was above the law. It sickened me.

We pulled up a long drive to a mansion that mimicked the back view of the White House with the many columns across the front. Already, there were people walking up the wide stairs to the grand double-door entryway.

“Are you ready for this?” Kelsey asked.

A black-tie affair to raise money for the senator in his upcoming election shouldn't be a dangerous activity. But with Ruin in attendance, one couldn't be sure.

“As ready as I'm going to be.”

The plan was to throw Ruin off by meeting him, not as the persona of Ruin he'd created. Rather as Randolph Covington III, the name he was born with. When he knew that I knew who he really was, we hoped it would help in the negotiations to get Tayla back.

We had to wait a few minutes in the car line before I was brought to the front of the circular drive to be let out. Kelsey didn't have to get out to open my door, because the event had porters to do just that.

The night was cool but not cold. I hurried up the stairs and didn't dottle like others who were milling about and talking to other guests. Last thing I needed was small talk and someone to ask me who I was.

Lights lit up the house as night settled over the land. I showed the attendant at the door the pass on my phone to give me access. They scanned, and I held my breath. Kelsey had done the honors and hacked into the guest list and added me. The scanner turned green, and I flashed the guy a smirk before entering.

It wasn't a small affair. The place was almost standing room only. That was a good thing. Hopefully, I wouldn't be noticed. As I discreetly kept an eye out for Ruin, I stopped next to a waiter and took a flute when I noticed a friend of my father's. Turning quickly but not abruptly, I headed in the

other direction. My hair color was different, but my face hadn't changed. If the guy looked at me long enough, he might guess who I really was.

I slipped into a room that was likely a parlor. There was an elegant living room set that was done in the French Renaissance style. Seated on the delicate furniture was a portly man who was speaking in hushed tones to another man who didn't quite look like a guest, nor did he look like help. I wandered in their direction and caught an exchange. The man handed the portly one what appeared to be an old-fashioned key. The portly man slipped it in his pocket and gave the other man a curt nod to dismiss him.

Though I hadn't been there for long, this exchange felt important. It didn't take long before the portly man got to his feet, made excuses to those near him, and walked with purpose out of the room.

There were enough people I didn't have to disguise the fact that I was following him. There were too many people going every which way for anyone not purposefully watching me to notice what I was up to. That was until we reached a hallway manned by a hulking figure with an earpiece on.

I held back and watched as the portly man produced the key he'd been given. The security guy checked his phone and scrolled as if he was matching the key to a picture on his screen. Then he must have because he waved the portly man forward. I watched as the man went halfway down the short hall before opening a door and taking one step down before the door closed behind him.

Something about the whole thing made it a priority that I get down there. I needed a key. I texted Griff to see if he knew anything about what was happening on the lower level of the basement. Then I went in search of the key guy.

I ended up on a wide, expansive back terrace. There were stairs that flanked either side that led to lush gardens illuminated by the moonlight. At the top of the stairs stood a security guard at each end, which led me to believe there was indeed something going on in the lower level.

Back inside, I ended up in a grand ballroom of sorts filled with the rich and famous in their evening attire. On the arms of most men were women of contemporary age, except for a few men who held on tight to their arm candy or trophy wives. Just inside the door a few yards away, I spotted my quarry. The young man stood with an older man in deep conversation in close quarters. I made my way in their direction.

As I got a few feet away from where the exchange of keys took place, the older man closed his hand around a key. He then slipped it into the outer pocket of his designer suit jacket. As a younger man left, I made my move. As I passed the older man, I accidentally, on purpose, bumped into him enough so he wouldn't feel my hand slip into his pocket and take the key. I didn't look at the item in my hand. I kept walking toward the guard, who blocked the hallway that led to the lower-level door.

Once there, I said nothing but slipped my hand out of my pocket, opened it, and revealed the key to the guard and myself. Antique bronze in color and weight, at the top, a heart bloomed out of a crown fittingly. The key part itself, which could fit into a lock, looked like the turret of a castle. The guard, unimpressed, having likely seen many of these, turned his attention to his tablet and scrolled down a list. Since I couldn't see the screen, I had to assume that each key was unique. Seconds later, he appeared to see a duplicate on his screen as he glanced back at the key before waving me forward.

I walked with purpose the scant feet to the door on the left, as I had seen the other portly man do. I didn't have to use the key to unlock the door. I just turned the knob and entered the stairwell. Closing the door behind me, I continued down and caught glimpses of the debauchery happening below.

It was a fuckfest. No other way to describe it. Men and women scantily clad were performing a variety of sexual acts on the men who were the guests of the senator's party above based on their attire. There was no doubt in my mind that Ruin was behind this. So I focused my attention on finding him. My gaze bounced around man to man until I spotted him.

Gone was the spiky, bleached-blond hair. Ruin looked more like the frat boy his father always wanted than the human trafficking king. His dirty-brown hair was quaffed as if he had just come from the salon. He was standing next to the young man who had been handing out keys upstairs. I gingerly walked in that direction while sending off a quick text message to Griff, letting him know I found our quarry.

When Ruin spotted me, I would have paid any amount of money to capture his expression. For a fleeting second, a surprise he probably hadn't felt in years formed on his face. The wide eyes and his mouth frozen open disappeared as quickly as they arrived. A narrow-eyed glare manifested as his lips jammed closed in a flattened line.

A sly smirk bloomed on my lips as we stood toe to toe.

“Rook,” he snapped.

“Ruin, or is that Randolph?” I countered.

“What name would you like to be called, Shawn?”

So he hadn't learned my real name, or he would have used it. Good. “Whatever gets me my money back.”

His sneer only deepened as he let out a dark chuckle. “You should know there are no refunds.”

“Really?” I asked, one brow up in question. “I would think it is bad for business that your clients pay and only get sent to prison in return. Maybe you're working with the feds.”

Undeterred, he said, “I could ask you the same. How did you get out?”

It was my turn to laugh without humor. “Luck. While the cops were busting the rest of your *clients*, the feds didn't Mirandize me. I got out on a technicality. I'm here to collect on what you didn't deliver. Or maybe you want me to spread the word about your duplicity.”

I hadn't come for my money, but I didn't want him to know that.

“Maybe I have something to offer you instead,” he said without commenting on my warning.

He crooked a finger in my direction. “I’m not interested in what you have to offer,” I said, glancing around at the scantily clad working men and women.

“I think you might,” he said and turned, walking deeper into the large room toward a hallway.

The young man stood there watching me for my next move. I said nothing and followed. Farther in, the men who’d used keys to gain access were wearing masks. Everything from pig to bunny faces with only their eyes showing. We passed open doors where full-on orgies were taking place.

It reminded me of Connor’s sex club, taken to the next level. The difference was that half the participants paid to be there, and the other half were paid sex workers. I’d gone to Connor’s club once, and it hadn’t been my thing. Griff liked it more than me.

We were passing a room that had a window. Inside, men hung around, staring at something in the center. Ruin came to a stop and glanced at me before focusing on the centerpiece. I turned back and finally noticed the cross and the woman strapped to it.

“There’s your filly, unmolested so far. If you want her back, prove to me I can trust you.”

My jaw ached from how tightly I clenched my teeth. I wanted nothing more than to destroy the man next to me. If I thought I could get away with it, I would have.

Instead, I was back in the same position, like so many long nights ago. Fuck or flee.

Then, I hadn’t seen her naked. Now, the sheer bra and panty thing she was dressed in left little to the imagination. My heart beat in my chest like a caveman. Just like the first time, the mere sight of her stole my breath. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to get her out of that room and away from prying eyes.

Her name played on my lips as Ruin added, “Your choice?” As if there was any.

TAYLA

THE POSITION I WAS IN WAS OF MY OWN MAKING. I THOUGHT I could beat an unbeatable man. Instead, I was strapped to something hard at my back. A mask was fitted on my face, covering my forehead and over the tip of my nose. It didn't have any peepholes, leaving my mouth exposed. At least this time, what bound my wrist was smooth and not metal.

I hadn't made one move in resistance. Ruin ensured my compliance when he returned to the room I'd been held in and fitted a custom collar around my neck. It appeared to be made of white lace, but he was sure to show me the metal disk that lined the inside. The words he'd said replayed in my head.

"We created this like the dog shock collars. I have a remote with several settings. If you do anything I don't like, I will punish you." Ruin had proven himself to be true to his word, so I believed him.

Once it was placed around my neck, he gave me a practice shock on the lowest setting. It felt much like a Taser gun. In training for work, we'd been given a quick jolt from one to understand what we would inflict on another human being. This was worse.

So I hung there with my arms up and spread wide above my head with my legs similarly positioned. It was as if I was making an *X* with my entire body. I wasn't wearing much of anything, as the breeze of anyone who walked by brought goose bumps to my skin. That had the light, unwanted touches

and murmured promises of things that made me want to gag, wishing I could go back and never request this assignment.

The memories of Ruin parading me around in barely anything kept any shy feelings at bay. But that this had happened again played with me mentally. I had to be tougher than I wanted to be. There were worse things, like being dead. I would close my mind to any horrors to come and go to a place far away in my head if I had to. The one man who could save me, I hadn't been able to find. A man I trusted for no reason other than a gut feeling. But I couldn't rely on Shawn being my savior. Instead, I waited for any asshole to make the mistake of removing my bindings. Then I would fight like a demon to get out of this hell.

Time was a construct I had no way of measuring until a voice stole my breath. "Miss me?" Since thumping music pumped through the speakers above, I hadn't heard his approach. I didn't need my eyes to know who the man was. His woody scent was imprinted on my brain.

"Shawn." I breathed out the word like it was my last breath.

"You remember me." His voice came so close to my right ear I snapped my head in that direction.

"Yes," I whispered softly. As if I couldn't admit it out loud. Still, despite the music, he heard me.

"I'll get you out of here, but you'll need to trust me. Your choice."

I hadn't spent the last several months conjuring this man in my fantasies for this to be a hard decision. "What do you want?"

"Not what I want. What Ruin requires. A show, much like before."

Sucking in a lungful of air, I hissed it out in frustration.

"Do you trust me?" he asked again.

I tossed back to him softly so our conversation was as private as it could be, "Can I trust you?"

From my other ear, his breath fanned my hair as he said, “I think you want to. Your nipples have been like diamonds since I arrived.” He had to be behind me because, in my other ear, he added, “You’re remembering what it felt like when I was inside you.”

There was no denying that statement. “I need to know if I can trust you,” I begged. Though I did, I wanted to hear him say it. Maybe then, the notion wouldn’t seem foolish on my part.

Seconds passed before he’d apparently moved in front of me and his words kissed over my parted lips. “For tonight, yes.”

Though he’d qualified his answer to my immediate future, I still said, “Then yes. Do your worst and get me out of here.”

His heat sparked nerve endings to life all over my exposed skin as he closed the distance. “Not worst, but best given the circumstances.” His hand landed on my thigh. “Just trust me,” he murmured as his hand slid between my parted thighs. “You’re dripping for me.” His fingers slid into my core and a whimper escaped me.

Sensations flowered inside me as his fingers pumped in and out of me. I was never more grateful for the mask because I knew we were being watched. But I could imagine in my head it was just the two of us. When I couldn’t think there was more to feel, his lips brushed over my pulse point, making their way up to my jaw. I was disappointed he angled toward my ear and not my lips.

“You are lovely,” he said before covering my mouth with his.

As that happened, his fingers disappeared, replaced by his cock. I gasped as he took our kiss deeper. Then his hand was at my throat and my eyes popped open. Only I couldn’t see because of the damn mask. For the first time, a tiny prick of fear clicked in my brain. It didn’t last long because the pressure at my throat was slight as he thrust into me again and again, my legs quivering in response. If not for being trussed up, I surely would have slumped against him.

“Fuck.” His husky voice seemed to growl the word as my passion peaked.

It was all too much. My emotions were everywhere. Who was this man, a villain or a hero? I didn’t know and didn’t care as his movement scored over my clit and I burst with an orgasm stronger than any I’d gotten with a vibrator.

With his face pressed in the crook of my neck, he grunted out his own release. Then we held there, both breathing hard. I wanted desperately to see his face, stare into his gorgeous gray-blue eyes. The color was somewhere between a storm and clear Caribbean waters.

The near euphoria I felt was squashed when I heard, “Good boy,” from Ruin. “You can take your prize.”

Was Shawn giving him a steely glare or a mischievous grin? I wouldn’t ever know unless Ruin was videotaping this encounter, and I somehow got to view it later. I shivered, thinking it was more likely that no video evidence existed of my time in this room.

Before I could internalize too much of this, my legs were free and then my arms. Shawn didn’t leave me to walk it off. He scooped me into his arms, and we were on the move. Even though I couldn’t see, I knew Shawn’s scent and Ruin would never carry me like I was made of glass.

We ended up somewhere with a door because it closed shut, muting the music. He sat with me in his lap before he removed the mask from my face.

He was as beautiful as he was before. “You’re really here.”

Until I saw him, I couldn’t be sure my mind wasn’t playing tricks on me, or the drug Ruin injected me with hadn’t created hallucinations.

“I am, and I’m going to get you out of here.” The determined set of his jaw and the pitch of his voice made me a believer.

All of a sudden, I broke down. I didn’t know if it was from postcoital bliss or plain gratefulness. I turned to hide the rush of my tears as I buried my face in his chest. “It’s really you.”

His arms tightened around me, and I knew I was right to trust this man. He stroked a hand down my back and rubbed there as I wept.

At one point, the door opened. “Boss said to give you this.”

I heard a rustling but didn’t lift my head. Then the door closed, and I sensed we were alone again.

“This is going to suck, but I need you to get dressed. We need to get out of here before Ruin changes his mind.”

I nodded my head against his body before lifting myself up. The ground was shaky as I stood, but Shawn was there with a hand to help me. Gratefully, the only thing I had to put on was a dress. It was green and sparkly, made of millions of reflective pieces larger than normal sequins. Then there were spiky tall heels which had to have been bought by a man. In my doped-up state, I wouldn’t be able to walk on my own in them because of that, and they were a size too small. I swayed on my feet when Shawn took out his phone and typed a message.

“Whoa. Are you okay?” he asked, catching me around the waist.

“He gave me something. I don’t know what it was.”

He cursed but held me with one hand and finished typing something with the other. Then he led me out of the room, which, to be honest, I hadn’t taken stock of. There was a sofa we’d sat on, and either a desk or table in one corner was all I could remember as we left.

Everything seemed so bright, with music pounding like it was pouring out of the walls as my heart raced. I stumbled a few times as we passed rooms with smells of sex and naked bodies piled on top of each other.

When we entered a larger room, men were sitting in chairs, getting blown by women and men alike. People were fucking against walls stacked in threes like a chain fuck. It couldn’t be possible. Clearly, I was so high I was seeing double. Or was I?

I was so caught up in that scene I hadn't noticed the door Shawn pulled me through. Fresh air hit my nose and the back of my throat. Bile raced up. I let go of him, ran for the end of the concrete that met fresh grass, and vomited.

My body began to shake and then Shawn was there with a hand at the small of my back, holding me from face-planting. "It's okay," he repeated several times before he gave a glance over his shoulder. "We need to leave."

I nodded but wasn't really sure it was true. What would have happened if he hadn't shown up? I'd kept up the bravado to myself about what I could survive. Yet I didn't know how many cracks would have formed in my mental shields. I let him lead me around the mess I'd left and through the grass. With every step, the spiky heels got stuck in the soft ground. With frustration smeared on his face, he lifted me up, halfway curled around his body and ran for the road lined with manicured trees. Like Cinderella, one of the heels was left behind, but I didn't care. He was here, acting like the hero I'd built up in my mind. I'd been right about him. I let myself relax some, knowing I was safe with him.

A fancy sedan pulled up as we broke the tree line. Shawn opened the door and slid me in. I tried to move quickly as he got in next to me and slammed the door shut.

"Go," he called out.

An attractive woman bobbed her head before facing forward to follow his directions. The oddest sensation crept over me. Jealousy. I'd never felt that for anyone ever before. It puzzled me why I would feel it now. I didn't know this man, let alone claimed him as mine. Yet there it was. The green-eyed monster was glaring daggers at the woman in front of me.

I swung my head in the direction of a masculine chuckle and found Shawn smirking at me.

"Kelsey's just our driver for the night," he said with a knowing smile.

Embarrassment covered my face like rose blossoms. Without looking at him, I asked an important question. “Are you taking me home?”

His answer meant everything for who I’d imagined him to be.

“No,” he said, breaking my heart for the first of many times to come.

MATT

IF THERE WAS ONE THING I HATED, IT WAS THE LOOK I'D PUT IN her eyes. Lying to her about my name was a necessary evil. I didn't know how loyal she was to her brother. He wanted me dead and would likely use any information he could find out about me against me. I couldn't put my twin or my parents at risk for my choice of career.

There was one thing I could do, and that was give her an option. "If you go home, you'll put your family at risk. Ruin will know I double-crossed him. He will only want to take you back. And wasn't your sister the original target?"

She clamped her mouth shut and curled into the opposite corner of the back seat. I almost said something when she closed her eyes. But there was nothing I could say that would make this better.

After a while, Tayla's breathing evened out, and I guessed she fell asleep. I hated even more that I'd left the creepy little monster alive. There were many ways to kill a man, but there had been too many witnesses for me to get out clean. Tayla had been the priority.

I asked Kelsey, "Did he get out?" I didn't say Griff's name. I didn't know yet how far I could trust Tayla. Kelsey would know who I was talking about.

"He's staying until the group leaves." She meant the catering team he'd infiltrated. "By the way, we found a place for you to stay. I'm taking you there now. We'll drop off your stuff and things for her later."

She didn't give me any details, just handed me a key card. Again, she was being just as cautious as I was.

I said nothing else and closed my eyes. I had a feeling it was going to be a long night. We arrived at a building in downtown a while later. It wasn't a hotel, so I assumed Griff had rented an apartment.

Gently, I rested my hand on Tayla's shoulder and shook her slightly. Her eyes opened wide with alarm for a second. It made me hate Ruin more. No telling what happened to her when he had her in his clutches.

I quickly released her and held my hands up. If anyone understood her trauma, it was me.

"We're here. Can you walk?" I asked. She lifted one bare foot. Apparently, she'd lost a shoe in my urgency for us to leave so we wouldn't be followed. I nodded. "I'll carry you then."

After I exited the vehicle with a nod to Kelsey, I scooped Tayla into my arms once again. Without adrenaline coursing through me, I noticed for the first time how incredibly light she was. Her eyes drooped, and I wondered again what Ruin had given her.

The doorman cleared the way for us, and there was suspicion in his eyes. I couldn't blame him with all the stories out there about abducted women. I only hoped he wouldn't call the cops. I made my way to the elevator with purpose, as if I'd been there a thousand times when it was my first. Kelsey had written the floor and suite number on a Post-it stuck to the key card. I used the card to access the elevator and waited. When it arrived, an older couple exited.

"Is she okay?" the older man asked. "Does she need help?" the woman added.

Tayla opened her eyes and gave them a sleepy smile. "It's our honeymoon," she said.

I grinned for more than one reason. First, because she'd clued in on how we must look and had been aware enough to make the statement. The second reason was that even though I

hardly knew this woman, the idea we were honeymooners pleased me. It wasn't as if I loved her. I didn't know her. Even so, a grin remained on my face.

The card opened the door to the suite. Upon entering, I had to turn left and straight ahead were floor-to-ceiling views of Chicago's cityscape. It was impressive. The city was lit up enough that I didn't have to turn on lights. The hallway ended with the kitchen to the right and a grand living room in terms of size in front of it. I turned between the kitchen island and the living room to go down another hall. I headed for the open door at the end, which I assumed was a bedroom. I was right.

The bedroom, like the rest of the condo, was designed with dark wood and gray tones with modern touches. The bed seemed to float off the ground against the wall to the left. I set Sleeping Beauty there. She didn't protest and hadn't opened her eyes since the brief conversation with the older couple by the elevator.

She curled into a ball, and I went back to the living room to grab a throw. When I returned, I covered her with it. Then I sank into a chair in the corner of the room opposite the bed and door. Since I didn't know what she might be on, I would be vigilant in watching over her.

I pulled out my phone to see if I'd gotten any messages from Griff. There were none. To pass the time, I searched the news sites and caught up with what I missed over the last few months.

At some point, I let my eyes fall shut but kept alert, or so I thought, until I felt someone trying to take the phone from my hand. I opened my lids to find Tayla hovering over me.

"Want something?" I asked and held up the phone.

"I need to call my mom."

"You can't," I snapped and immediately regretted it when she stepped back and flashed a hateful gaze my way. "If you call your mom, she won't be worried."

"Exactly," she snapped and crossed her arms over her chest.

“And then Ruin will know you’re free.” She let out a noise of frustration. “When he had you before, did he ever mention your parents? Like knowing they were sad or worried and or still looking for you.” I’d hit the nail on the head because her expression changed. “If you let your mother know, again, you’ll be putting them in danger. He will do something to them or take your sister to draw you out. His ego won’t let your freedom lie.”

She tossed her hands in the air. “What am I supposed to do? Hide out with you here forever? I have a job. And if you didn’t know it, I work for the FBI.”

“And they kept you safe?” It was a dig and hit the mark.

“No. The op didn’t go as planned—” She stopped and looked at me with suspicion. “How did you know I was on an op?”

“You just confirmed it.” Which was true of sorts. My handler had given me intel, but I didn’t know for sure until now. “But what does that matter? They let you get caught. I’m the one that freed you. If you want to take your chances with them, go ahead.”

I wouldn’t hold her captive, no matter what it cost me.

“What is your plan? How do I even know who you’re working for?”

We were at a standoff, so I tossed back something for her to consider. “Your brother trusted me. By the way, what did you tell him after?”

She exhaled and said, “I didn’t have to tell him anything. He knew how I’d been found. He asked me to confirm what man I’d been with. I tried to keep it from him but eventually told him it was you.”

I nodded. “How did he react?”

“Pissed, of course, and told me to stay away from you. When I asked him why, he said you couldn’t be trusted. You worked for the mob.”

“Of course he did,” I muttered.

“Even if you do, I called him a hypocrite because he trusted you enough to send you to save me.”

She had me grinning again. “What did he say to that?”

“What could he say? We fought, and I told him to stop being such a child. That I could have sex with whom I wanted. And if not for you, things could have been a lot worse.”

Damn, if she wasn't sexier to me right now, full of righteous indignation on my behalf. Then I sobered. “Any regrets?”

I needed to know if she was okay with everything that happened between us.

TAYLA

BEDROOM EYES WERE A THING. SHAWN HAD THEM IN SPADES. I wanted to curl myself in his lap, run my fingers through his hair and kiss him until he knew without a doubt what my answer was.

I gave myself a mental pat on the back when my feet remained rooted to the ground, and I said, “Regret what? You didn’t die, and I wasn’t gang-raped. Yeah, no regrets there,” I said sarcastically.

My response was a defense mechanism. Regrets I didn’t have. Revenge was what kept me going.

“What about tonight?” he asked.

His gaze clung to me like he was a human lie detector. “No. No regrets.” I didn’t tell him that he was the pathway out of my mental hell. He was the ying to my yang. The therapist liked to say that I needed a hero, so I’d made him one. But he’d proven himself to be my Batman. If only I could be Wonder Woman, we could save the world together. First by ridding the world of an evil called Ruin.

“How can you be sure? You said yourself Ruin gave you something,” Shawn said.

“He did, but it wasn’t mind altering.” I stopped because that wasn’t true. I took stock of what happened and rationally spoke about my ordeal. I would have to write a report about it for the FBI at some point. “Okay, it made me calm and relaxed, but nothing more. It wasn’t like ecstasy or anything like that. I didn’t feel sexier. In fact, I was creeped out by the

other men in the room who walked by and spoke to me. Whatever he gave me made me less anxious. That's it."

After I'd been freed from Ruin the first time, I hadn't experienced any withdrawal. He hadn't hooked me on whatever drugs he'd given me. For that, I'd been grateful.

Wanting to soften the grim expression on Shawn's face, I moved closer, stepping between his legs. I reached out, and he caught my hand in his calloused, warm one.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," he said before letting go of me. There he was, proving himself to be a good man again.

I placed my other hand on his. "You don't have to be. It isn't your fault."

"I should have gotten him last time, so you wouldn't have put yourself in a position to be caught again."

Foolishly, I leaned in his direction. Immediately, he let go and stood up. "Are you hungry? I can see what's here and make you something. If you want to shower, I can find you something to wear as well."

He'd moved behind my back so we weren't facing each other. Considering how red my cheeks were, it was for the best. "Yes," I answered. "To all of it."

"Okay," he said and left, closing the door behind him.

Clearly, I'd been reading things wrong. His eyes had lingered on my mouth, or so I thought. Maybe I'd manifested that. I'd wanted to kiss him outside of a bodily harm or life-or-death situation. I needed to know if the connection I'd felt was real. Stupid me. My lack of relationships was showing.

I went for the shower, trusting he would find something outside of the borrowed green dress for me to wear. Hopefully, after, my head would be clear from my silly thoughts of a man I shouldn't want.

The bathroom was impressive, with marble floors and gleaming fixtures. It was larger than my bedroom that I'd grown up in. A floating soaker tub called to me, but I went for the larger shower. An automatic touchless dispenser hung on

the shower wall with three options: shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. Everything I needed. I peeled off the straps of the dress and let it fall to the floor.

I caught sight of myself in the lingerie Ruin had provided and anger overtook me. I began tearing at the fabric, but I didn't have the strength to rip it. Instead, I did it the old-fashioned way, unhooking the strap at the back of the bra. When it was undone and off me, I fisted it in my hand and threw it. It went nowhere, of course, falling gently near the dress. The thong went the same route before I turned and got into the shower.

After pressing buttons in the high-tech shower without thought, water fell like rain over me. I pushed my hair away from my face as I prayed the shower could wash away my sins. Because, damn my life, I still wanted Shawn.

At first, I tried to think of what my therapist would say. She would tell me I was allowed my feelings. They were valid—all of them. And I felt things. I felt better when I was with Shawn. His presence soothed my soul and calmed my inner turmoil in a way no one else had. Maybe it was because he knew. He'd been in my personal hellhole like no one else. Maybe it was who he was as a person, and I wouldn't question it. My only fear was my need would push him away.

Many tears had spilled from my eyes before I finally left the bathroom, wrapped in a towel that hung from a wall. It seemed to be clean as if it had been washed recently. With it secured around me, I stepped into the bedroom. The door was closed as if Shawn hadn't come back in, but there was a bag of clothes on the bed. I also heard faint voices coming from the other room. I wasn't sure if he was watching TV or if we had company.

MATT

UNABLE TO TRUST MYSELF, I'D BOLTED OUT OF THE ROOM before I did something like kiss her. Everything that had happened between us before was necessary. Now, I had to protect her and nothing more.

The excuse to make food wasn't just an excuse. We needed to eat. Who knew what was in store for us the next few days.

There was a sharp knock at the door. At the same time, my phone buzzed. A check of the screen showed a preview of a text from Griff. I moved to the door and opened it without pause.

"Hey," I said as we clasped hands and he came in for the half hug. Kelsey followed in behind him.

"Brought you something," Griff said, holding up a bag in each hand. He set one on the counter and the other he held out to me. "For yer girl. I doubt she wants to stay in that dress forever."

I peeked inside before nodding. "I'll be right back," I said before making my way back to the room Tayla was in.

The door to the bathroom was cracked open, and the shower was running. I fought the pull to go in there and share the shower. Her unspoken invitation before had been tempting. I looked away and left the bag on the bed before exiting the room, saving us both.

Griff and Kelsey were quietly conferring when I walked in.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We know where Ruin is or where he was,” Griff answered.

I held out my hands. “Care to fill me in?”

“I tagged the car he arrived in. We tracked it to an industrial park south of town,” Griff said.

“We need to go now,” I said.

“He’s likely not there at this point,” Griff said. “I need to check again.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s a lead,” I said.

“We can’t go in guns blazing. We need to think about this and what about—” Griff looked over my shoulder as Tayla walked in.

“Didn’t know we had company,” Tayla said, looking like a snack. The woman stole my attention whenever we shared space.

Griff turned on the charm with a grin that most women found enc. “Hi. I’m Griffin.” He held out his hand. But Tayla, stood firm in baggy sweatpants and a hoodie, and was still the most desirable woman I’d ever seen.

Her eyes bounced from him to me and then to Kelsey. She folded her arms. “You said you know where he is.”

She looked more determined than ever. I stepped forward. “We will get him.”

“Not without me,” she said.

Everyone jumped in at once. I held up a hand, silencing the room. “We just got you back—”

Tayla squared her shoulders as she pivoted and lanced a narrow-eyed gaze in my direction. “If you didn’t already know, I’m a trained FBI agent. I can handle myself.”

Griff’s brows shot up as he sent an amused grin my way. I ignored him while also not stating the obvious, that she’d been

caught twice by Ruin. I was a hundred-percent sure she didn't want to be reminded of that.

Before I could respond, Griff held up a finger, gaining our attention. He pointed at Tayla. "Weren't you wearing that last night?" he asked.

I gave her a quick once-over because it was obvious she'd changed into the new clothes he'd brought for her. Then I spotted the lacy collar around her neck.

"If you don't have the key, Kelsey can get bolt cutters from the van," Griff added.

Tayla's hand quickly shot up to protect her neck as color leached from her face. "You can't."

Griff, quick with jokes, said with amusement, "Is it sentimental?"

I had a very different idea because she likely hadn't taken it off, including when she showered. "Is it booby-trapped?" I asked. That was something Ruin would likely do based on everything Connor had told me about him.

Tayla nodded, not letting go of her neck. "He said if I removed it, it would shock me ten times worse than a Taser gun on full charge."

Griff cursed as I did. Kelsey, however, said, "Do we have any rubber or thick plastic?"

My mind raced through the possibilities. Griff said, "Wait." Then he darted toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms. He'd obviously checked out the apartment before sending us here because he came back with a green resistance band used for exercise or strength training as if he'd known it was there.

Already on the same page with Griff, I walked over to Tayla. "May I?" I asked, pointing at her neck.

There was still fear in her eyes, but it wasn't directed at me as she moved her hand away. I brushed a finger lightly across her neck and under the lacy collar. I leaned in and spotted the silver disks that lined the inside, noting there was a little room.

“Okay. That might work.” I let go. Was it hard to do so? Yes. But right now wasn’t the time to examine the pull I felt toward her. Instead, I went over to where Griff had the band stretched out. “Were there others?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “The others were thicker.”

I nodded and gave him the signal to go through with slicing the band in half with the butcher knife he held. There was a single fatal slice before Kelsey took the severed band. “Let me measure it first,” she said.

If Griff had asked to do it, I would have shut him down, not wanting any man to touch Tayla except me. Instead, I gave a barely perceptible nod to Kelsey.

“I’ll get the bolt cutters,” Griff said and exited the condo.

Kelsey went over to Tayla and measured before holding out the rubber band to me. “Here,” she said. She’d marked it where I should make the second cut.

Channeling all the frustration I felt from not getting Ruin yet, I chop the band, uncaring that it hadn’t belonged to us. Like Griff, I sliced through the thicker rubber with ease. I took the measured piece and walked over to Tayla.

“Do you want Kelsey to do it?” I asked, fighting the desire I felt every time she was near.

“No. You can,” she said in a near whisper.

Just skimming my finger across her collarbone was enough to do me in. I focused on the task and worked the rubber under the collar. As I finished, Griff breezed through the door.

“Honey, I’m home,” he said, and Kelsey admonished him with whispered words for him to hush.

It was then the magnetic hold between Tayla and me eased off. I turned toward Kelsey and Griff. His brow was raised in question. I held out my hand and Griff stepped forward. “You sure you don’t want me to do it?” he asked.

He sidled up behind Tayla so she didn’t see him teasingly wink at me. I couldn’t glare at him, or Tayla would suspect that we were having a silent conversation about her.

“I’ll do it,” I said instead.

“Griff, why don’t we go get something from the van,” Kelsey said.

He frowned. “What?”

She rolled her eyes. “Something to check for trackers,” she said and tugged on his arm.

He flashed me a smirk before Tayla shifted her focus toward them. Griff let Kelsey lead him out of the condo. Then it was just us.

“This will work,” I said, trying to reassure her.

“I know,” she breathed.

I kept my cool, keenly slipping the tips of the bolt cutters just right. Internally, I counted to three while holding her gaze, then snipped. There was a zip of electricity that was stopped by the rubber, and then she was free.

Her eyes drifted shut as if she was saying a silent “thank you” that it had worked. I held there a second before removing the collar and taking a step back. It was then that she opened her eyes and her gaze landed on me.

I held up the collar. “I don’t think you want a souvenir,” I said with levity.

She shook her head. “Thank you,” she whispered.

I nodded and turned away. The pull between us was too compelling to ignore, but I had to. I turned and took a few steps to the counter and put the collar there. Ruin was more than a bastard. The metal disks that held the thing together were strung like pretty jewelry but were deadly.

Tayla stepped beside me. She smelled like wild berries, making my mouth water.

“Do you think there’s a tracking device in there?” she asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“I wouldn’t doubt he’d do something like that.” I didn’t add that I’d been a fool not to consider that. It was too late now.

“There might even be a silent alarm that lets him know I’ve taken it off,” she suggested.

“Maybe. We have to consider everything.”

Griff and Kelsey walked in with Griff on the phone. Kelsey headed in our direction and Griff stayed near the door.

“Any problems?” Kelsey asked.

Tayla’s lips curled in a small smile when Kelsey reached us. “No,” Tayla answered.

“Why don’t I take this? I’ll check it for trackers and get an idea of what it could do,” Kelsey said and picked it up, examining it.

“Just what we were thinking. Tayla also thought we should check for any fail-safe alarms that might have alerted Ruin if it’d been removed.”

Kelsey nodded as Griff ended his call. “Everything is in place. We’re going to get this fucker tonight,” Griff announced.

“Yeah,” I said and glanced at Tayla.

Her eyes narrowed and she circled back to the conversation we hadn’t finished earlier. “Don’t even think about leaving me here,” Tayla said.

That had been exactly what I’d been about to suggest.

TAYLA

EVERYONE STARED AS IF I HAD PULLED A PIN ON A GRENADE, so I let the elephant out of the bag. “I know what you all are thinking. That this man has caught me twice. And that’s true. The first time, I was reckless and too emotional. I wager that you all would have acted as irrationally as I did if you had a little sister being preyed upon.”

This was important for them to understand. I took a breath when no one jumped in. I had to convince them to take me. My nightmares wouldn’t end unless I saw with my own eyes that Ruin was either in custody or dead. I didn’t have a preference.

I continued. “However, the second time wasn’t my plan. I warned my boss, the team, and my colleagues about how cunning Ruin is. They didn’t listen. Treated me like a clueless junior agent. My only mistake was I didn’t fight hard enough on my position, even though I had. In the end, I was right and got caught again. But make no mistake, whether or not you trust me, I’ve been trained for jobs like this, and when this is all over, I plan to go back to this job.”

It was Shawn who spoke first. “Which is the only reason I hesitate. I spent three months in jail after trying to save your life. This op isn’t exactly legal. Do you want to end up in jail because you aren’t following their rules?”

I’d wondered where he’d been, and just like that, I felt guilty. But now wasn’t the time to apologize for his detainment on my behalf. That would come after Ruin was in

jail. “I want my life back. And as long as he walks free, I’m not free.” All the therapy in the world wouldn’t help me if I couldn’t see this through to the end.

Shawn seemed to get it without me explaining and nodded. “Then let’s go over the plan.”

I hadn’t thought it would be that easy to win them over, but I was grateful he didn’t make me feel less or as if I was a liability.

My training kicked in as we huddled in the living room. Any personal issues of mine were thrust into the background. Mental toughness was emphasized as the key to surviving any situation. That part of me took over as Kelsey opened up a computer and Griff laid out the plan.

It was around two in the morning when we left for a mix of industrial and residential areas south of town. This time had been chosen with the hope most people would be asleep since it wasn’t a Friday or Saturday night. There was also the downfall that since there would be so little activity, anyone awake would spot us. It was a risk we decided was worth it. It had been nice to have an equal say in the plan. They hadn’t shrugged off my thoughts or ideas. One of which was to not drive by but to park a block away and go on foot with surveillance.

Kelsey was staying in one of the vans we brought. She and Griffin approached from the east, and Shawn and I approached from the west. But Kelsey would send her super silent high-tech drone before we did anything.

“All clear,” came Kelsey from the comms Griffin fitted us out with. He had more gear than the FBI did on a normal raid. They had outfitted me with a Sig P365, which was similar to the famous Glock most people saw or heard about in movies. Griff had an arsenal from Smith and Wesson to a Ruger. I’d chosen the Sig because it had been like the one my stepfather had taught me to shoot with.

We moved as silently as possible. Still, our steps rang like thunder in the silent night. We stopped at the edge of an alley before the block of row houses that held the one we were

looking for. Flattened against the building, we waited while Shawn scoped out the street with his eyes and Kelsey from the drone above.

When Shawn nodded, we moved again until we heard a door open. Griffin and I shifted to get a view. He looked over Shawn's shoulder while I went in low and looked from around his middle. Three men exited the building. I spotted Ruin and recognized two of the goons with him.

I held my breath as if I let it go, Ruin would hear it. They got in a dark, nondescript sedan and pulled away. It was only then I exhaled. I moved back and leaned on the wall as if it could hold me up. Griffin and Shan spoke in hushed tones and when they approached, I asked, "Are we aborting?"

Shawn shook his head as Griffin said, "The tracker is still active on his car. And following him with so little traffic would give him more opportunity to spot a tale. We go in and see why he was here."

That made sense. Our dark clothing gave us some cover as we crept forward. We reached the door without causing alarm. If this had been a sanctioned FBI operation, I would have worn easily identifiable clothing. I also would have had a badge and a warrant in my hand. Instead, we used the knob, which didn't turn. Griffin was quick with lock picks, and we were in.

All was quiet at first. While Griffin held the door, a drone suddenly appeared. After it entered, Griffin closed the door behind it. We crept forward and, with Shawn using hand signals to tell us to split off to check the lower level, the floor creaked.

Shawn shot a fist in the air, signaling us to stop. I glanced around for any movement as I listened intently for any sounds. A door closed, and we waited a beat before Shawn signaled us to move forward. Griff went into the living room on the left. The furniture was more than worse for wear from the glance I got.

I kept moving forward until I reached the first door on the right. The knob was a little stiff but gave in to the turn and the

door popped open with a little burst of dusty air. I took a step into the small, cramped room only to find two twin beds with a small table in between. The closet was empty as well. When I stepped back into the hallway, I wasn't alone.

A piercing scream came out of nowhere until I spotted our guys, dressed in black, carrying assault weapons. I guessed I couldn't fault the woman's fear. A second later, I was in her face, begging her to be quiet.

"We aren't here to hurt you," I crooned.

Griffin, who'd seemed like a gentle giant until now, pointed his weapon at her. "Shut the fuck up," he barked. I glared at him, and he shrugged innocently at me with a quick wink.

If we'd walked into the situation I thought we did, the woman would respond to his demands. Likely, they'd been conditioned not to defy someone in authority. So I understood why he'd been gruff, as we hadn't wanted to wake the entire neighborhood.

She immediately quieted. Shawn moved next to me and said to her, "We're here to help."

Footsteps sounded above. "Get down here," Griffin commanded.

As I glanced toward the stairs, I watched as the drone rose horizontally to the second floor. Kelsey would be our eyes as several women slowly made their way downstairs.

The women assembled in the hallway in two rows as if they'd done this before. It sickened me to think why they were here.

"What is your name?" I said to the screamer.

"Arina," she said, with an accent I couldn't place at the moment. Her long dark hair hung like a curtain on either side of a pleasant face, and she tilted her head to hide parts of her face with it.

"What is this place?" I asked her.

A taller woman with long reddish-brown hair, who stood a few women down in the back row, answered. “Hell. Why you here?” she sneered in defiance.

“To help,” I said.

The same woman laughed, though it was full of bitter notes. “Just like he say he help us,” she said in broken English.

“You mean Ruin? The man who was just here?”

All the women nodded. But the ringleader spoke. “And you know him how?”

“I got away,” I said. Then I turned my attention back to Arina. “How did he get you here?”

She glanced away before telling a sad story. The women were citizens of a country embroiled in civil war. They’d individually fled their country when their husbands, brothers, or fathers had fallen in battle. They all landed at the same refugee camp in a neighboring country.

“A man offered us each the opportunity to come to America.” The group agreed. “We went with them and ended up on the same boat over. Once we got here, our papers were taken, and we were told we would have to work to pay back the cost to get us here, our clothes, and even the food they feed us.”

Then, several women added to the conversation. “We fuck or we die,” one said. “Or passed around,” another said.

Arina took over again. “We are to earn five thousand a night. Anything we earn over that, we get half of.”

The bitter woman said, “The shitholes we’re sent to, it’s impossible to earn that kind of money.”

That could have been my fate. “Why don’t you just leave?” I asked, glancing at the door.

Chin up, Arina said, “We can’t. He will track us.”

My blood ran cold as the implications of what she just said hit me like a blow to the gut. Shawn took over. I vaguely heard him asking the women where the tracker was. Without shame,

the women showed him, lifting their shirts. Each was in a different place. Most were on the fleshy part of their bottoms. But some showed their breast or their abdomen.

“We shouldn’t be here,” I said out of the blue.

When everyone stared at me like I was an alien, I amended my words. “If Ruin is tracking them, he could know they are all gathered downstairs.” Depending on the level of tracking. But they would certainly show them huddled together. “At this time of night, he could think they are plotting something.”

Shawn nodded, as did Griff, when a piercing shriek sounded from upstairs. Kelsey’s voice came through to our ears. “We may have a situation.”

“My baby,” a woman pleaded. “Please don’t take my baby.”

Clearly, all the women didn’t yet believe our good intentions. “We wouldn’t do that,” I quickly said.

The tall woman’s face had lost some of its hostility. “Ruin only lets us keep the babies for six weeks to breastfeed. Then he sells them.”

“Go upstairs to your rooms. We’ll come by to get the trackers out,” Griffin said.

“Quickly,” Shawn added.

The women hustled back upstairs while Shawn, Griffin and I huddled together with Kelsey on comms.

“Babe. Bring in the supplies we need to get the trackers out,” Griff said to Kelsey.

Shawn lifted a brow, but Griffin didn’t seem to notice. To us, Griff said, “We have to do this quickly. If Ruin noticed them gathering, he’ll send someone here to check things out. We need to be out of here as quickly as possible.”

It was decided that Griffin and Shawn would do the removal. I would do the aftercare to stop any bleeding and cover the wound with a bandage. We would leave the trackers on the bed and get the women out and into the van Shawn and I had been in. Apparently, Griffin had anticipated we might

need a van to transport victims, which is why we'd driven two vehicles. Kelsey would keep watch with the drones for anyone heading our way.

Things moved quicker when the women we finished with helped. They got everyone organized by gathering up the things they couldn't leave without. The hiccup came with the baby. We couldn't find any tracker, but we weren't a hundred-percent sure. Time was up and we were ready to leave when Griffin stopped Shawn and me.

"You two take our van back to the condo. Kelsey and I will transport the women to a safe location."

I almost balked when I realized why they didn't want us to go. The women's safety was a priority over my curiosity. So I nodded, knowing these men would ensure their safety. Shawn and Griffin switched keys. We all hustled the women to the van, then Shawn and I watched as they drove off. Then we headed in the opposite direction of the other van.

What looked like a delivery truck was tricked out in the back with computer equipment on a long desk on one side and racks of weapons and other gadgets on the other side.

Quickly, I closed the door to the back after a curious peek and strapped in. We didn't talk. I wasn't sure of what to make of it, but I was grateful for the time of introspection.

We parked the van in the garage of the building we were staying in. The ride up in the elevator was awkward as hell. It was as if Shawn didn't want to look at me. I sighed when the doors opened, and we stepped into the hall. He used the passkey to open the door and held it for me to enter first. Then he came in and pulled out a gun.

MATT

QUICKLY, I SWEEPED THE ROOM, LOOKING FOR ANY HIDING places. I left Tayla frozen at the front door without a word. If Ruin had someone waiting for us, I didn't want to give him or her a heads-up we were inside. The soft click of the door closing couldn't be avoided. There wasn't any place to hide in the kitchen or living room area except a hall closet I'd cleared before making my way to the bedrooms.

I checked the first, which housed nothing but gym equipment. The closet was empty. The hall bath was free of anyone, as well. Then I checked the spare bedroom, under the bed, and that closet held no one either. The last place to clear was the primary bedroom at the end of the hall.

This was the room Tayla was staying in and I took extra care. But with minimal furniture throughout the condo, it didn't take much to ensure we were alone. I longed for the device I'd used in the past to check for bugs. I'd have to go back to the van later to see if Griff had one.

When I entered the hall, Tayla stood next to the island. The woman took my breath away every time I laid eyes on her. And she was in neck-to-toe black with everything hidden except her curves.

After everything, there was no way in hell I could touch her. I cleared my throat and said, "No one is here."

There was pain in her eyes I wanted to cure. "You think he tagged me too, don't you?"

"We can't rule it out."

She nodded. “Unless he did it when he drugged me...” Her shoulders dipped.

For all we knew, he’d planted a tracker on her from the first time he took her. It would explain how he could have planned and gotten her the second time so easily.

Her jaw tensed, and her beautiful mouth flattened. Then she stripped right there. Off came the black leather jacket she’d borrowed from Kelsey, then the black tee. Her dark wash jeans hit the floor, and I shifted, hoping to keep my dick under control. It was an involuntary response I couldn’t stop. She was gorgeous in a way no other woman before her had attracted me.

“I’ve seen myself and haven’t noticed anything. You’re going to have to check,” she said as she reached behind her to unhook her bra.

Fuck me, I didn’t see how I was going to touch her without wanting to be inside her.

“Shawn!”

I pressed the corners of my eyes with them closed, praying to whatever was holy I could do this. “Yeah. Okay.”

She tucked her thumbs in the corner of her lacy panties and pushed down. My dick hardened to granite. I forced the man I’d grown to be back in the recesses of my mind and became more of Shawn. He was a cold son of a bitch who did what needed to be done without feelings.

I turned dead eyes on her as I moved to face her. Then I pushed a little of the cop in me as I swept fingertips through her hair and checked behind her ears. As my hands glided down the column of her throat, I met her gaze. Her pupils were already dilated with desire. I held her stare as my hands moved to cup her breast. Using my thumbs, I swept them under them. It was only then I forced my eyes away from hers to inspect the area.

On my knees, her pretty cunt was there. It would have been so easy to move forward and sweep my tongue over her swollen clit. Instead, I used my hands to part her folds. I

couldn't put it behind Ruin's sick mind to put it there. Nothing.

With my hands on her hips, I flipped her around. With my hand, I guided her to lean forward and hug the counter. Still on my knees, I seized my cock through my pants. How easily I could stand, free the beast and fuck the shit out of her.

Instead, I forced more of Shawn to the forefront as I let my hands slide down the side of her rib cage until I reached her hips. I lightly probed her ass, knowing the tracker may not be right under the surface of her unmarred skin. It was at the junction of where the bottom of her ass curved up to meet her legs that I found it.

A tiny scar she would have never seen without specifically looking for was there on the right.

I must have stayed at the spot too long because she said, "You found it, didn't you?"

Rage flowed through my veins like a shot of adrenaline. "Yeah." The word left my lips so gruff it did not surprise me when she turned to look at me over her shoulder.

I got to my feet and went to look for something to use to remove it when she stopped me with a light touch of her hand on my forearm.

"How long?" she asked.

She was asking how long I thought it had been there. The scar wasn't new. "A while."

Her hand fell away, and I went to look for a sharp knife. I didn't want to scare her further. Finally, I remembered Griff had tapped my hand to signal for me to keep the scalpel I'd used on the girls. I pulled it from my pocket and went to the sink. I cleaned it thoroughly. I even turned on the stove and placed the blade in the flames as my hands shook from fury. It would be hard not to kill Ruin when I saw him next, even though I'd promised Connor that honor.

Then she was there. Her body lit a flame in mine. It was like the woman cast a spell over me. There hadn't been a day

that thoughts of her hadn't plagued my mind since the day we met.

"It's okay. I trust you," she said.

"Get on the bed," I ordered.

She didn't bristle at my tone when I realized anger fueled every word that left my mouth. She headed to the bedroom while I checked for a first aid kit. I found one in a cabinet above the Viking refrigerator.

I found her in the room where she unashamedly lay on her side on the bed. Her full breasts on display made my mouth water. Tongue-tied, I couldn't even speak. I circled a finger in the air, indicating she should lie flat.

She settled into place as our connection, hotter than a forge, would have melted metal. It was her words that she trusted me, reverberating in my head, that allowed me to focus. I counted out loud down from three before I put the knife to her skin with the precision of a plastic surgeon. Staying on the scar line, I cut less than an inch long and not that deep. Blood rushed to the surface. As quickly as I could, I probed the skin and pressed to get the pill-shaped tracker out.

I held gauze on the wound and asked, "Are you okay?"

It was in the depth of her eyes that I rode a wave back to sanity. A kill order had blared in my head as I fought against the instinct to draw Ruin out right now.

We held there until the blood stopped flowing. Lucky for us, there were hypoallergenic suture strips for wound closure in the first aid kit. I used one to securely close the tiny opening. It held fast. I covered it with a fresh pad of gauze and secured it with medical tape. Tomorrow, we would remove that layer to let the wound breathe easier. I gathered the remaining things and made my way off the bed.

"Shawn."

Every time she said that name, I felt guiltier than I had before for lying about it and so much more. I couldn't even respond. I just stood there frozen.

“You don’t have to go,” she said.

All the reasons why played in my head before I said, “I should.” I turned away, and when I reached the door, I added, “Get some sleep.”

Frustrated, I pushed into the spare room and managed not to slam the door. It wasn’t her fault I had to keep my hands off her. I tore the jacket I still wore off my body and let it fall to the floor to be the base of the pile for the rest of my clothing as I continued to strip. I might have slept nude if I wasn’t on alert. Ruin knew where we were.

I hadn’t finished undressing when I realized I still held the tracker in my hand. I needed to do something with it. There was a soft knock at my door, and Tayla poked her head in and said, “I don’t want to sleep alone.”

A crack of thunder answered before I could. Pelting rain battered the window, stealing my focus from her until she said, “Fuck me.”

It wasn’t a curse that left her tempting lips, but she’d said it like a prayer. I snapped my head back in her direction. There was no hint of amusement in her expression. My control broke, though I managed to put the tracker on the bedside table instead of dropping it to the floor before I moved.

I reached for her hand and yanked her to me. Our lips collided with the ferocity I’d been holding back. I glided my hand down her back to cup her ass. It was then I paused, reminded again of the asshole who’d forced me to hurt her again to remove his poison pill from her body. I was careful not to disturb the area I’d cut.

“I’m fine. Don’t hold back,” she begged as her nails raked over my scalp.

She wound her legs around my waist, and I slipped my hand over the bandage once more to ensure it wasn’t wet and the sutures held. It wasn’t. When she rubbed her tight core against my throbbing cock, my mind flipped back to pleasing the woman in my arms. My knee dipped the mattress as I positioned us with me beneath her as we sat with her

straddling my lap. Her fingers clawed at my shirt as we continued kissing, her mouth searing mine. I lifted my arms, letting her remove the shirt. It ended up in a pile somewhere on the floor.

With her hand on my chest, she urged me back before shifting back so she could remove my boxer briefs. I lifted up, but her hand was back. Her head dipped and damn it all to hell, her tongue licked the head of my cock and the bead of precum that appeared.

I closed my eyes because I could have come right then with one swipe of her tongue. Never had I lost all control. "Fuck, you're perfect," I managed to say.

A sly grin curled her lovely lips. She fisted my cock like she was very sure of what she was doing. Though she'd been a virgin, it didn't mean she hadn't done other things. A growl rumbled in my throat at the thought of her with someone else. Only when she swallowed the head of my cock did I lose all reason.

My phone buzzed somewhere, but I couldn't have given two fucks. As her mouth took me deep and out again, I fisted the sheets. Afraid if I touched her, I would flatten her to the bed and pound in and out of her like a man possessed.

As she hollowed her cheeks and twisted her hand, she moved up and down my shaft. When I got too close, I covered her hand with mine to stop her.

"No. I'm not going to come in your mouth. I'm going to come so deep inside you, your pussy will weep for days."

I shifted and positioned her so she was on her knees, and I was behind her. The bandage looked fine, so when she begged me with the word "hard," I didn't think twice. It was a damn good thing she was not looking at me. I stilled with my cock in my hand against her opening. She shifted back. I gave her ass a playful slap. "Greedy," I said.

"Needy," she countered.

I rubbed the head of my cock through her slippery folds, greasing the way. I wasn't full of myself, but my cock wasn't

small. As much as I wanted to slam inside her, I fed her my cock inch by fucking inch.

The veins in my neck had to be popping to the surface because the feel of her warm inner walls taking me had me ready to explode. It wasn't until I was balls deep that I began to move and rub over that spot inside her that made her squeal. Fuck me.

TAYLA

THE DEEPER HE WENT, MY BODY TINGLED FOR MORE. MY nerve endings were sensitive to every tiny move. When he cupped my breast and pinched my nipple, I gasped and tensed. Which apparently did something to my insides because the man cursed. Loving the idea that I could affect him like that, I tightened my core again, and he lost a step in his rhythm. I bit my lip.

The man hadn't let go of my nipple, but then his other hand was between my legs. I didn't think I could reach another level of pleasure until then. I begged incoherently, as I couldn't recall the words that left my mouth.

He released my nipple as his fingers brought me there with pressure on my clit. I came hard and clenched when I did. I buried my face in the pillow, screaming from the high of it. He wasn't far behind me, filling me up as he promised.

He tugged me down to the mattress. I lay in the curve of his body as he spooned me from behind. I didn't have the breath to speak. Instead, I nuzzled my head back at the juncture of his neck as he kept a protective arm around me.

Never had I slept with a man. Not like this. As I easily drifted off, I could only think about how this was the first time we had sex on our own terms.

At one point, I awoke. Nightmares chased me to the surface of consciousness. Sweat cooled on my skin and Shawn was gone. I blinked a few times and heard hushed tones coming from the other side of the room. Just hearing his

murmurs slowed my racing heart. He hadn't left me. I wasn't dreaming. The nightmare was over. I was safe and felt sleep drawing me back into its clutches.

I turned over and saw him speaking on his phone. My drowsy brain couldn't make sense of what he was saying. It was enough to know he was still in the room. My eyes shut, and I fell into sleep again.

Hours later, when I opened my eyes again, Shawn was back. His thumb drew circles around my nipple, and I groaned. In the next moment, he was lifting my leg and sliding the long shaft of his hard cock so deep I was wide awake. The man knew the art of fucking, if there was such a thing. If I'd known sex would be like this, I might not have waited so long to give myself to a man.

Then again, it was this man who made fucking so enjoyable. As much as I enjoyed the hard, fast romp we had hours before, this languid pace made my heart flutter. *Slow your roll*, I told myself. *No falling in love. Enjoy the moment and remember it.* Shawn didn't seem like a man looking for love. It was doubtful he ever once in his life couldn't find a willing woman if he had an itch he wanted to scratch.

But even I got caught up in the spell of his lovemaking. It felt far from fucking. It was probably a good thing I couldn't see his face. He'd gone so cold last night that I'd almost stayed in the room and hadn't gone for what I wanted. What had happened to me and what we'd encountered last night had reminded me life was short.

Once Shawn got Ruin, he'd likely disappear from my life. And who knew if I'd find a man I'd trust enough to give myself to again?

We came not in a rush but just as powerful. Our skin was dewy with sweat as we lay there together.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. I might have said no, but my stomach growled in answer. "Eggs and bacon?"

"Sounds good."

When he pulled out, I wanted to weep. Intimacy was an incredible thing that played with your emotions. There was so much I wanted to say. Until I noticed the tracker on the nightstand. I picked it up along with his shirt from the floor and pulled it on before exiting the room.

“Should we keep this?” I asked, holding the tracker up so he could see.

He turned to face me. “We have the advantage at the moment of knowing he knows where we are.”

“But won’t he know that we know about it when he finds the women missing? He can place me there.”

“True,” he said, then went to take eggs out of the fridge. “If we destroy it, then it will confirm that we know. By not destroying it, he may think you still don’t know about it.”

I bobbed my head.

He turned back around to gather what he needed to cook while I planted myself on a barstool and watched. As I stared at his bare back, I noticed little scars here and there. A part of me wanted to ask what marred his beautiful skin. Instead, I closed my mouth. I didn’t want to spoil what had been a beautiful evening and what was shaping up as a glorious morning.

“Last night was the first time I’ve slept so good in a long while,” I admitted while admonishing myself for the admission. I’d gone from being committed to silence to being vulnerable. Who was I?

When he glanced my way, his smile lit up the room. “Oh really?”

I nodded like a bobblehead. Seriously, when had I become that girl? So I went and spoiled it. “Yeah. Even after everything, I had nightmares...” He stiffened, and I trailed off because I’d gone and stuck my foot in my mouth. “I mean, it was great. I—uh—It was really great.”

Quiet landed like a solid wall between us. I scrubbed my hand over my face, grateful that he wasn’t facing me. I forced myself to stay seated. He wasn’t allowed to get weird about

my situation. I wasn't great, but I was good. And last night had been amazing.

"I don't know if I ever properly thanked you. So thank you for everything. If you hadn't come, I might still be bound to him."

When he shifted toward me with two plates in his hand, I couldn't read his expression.

"The first or second time?" he said.

Feeling like a fish out of water, I opened and closed my mouth a few times as a smirk grew on his face. Tongue in cheek, I said, "Both."

"Eat," he said in response and handed me a fork.

So I did, and it was glorious. Not to boast about his ego any further, I kept it to myself. Though my huge grin probably gave it away.

When I put my fork down, he asked, "More?"

I playfully narrowed my eyes. "Are you fishing for compliments?"

"Don't have to. The satisfaction is right there on your face. Though I admit, I'm not sure what you prefer."

My response was to lift a questioning brow.

"You have that post-orgasm glow. Now I'm not sure if you prefer my dick or my cooking."

My smile turned flirty as I got off the stool and said, "Maybe you should find out."

He bit his lower lip, and I was sunk. Damn if the sound of his phone vibrating on the counter didn't spoil the mood.

"I have to take this," he said. I moved to grab the dishes. He shook his head. "I've got this. You go ahead." He waved me off.

I might have challenged him because he had done all the cooking. The least I could do was clean up. Instead, I assumed he wanted privacy and acquiesced. Funny how, a second ago, I

thought we would grab a shower together. Instead, I was in the room I should have slept in, using the private bathroom alone.

Was it just me, or was he giving me hot and cold? What would I say to him, or should I say, especially if he said nothing? It wasn't like we were in a relationship. Still, whatever there was between us, communication would be best.

As I ducked into the shower, having removed his shirt, I wondered if he would join me.

MATT

“FINALLY ANSWERING YOUR PHONE,” THE VOICE ON THE OTHER line said.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. We sent you on an op and you disappeared. You didn’t go with the subject to the hotel we arranged.”

My jaw was tight as I held back all the things I wanted to say. “Why are we having this conversation over the phone?”

“I don’t know. Because you aren’t returning my messages and, like you don’t seem to remember, I have people to answer to.”

I glanced at the closed door down the hall. “I don’t know. After three months of no communication, I assumed I didn’t answer to anyone anymore.”

“Don’t be a baby.”

“Fine, here’s your report. Everything is A-Fucking-OK,” I gritted out.

“Don’t hang up. We have intel—”

But I hung up. Though I hadn’t quite decided what to do about my position with the FBI, I might have sealed my fate. Like Tayla, I had my own nightmares about the last few months I couldn’t forget. The bureau’s little lesson about staying in line had stolen several parts of my soul I feared I wouldn’t get back.

More importantly, Tayla's disappointment at my dismissing her played in my head. I'd seen the unknown caller and knew immediately it was my handler. It would only be natural for Tayla to want to know who I'd been speaking to. Too many lies stood between us. I didn't want to tell her another one.

I rubbed my temples, unsure of what to do, when there was a knock at the door. Before going there, I opened a drawer in the kitchen, pulled out a Glock, Griff had left, and put my hand behind my back.

"Who is it?" I asked, inches to the right of the door. If someone dared to shoot through it, I didn't want to be an easy target.

"Call for you," a male voice said, trying to sound pleasant.

"This isn't a fucking hotel," I called back, as I kept glancing back toward the room Tayla was in just in case the loud conversation brought her my way.

"You want to take this call?"

The last thing my handler said plagued my mind. She'd been trying to warn me, or had she?

I reached with my left hand, unlocked the door, and flung it open at the same time. I aimed the 9mm with precision with my right. The angle wasn't perfect, given that I was standing off to the side, but it was good enough.

The man on the other side only held out a phone. It was a cheap flip phone I snagged from his hand. So far, he hadn't pulled a gun on me and I prayed that Tayla wouldn't come out. I couldn't look back without risking myself and her in the process.

"Hello," I said into the phone, using my left hand, still aiming the gun at him with my right one.

"Shawn." The voice made my blood curl. Though I knew I wasn't free of the man, I hoped I was. I said nothing.

"Shocked to hear from me? Well, let's not waste words. I had my suspicions about you. But I was wrong. You may be

more fucked up than me.” He cackled. “I’ve had you watched. And what do you know, you went to a pedo auction. Didn’t know you fancied kids.”

No doubt he thought he had something on me. Still, I said nothing.

“I need you to work for me while I’m stuck in here. Don’t worry. My bitch-ass wife and the feds didn’t get all my money. I’ll give you double what you made before. But first, you deliver my pig-squealing wife. That’s not a request, mind you. Don’t take too long. I might have pictures of you with a known pedophile. My guy did have to prove to me he saw what he saw.” He paused, and I didn’t fill it. “Do we understand each other? By the way, that piece of ass you have with you is sweet. I don’t blame you at all.”

I might have broken some teeth, considering how hard my jaw was clenched.

“Shawn.”

I waited a second before saying, “Yes.”

“Do. We. Understand. Each. Other?”

I waited a second more. “Yes.”

“Good. Give the phone back. But remember, you don’t have long to find her.”

I folded the phone in half, cutting him off before he could give me a definitive date. Then I tossed the guy the phone, leaving him to catch it with his two empty hands as I shut and locked the door.

“Who was that?” Tayla said, entering the room wearing a robe.

There were enough things I was keeping from her. This wouldn’t be one of them. I ran a hand through my hair and sighed. “Not anyone good.”

Her brow quirked up, and she folded her arms across her chest. So I glanced at the ground before continuing. “I told you before, I’m not a good guy.” She pursed her lips but didn’t grace me with a response. “The man I used to work for isn’t

taking my desire to end our business relationship to heart. He's basically given me orders from prison with an ultimatum I can't ignore."

"How did he find you?"

It was a good question. I shrugged. "I don't know. There's no way he had people following me all this time, and I didn't notice." Though inwardly, I wondered how well my head had been in the game.

"Do you think...?" she began.

For a second, I didn't get it. Until I did. I shook my head because I couldn't accept the idea. "When?" I said on repeat a few times. Then it hit me as my mind raced through memories I wished could remain long buried.

I refocused on her. "Check me," I said, with words barely above a whisper.

She nodded and came over. As she circled me, I unbuttoned my pants. When she faced me again, she reached up to put her hands on my shoulders and then slid them down until she reached my hands. With my thumb hooked in my waistband and pressure from hers, the pants gave way to gravity.

Our eyes locked, and she used her hands instead of her eyes. Because of that, I felt and saw when she found something.

I nodded to her, and she took a step back and then moved behind me. Her touch would have gotten me hard if not for the dread I felt about what she found.

"You see something," I stated, breaking the silence.

"You wouldn't, by chance, have a scar here?" She touched a spot where my ass met my leg. Nearly the same spot I'd found the tracker on her.

"Not that I'm aware of."

She pressed on the spot. "I can't be sure that anything's there."

“We can’t risk it. You’re going to have to cut me open and see.”

Her movements stilled, and I turned to face her as she crouched on her knees. I reached down and tucked a finger under her chin. “You can do this.”

Her head shook, sending her wet, curly locks flying around her head. “Not here.”

I didn’t want to get blood on the bed, but she was right. She needed me face down. “Get the blade,” I directed and pointed at the counter. As she did, I got down on the floor into the prone position. It said a lot about how much I trusted her. I was more vulnerable in this moment than I would allow myself without being overpowered. With slow and even breaths, I kept the nightmares clawing on the inside of my brain at bay.

“Are you sure?” she asked, unable to mask her nervousness.

“I’m not sure of anything. But we won’t be safe until we know if I’m being tracked.”

It was silent then. Only the rustling of fabric as she bent down and got on her knees. My heart raced from ugly memories of the past as I tried my damndest to remain still and not leap to my feet.

“I’m sorry,” she said, right before a biting pain chomped at the spot she’d pointed out before.

Too many seconds passed without her declaring that she’d found something. “You may have to open it a little wider to use your finger to probe for it.”

When I only got silence, I imagined her bobbing her head until she shakily uttered a less-than-certain “okay.”

For the next several minutes, I only heard the sounds of our rapid breaths, or maybe just mine, as I ground my teeth, determined not to show any signs of weakness.

“Found it.”

I closed my eyes, recalling when this might have happened. Being locked up in a six-by-eight room that you share with one other person you dwarfed in size didn't mean you were safe, even in the cell where the door was locked.

Trying to stay awake forever wasn't possible. And the one time sleep claimed me against my will, I'd been overpowered by four other inmates who invaded our cell after lights out.

Terror didn't cover what I felt as each of my limbs was held down by a person while another held a sickly-sweet damp cloth over my mouth. Eventually, I passed out either from the drug or lack of oxygen, but until blackness claimed me, all my worst fears had me longing for death.

I'd awoken alone on my cot, my cellmate above me. But it was the immense pain in that area that had me curling into a ball, trying not to imagine what had happened. Hope, even the unlikelihood of it, had me thinking they'd only wanted to implant the tracker. But I wasn't that stupid.

"It's done," she said. I could feel the tape on me she'd used to close the wound.

I blinked as my surroundings came into focus. Gone was the memory, banished back into the deep recesses of my mind. Knowing time wasn't on our side, I snapped back into training.

"We need to go." I held out my hand to see what she'd found. She put the bloody miniature pill-like object in my palm. "Grab whatever you absolutely need and let's go."

Ruin would already know about the missing women. Since we'd left the trackers on each of their beds, he would assume we would put it together that Tayla had one too. The only advantage we had was that we were aware of my tracker.

What I'd need to figure out, and soon, was if the kingpin and Ruin were working together. The trackers were similar enough to draw that conclusion. But I had to get us out of here now. I got to my feet and pulled on my pants. Then I pocketed the tracker she'd found on me, not taking the time to clean it.

My next move was to go into the room I'd claimed. I swept the tracker we'd found on her into my palm. "Are you ready?" I called out. I didn't yell because I wasn't sure if anyone was in the hall waiting for us to exit.

Her head popped in the door. A hoodie covered her hair. "I'm ready."

I nodded and held up her tracker before making my way past her and into the bathroom. I dropped the tracker in the toilet before flushing it. When I turned, her expression was scrunched up in question.

"They know we found it. No reason to hang on to it. And if they didn't. They would assume you are on the elevator down. Either way, we don't need to keep it at this point."

"Yours?" she asked.

I shot a thumb over my shoulder toward the kitchen. She followed me there. I snagged a banana because it was right there. Then I put a finger to my lips. She nodded in understanding. At the door, I took care to open it slowly, keeping part of my body hidden. When no shots rang out, I risked a glance. The hallway was empty.

We were over forty stories high, so I went for the elevator. Hopefully, those after us weren't on to us yet. A quick departure would give us another advantage. I may have pressed the button a few times too many because Tayla's hand captured mine.

"I can't begin to understand what you're going through, but I'm here to talk if you want," she said.

In her eyes, I could see the shared misery. She hadn't exactly had an easy time of things over the last year. I'd only endured three months of hell. I squeezed her hand and opened my mouth to say something when the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

TAYLA

HIS LIPS CLOSED, AND THAT WAS THE END OF THE conversation. He took my hand in his and we quickly got into the elevator. He hit the button for the garage floor and down we went. Though we hadn't encountered anyone, my heart raced like we were being chased. Then again, it could have been because he hadn't let go of me. I took a small step forward, wishing I could lean into him. Yet, I held myself back, not sure what to label what was between us.

When the elevator stopped, his hand tightened on mine and awareness of our surroundings kicked back in. The doors parted and Shawn used his hand to flatten us against the side wall after pressing another button. It was then I spotted a man dressed in dark clothing standing with his back to us. A snake tattoo peeked out of the collar of his shirt on his neck. People didn't generally hang out in a garage. It was likely he was there for nefarious reasons.

The man turned in our direction as the doors closed. I couldn't be sure he hadn't seen us as we descended farther. Once we reached a lower level, Shawn cautiously led us out into a darkened space filled with floor-to-ceiling metal cages. I guessed it was storage for the residents. He placed a finger to his lips, and we made our way down a narrow corridor between cages until we reached a door.

A ding indicated the elevator was back on this floor. Shawn quickly ushered us inside what appeared to be a tiny maintenance office that held a metal desk and shelves. Once he closed the door as softly as possible, he flicked on the

overhead light and moved about the space, inspecting the walls.

Not sure what else to do, I kept an ear to the door to see if I could hear anyone coming. Then, a grunt had me turning my attention back to Shawn. He was lifting a shelf. I moved to help him, and expeditiously, we moved it out of the way, revealing what appeared to be a ship's hatch door with the wheel handle. No way there was a ship down here. Maybe there was a bunker.

Shawn spun the wheel after a few seconds of trying to get it moving. It was sexy as all hell, watching his biceps flex as he used his strength. As I heard footsteps approach, I chastised myself for not keeping my head in the game. There was possibly a man, or men, who wanted to hurt us.

The bunker door popped open with the screeching sound of metal on unoiled hinges and stale air whooshed in. Beyond that was a dank tunnel. Shawn held his hand out to me and helped me through the hatch and over a puddle of something. I didn't want to guess what it was.

He didn't take time to shut off the light or conceal what we'd done. He closed the hatch door before he took the banana from his pocket. Then he peeled it open, broke off the top, added the tracker he took from another pocket, and tossed the combo to the left. He bit off another part before we took off at a lope to the right.

I didn't have to ask why he did what he did. If they were tracking him, they would head to the left of the tunnel. We reached a fork in our path and headed right again. At the same time, we heard the squeaky hatch door open. We picked up the pace as I heard the sounds of a train off in the distance. We had to be in an old access tunnel to the subway. I had so many questions, but didn't ask a one. Shawn's purposeful movements felt like he had a plan. When we were safe, we could talk about how he knew where he was going.

Around twenty minutes later, we stopped, and I caught my breath. Months before my captivity, I would have considered myself in decent shape, as I had to pass the fitness test at

Quantic. But now, I had to cover my mouth to conceal my huffy breaths, afraid someone would hear me.

Unsurprisingly, we were at another hatch door. Shawn didn't have to work so hard on opening this one. On the other side was a supply closet. I took a step up and over to get inside, and Shawn was there with a helping hand.

The door closed silently as if it had been given some TLC recently, and he locked us in. Industrial shelves surrounded us, lined with cleaning supplies. I moved to the side to let Shawn continue to lead, as he obviously had a plan. Only I bumped right into a bucket that held mops. It tumbled over, sounding like thunder as it hit the ground and I lost my footing.

As if I was being dipped, Shawn caught me around the waist. Tingles raced through my body at the very wrong time. Our gazes were magnetically attracted for just a second before he set me back on my feet.

He moved to the door and opened it a crack before waving me forward. We stepped into a hallway, and someone said "help" before they noticed us. "You, son. Come help me."

Shawn went for the older woman, nearly bent at the waist. As he'd done with me, he helped her into a standing position and became her anchor at the same time he followed her directions. I took stock as to where we were. Noticing an open door with what appeared to be an apartment. But the medical equipment in plain view and the older woman in the hall suggested this was some sort of senior facility.

Shawn appeared out of a doorway I hadn't seen him go through. He swiftly came my way and guided me toward a door that had an exit sign above it. We pushed through and headed up several flights of stairs.

I was winded by the time we got there and did my best not to show it. Parts of the hallway had plastic covering over the walls. He checked his phone before he confidently walked us to the end of the hall and turned the knob on a door.

It was as if we walked into a time capsule. The apartment was furnished and looked lived in, with bookshelves and

framed pictures lining one wall. Whoever lived here had a happy family. There were lots of smiling faces.

A beautiful quilt that looked handmade lay folded over the back of the sofa.

“Does someone live here?” I croaked, having not spoken in a while.

“Not now.”

“How did you know about this place?” I asked while leaning on the back of the sofa, glancing at Shawn, who stood in the kitchenette area.

“When we realized that you might have been tracked, Griff found this place for us to hole up. They are renovating the building. A few floors above and below us are vacant, giving us privacy.”

I was impressed with Griffin. His ability to pull something together was almost superior to the FBI. Certainly, a lot less red tape.

“Are you hungry?” Shawn asked.

We had rushed out that morning and I felt my stomach rumbling for some lunch. “Yes, actually. Are we going to order delivery?” I teased.

He walked over to the refrigerator, which was stocked. Griffin was on top of everything. Shawn had cooked for me before. It was my turn. “Why don’t I make us something?” I asked.

“Okay,” Shawn said, looking impressed. “I guess I’ll go grab a shower.”

“Sounds good.” Though, to be honest, I wanted to join the man in the shower. The look he gave me before he left for the bathroom suggested he wouldn’t be opposed to the idea.

Things felt calm for the moment. It seemed unlikely the men following us would find us here. I let my guard down and focused on the task at hand.

After checking the refrigerator and cabinets, I decided to make a spicy chicken sandwich because all the ingredients were there. I washed my hands and got to work.

Cooking reminded me how much I missed my family. I used to spend hours in the kitchen with Mom. Because she worked so hard, that was the time I had with her. She was my rock and everything. I missed my stepdad and sister as well. They were my world. I wiped a tear from my eye and hoped this would be over soon so I could see them.

My emotions were clearly all over the place because when Shawn came out with his hair still a little wet, my skin prickled with alertness. Never in my life had I been this horny. Embarrassed, I turned away from him, hoping he didn't see the flush spreading over my skin.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked.

I glanced over my shoulder and smiled. “Can you peel some potatoes?” I turned in time to see him pushing up the sleeves on his hunter-green Henley shirt, revealing a hint of his left forearm. As I was working on seasoning the chicken, he didn't ask for help to find a peeler. He took the initiative and found it himself.

“Do you like to cook?” he asked.

A smile spread across my face. “I do. And I did it a lot with my mom. It's my happy place. How about you?” I asked as my pan began to sizzle.

“As I've said, I learned through YouTube. But it's the only time I have nothing to prove to anyone but myself. That makes me happy.”

I turned to face him. “You haven't cooked for anyone before?” He shook his head. “Not a girlfriend?”

“I've never had a girlfriend.” He shrugged when my eyes widened, but I caught a little smirk at the end.

“I'm not judging. I've never had a boyfriend, not a serious one at least.” I grinned. “We are a pair, aren't we?”

“Why no serious boyfriend?”

His question surprised me. “I’ve been pretty focused on my career and helping my parents with my sister. There wasn’t really time for boyfriends, not that anyone really stood out to me. You?”

“Similar. I’ve been pretty focused on my future, but there was one.”

I felt my stomach drop with jealousy, though I had no right to. “Who was she?”

“Someone I knew from college. I wasn’t ready for a relationship when she was. When I was ready, she’d found someone else.”

I cleared my throat, afraid my next words would squeak out. “Any regrets?”

“Initially, maybe. But now, I realize she wasn’t my person, and she found hers.”

The breath I held was because I didn’t want him to see me sigh with relief. Quickly, I changed topics. “What’s your favorite food?”

The question seemed to cleanse the air of the heaviness that had been there.

“You’ll be surprised. A great burger and fries. I’m a simple guy.”

That did surprise me. I expected him to say steak or caviar or something more elegant. “I’ll have to agree with you on fries. Great fries are one of my favorite foods.”

“Sounds like I have a challenge,” he said.

“I guess I’ll have to change your mind and make a chicken sandwich your favorite.”

“Game on,” he said with a wink.

All of a sudden, I felt like I was on a cooking competition show.

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked.

I pointed at him. “Are you trying to distract me?”

His playful shrug was too cute for words. “You didn’t answer,” he said.

“I don’t have one. Do you?”

He smirked, and I melted when he said, “Whatever color you’re wearing.”

I laughed out loud. “You are too smooth. Should I be worried?”

“Should you?”

I scoffed. “You are not going to distract me. I’ve got this. Make sure your fries are crispy,” I jested and got back to work.

We shared the stove, but there were fewer words and a lot of looks. I licked my lips several times and even bit my lip. Eventually, we sat at the small round table, setting our food in the middle. I slid one of the finished sandwiches over to him. The secret wasn’t so much the chicken, which I seasoned simply with salt and pepper. It was the slaw I made that topped the chicken sandwiched between beautiful brioche buns that happened to be there. I would kiss Griffin when I saw him.

After he bit in, the sound that came out of his mouth was like sex. “You like it?” I asked with a wide grin.

He moaned again. “Wow. That was next-level good.” He pushed the plate of fries my way.

They were golden and looked absolutely perfect. I picked one up, and the crispiness was there. I didn’t have to bite into it to know that. They were also salted to perfection. A moan escaped my mouth.

“We’re a great team,” he said.

“We are. Let’s eat.”

Eating became foreplay as we eye fucked each other while eating. I might have gobbled my food in anticipation of what was to come. Too bad seconds after we finished the meal, while leaning back in our chairs, a knock preceded the door opening. Griffin and Kelsey appeared.

“Thanks for the food,” I said.

Griffin came over and fist-bumped me. Shawn got up as Griffin nodded to me with a huge grin. I tried not to think about why Griffin and Shawn walked off to the side to talk, excluding me.

Kelsey came over and asked, “Is there anything you need?”

I’d brought the bag of clothes they’d given me back at the apartment. There were still a couple of outfits there I hadn’t worn. “I think I’m okay.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Are you sure? Do you need any monthly things?” she asked discreetly.

“Ohhh,” I mouthed, finally getting it. It quickly hit me what it was I desperately needed. I whispered it in her ear, not wanting the guys to hear. She nodded and said, “I’m going to run out. Do you need anything?” She directed her question at Shawn.

“I’m good,” he said and went back to silently conferring with Griffin.

After she left, Griffin rounded us up. “You have a late flight. I’ve left a car in the garage for you to get there. Shawn has the keys.”

“Flight?” I asked, glancing at them both.

Shawn answered. “We already had a target on our backs. Knowing they’ve been tracking us, we need an advantage. That means getting out of the state.”

“Are you okay with that?” Griffin asked.

How could I not be? I wasn’t going to put Shawn in danger because I was too stubborn to leave. “Sure,” I answered.

Griffin went over the finer details, like us not being caught by any of the residents while we were here and when we left. We were to leave late tonight. The streets would be clearer, and hopefully, most of the residents would be asleep. We had to be out before the shift changed.

When Kelsey came back, she handed me a nondescript bag and then she and Griffin left. Shawn hadn’t slept the night

before and decided to get some shut-eye. There was a hint that he wanted me to join him.

He was in the bedroom when I went for my bag. I realized that I didn't bring the pj's. I'd left them on the floor after my shower in the apartment.

"Do you have a T-shirt I can borrow to wear to bed?" I called from the other room.

"Get whatever you need from my bag."

I heard him move into the bathroom and start brushing his teeth. His bag was on the sofa and already open. I leafed through the clothes and found a T-shirt at the bottom. When I yanked it out, something else came with it. Open, face up, was a wallet. I picked it up, planning to close it, when the name on the ID caught my eye. Matthew Moore. But the face was that of Shawn. What the hell?

MATT

WHEN I FINISHED IN THE BATHROOM, I NOTICED TAYLA wasn't in the bedroom yet. Griff had already explained that the bed had a new mattress pad and sheets on it. She shouldn't be weird about that.

“Tayla, is everything okay?”

There was a second before she said, “Yeah. I'll be there in a minute.”

I had no idea what could be holding her up, but I decided not to question her on it when she walked into the room.

As the silence continued, I finally asked, “Are you okay?”

She didn't answer, only nodded. Something was definitely off. Evidenced not only by her nonresponsiveness but also by how she lay on the bed with her back to me. That in itself wasn't telling. If she'd been positioned closer to the middle, I'd think maybe she wanted me to hold her or act on the sexual tension that had built during the meal. But she was so close to the edge that a light breeze could have pushed her onto the floor.

I walked out of the room and surveyed the main area. What happened in the last few minutes that changed the woman from playful to reserved? Nothing looked different except my bag, which was opened. I walked over, but all my clothes were neatly inside.

Back in the room, she was quiet. As much as I wanted to be an asshole and demand she explain what the hell had

changed, I couldn't be that guy with her. She'd been through enough and if she needed a moment, who was I to press her?

I turned off the lights and got into bed despite the early hour, keeping well on my half of it. Then I lay there, eyes open, staring at the ceiling, waiting for something. Nothing came. An uneasiness settled over me. She'd been my anchor from everything I wanted to forget. Now, all the warmth I'd felt from her was cold at my back. I kept my eyes open, afraid to sleep even though I needed it. I didn't want my demons to appear. Some things you can't completely control, and I may have dozed, though when my alarm went off, I felt as though I had no sleep at all.

Wakefulness didn't dawn with any new revelations. Tayla jumped when I tapped her arm. She was off the bed like lightning had struck her. In her eyes, I spotted the mistrust, and I ground my molars. I had no idea what I'd done.

I went for an olive branch. "Do you want breakfast?" I asked. She shook her head and damn if I didn't miss the sound of her voice. "We should get an early start then," I suggested.

Her head bobbed, and then she went into the bathroom. I changed in the living room, still trying to figure out the woman. There would be time on the plane to have a conversation, I told myself. Tayla was out of the bathroom by the time I finished. I ducked in before we left.

Minutes later, I edged the door open and scoped out the hallway. Everything was silent, and all was clear. Even though things appeared okay, I used hand signals to lead us out. This time, I didn't touch her. She was acting skittish, and I wouldn't spook her further.

Despite everything, we were in sync with our exit. We made it to the stairwell with no incident. Once inside, I lifted my fist to signal her to hold. Voices could be heard a few floors down. I couldn't make out the whispers, but giggling followed. As whispered words turned into faint moans, I rolled my eyes. We could be there a while.

I glanced back at Tayla, and it seemed she'd heard and drawn the same conclusions as I had.

“Wait.” The word hadn’t come from either of us. “I’m being paged.”

The voice sounded female. “Later?” a guy asked.

Some other sounds, not words, but fabric movement, maybe. Then a door opened. I held up a finger. I waited to hear if both parties had departed. It was a good thing, as ten seconds later, the door opened again. I waited another few seconds and was fairly sure the guy left, and it wasn’t someone else coming into the stairwell. I pointed down, and we began our descent again.

We quickly made it to the garage level without further incident. The car was right where Griff said it would be. It wasn’t exactly a practical car. Considering the destination, we had to fit the part. The sleek black Mercedes sedan would definitely fit in the private airport parking lot.

I used the key fob he’d given me to unlock the door. Before I could get to the passenger side, Tayla got in. As much as I wanted to know what was going on with her, I decided to wait until we got on the plane. I’d swallow my ego and all of my pride to keep her safe.

The streets were free of traffic, just as the car was empty of conversation. The handful of cars we passed were more than the words that passed our lips.

By the time we made it to the airport, the tension between us was deafening. I got our bags and directed us to the awaiting plane. I’d flown King Air many times and spotted the jet on the tarmac. We bypassed the small building and went straight for the attached stairs. Once we got on the plane, Grant, our pilot, came out of the cockpit.

“Matt,” he greeted.

Grant was related to Kalen and Connor King. And as a favor to them, he was flying us today.

“Grant,” I said. “This is Tayla.”

A precious smile formed on her mouth. She granted it to him and not me. “Hey,” she said with a wave.

“Nice to meet you,” Grant replied.

“How’s Jo?” I asked. He, like almost everyone else I knew, had gotten married.

“She’s good.”

“Liam? I actually need to talk to him.” Liam had moved to Montana to be near Natalie, the woman he loved and the kingpin’s daughter. “It’s important. Can you have him get in touch?” His woman was in protective custody, and we weren’t to know where he was. But this thing with the kingpin directly affected him and Natalie.

“Yeah. I’ll get word to him. We should get going. Take a seat. It’s just me today, but the bar is stocked. The bedroom has fresh sheets. The shower has towels.”

Tayla’s eyes popped before she turned away and sat in a solo, comfy leather seat on the left side of the plane, making it impossible for me to sit right next to her. The right side had two rows of double seats. I sat in the double across the aisle from her.

Grant came over the intercom and gave the safety speech before we were underway. When we reached cruising altitude, Tayla said the first words to me since last night. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I watched her walk away as I felt the beginning of a headache. I hadn’t slept well. Every time I closed my eyes, I’d been taken back to prison. Without Tayla to hold on to, the ease at which I slipped into nightmares was problematic. To keep them at bay, I’d stayed awake. What I needed now was ibuprofen. I didn’t have any. Then I remembered that Kelsey had gone to the pharmacy for Tayla.

Past the two rows of seats was a galley that held a sofa on the wall by the windows, and the other had a big-screen TV. Beyond that was a door into the bedroom. Tayla hadn’t locked it, so I stepped inside. Her bag was on the bed, and I heard water running.

“Do you have any Advil?” I called out before grabbing her bag.

Normally, I wouldn't have opened her bag without permission. But nothing in it was personal, as it had all been purchased by Kelsey or Griff's team. I had the bag unzipped when I reached for the paper inside. I was sliding the contents out when Tayla came in and said, "Wait."

It was too late. There in my hand was something I couldn't quite comprehend. Everything went silent for a second before I could draw breath and dumbly hold up the box. "What is this?"

TAYLA

I GRIPPED THE TOWEL CLOSED AS IF IT WERE A LIFELINE. “Best-laid plans” was the saying, but for me, everything was falling to shit. The man I had trusted may not be trustworthy, which shook me to my core. He’d been one of the reasons that had kept me sane.

“It’s exactly what the box says, Shawn.” I put a lot of emphasis on his name. “Or is Matt your name?”

The question had built in my head until the point of pain. I felt tears pricking in my eyes, which was one of the reasons I hadn’t brought this up until now. There was no way I wanted to cry. My emotions were all over the place.

“I can explain,” he began, having the nerve to sound pissed off, but I cut him off.

“You sound like every bad cliché line ever said in a movie.”

His eyes narrowed, and he snapped at me. “I didn’t know you. And as I’ve mentioned, I work with some very dangerous people. So I use an alias, sue me. No way would I give anyone a way to hurt my family because of my choices. Now you have your answer. I’d like some of my own. Whose is it?”

There was a moment when I considered slapping him, but I refrained. “Okay. I’ll give you that because we haven’t seen each other in three months. It’s a logical question, given you don’t know me,” I said, repeating his first words. “Let me set you straight and give you details you probably don’t want to hear but are relevant to your question.” I stopped and took a

breath. “My period is irregular. What that means for me is it isn’t unusual for mine not to show up for a few months. Honestly, I hadn’t given it a second thought until Kelsey asked me if I needed supplies, and I didn’t. While it’s likely nothing, if, and I mean if, I’m pregnant, it’s yours. I haven’t been with anyone else, and Ruin billed me as a virgin and did everything to ensure you would be my first.”

I didn’t go into the things he did do. There was no space for that in this conversation. If I thought he would drop it, I was wrong.

“No one offered you the morning-after pill?”

I glared at him. “For your information, I was too busy defending you to the cops, the nurses, doctors, social workers, my mother and whoever else came to my hospital room that day that I wasn’t raped. I didn’t think about myself. I’m not even sure if they offered it because it didn’t cross my mind. Sorry, I wasn’t exactly thinking straight.”

“Okay. Fine. When were you going to tell me, if at all?”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I glared a few seconds before answering. “When I had an answer.”

He nodded and began to walk away.

“That’s it,” I spat. “No opinions?” I wasn’t sure what I expected.

He spun around with fire in his eyes and stalked toward me. “What opinions do you want me to have? Everything is up to you, no matter how fucked up my life is. Including how I should walk away from you, but I can’t.”

In the next moment, his mouth was hot on mine. I gave as good as I got. We fought for dominance over the kiss until we were frantically peeling at each other’s clothes. He hiked me up and urged my legs around his waist as my back met the wall. His thrust inside me felt like a brand. Everything I felt for him tattooed its way onto my heart.

There was nothing sweet about our lovemaking. It felt angry as if we were both frustrated with our undeniable connection. The earth moved, and it took more than a moment

for my mind to penetrate the sexual haze I was in. We were on a plane, and as that thought materialized, Grant's voice sounded above. I couldn't make out the words, but as the plane shook, I was certain he was warning us of turbulence. But Shawn's kiss on my neck made all that noise disappear. All I wanted was in the now as Shawn pounded his way to my ultimate climax. My inner walls spasmed around his cock, forcing his own release with a roar.

The plane jolted again as Shawn held me there against the wall, his face buried in the crook of my neck, his breath fanning over me. Not until the plane rattled again did he pull out and set me on my feet. The unsettling part was he didn't look at me. He busied himself, gathering his discarded clothes, so I did the same. Though I noticed his bandage looked wet with blood.

"We should redo your bandage," I said. It was a peace offering, as much as I still cared for him.

Not until he was done did he glance at me while he probed that area. "It's fine. We should go strap in," he said as the plane rolled slightly from turbulence.

At a loss for words, I nodded and followed him out of the bedroom, past the sofa into the main area with three rows of seats. Considering his mood, I sat in my original seat on the second row of single seats on the left side. He sat across from me, and I dared a glance and watched him put on his seat belt. Before he finished, I put on my own. When I chanced another look, hoping for an opening to discuss what was going on between us, his eyes were closed.

He hadn't been sleeping enough. I decided to let it go for now. Shortly after, Grant spoke on comms and said that we'd passed the bad patch of air. I got up and Shawn didn't stir. I sighed and went to do what I originally set out to do. However, before I showered, I peed on the stick. In fifteen minutes or less, I would have answers.

Time slowed as my tears mingled with the stream of water. Like it or not, I was falling for a guy who'd told me he wanted to walk away from me. I gave myself the time to mourn the

loss of a potential relationship. Though I vowed to be over it before I got answers to my current problem.

When I had them, freshly dressed in clean clothes, I sat in my seat, eyes closed, wondering how I should feel. I had no idea I'd fallen asleep until Shawn gently roused me awake with a nudge. Startled, I automatically wiped my mouth, grateful to find no drool.

There was no humor on his face, and I jerked my gaze away from his. I unbuckled. By the time I stood up, Shawn was in conversation with Grant. I gathered my bag and walked toward the open door. Their conversation finished when I neared. Shawn exited, and I gave Grant a polite "thanks." Though he smiled, it felt sympathetic, as if he could feel the tension between Shawn and me.

As I descended, I realized I had no idea where I was. It was the first question I asked when I got into the awaiting car after following Shawn through a maze of turns until we exited to a parking lot. The car was once again fancy but not showy. It was a black Nissan Maxima with high-end features.

"We're in New York," he answered.

I wasn't sure what to think about that, as I had more pressing issues. "Are you not going to ask?" He glanced from the rearview mirror, which he didn't need since the display monitor gave him a view of the back. "About me?" I added.

His eye flicked back to the road. "I figured you would tell me when you were ready."

So he'd known I'd gotten up from my seat but had said nothing. Annoyed, I said, "We are going to be parents—"

Anything else I might have said was cut off by a call he received. "Yeah," he said into the phone.

Jealousy rose like a specter when I heard a female voice on the other end. I glanced out the window, not wanting to embarrass myself. I had no claim on this man. Hadn't I learned my lesson on the plane? I guessed not because I was lost in a sea of misery as I wondered who the woman was to him.

“Yeah. I’ll be there,” he said ominously before ending the call. He ran a hand over his head and looked visibly upset.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He appeared to take a breath before answering. “My mom was in the hospital. They believe she had a stroke. I have to go and see her if you don’t mind.”

I couldn’t imagine getting that news. “Of course.”

Everything I put off talking to him about until now was pushed back further. I didn’t think talking about life when his mother had a brush with death was appropriate. That conversation could wait a little longer. Instead, when he placed his right hand down, I covered it with mine, curling my thumb around to his palm. I gave his hand a little squeeze, and he squeezed back.

We stayed like that as we drove through the crowded streets of New York City. The city was bright even in the middle of the night. I was in awe of all the tall buildings. It was true I was from Chicago but in the suburbs. I didn’t often go into the city growing up and soaked in all the sights along the way.

When we turned into a parking garage, there had been nothing to indicate a hospital. But what did I know? He drove by several open spots as if he knew where he was going and parked in a numbered reserved spot. Maybe it was a private hospital, I thought to myself.

He backed in and removed his hand from mine to maneuver. The loss of contact impacted me more than expected. How could I feel so deeply for this man? We hadn’t known each other that long. Yet, I’d had months to dream about seeing him again. And I hadn’t been wrong about our connection.

Once the car was off, I followed his lead and exited the car. He moved with purpose to an elevator that wasn’t marked with any signs or notifications I would expect from a hospital. I kept my questions to myself and assumed all would be revealed soon enough.

And it was. He hit a floor button, and we went nearly to the top of the tall building. We exited to a hallway that had nothing to do with a hospital.

“I thought she was in the hospital,” I said.

He paused and turned to face me in the hallway. “Like I said, she was in the hospital. She checked herself out and said she wanted to die at home.”

That left me gaping as I stood there a second longer as he pivoted and headed to a door at the end of the hall. I caught up with him just as a housekeeper, who wore a black button-up dress with a white collar and white apron, opened the door.

“Mr. Moore,” she greeted.

“Lydia,” he said and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “How is she?”

“Is that Matty?” came a voice from out of view until a stunning, leggy blonde came barreling into Shawn and wrapped herself around him.

A second later, a very attractive man with an amused expression stepped into view. “Babe, we should let them come inside.”

The foyer was full of people. The blonde pulled away, and I noticed for the first time her red-rimmed eyes. The man took her hand, and they stepped out of the foyer around a corner. The maid ushered us in and the opulence of the place came into view. Above, there was an enormous chandelier in the center of the foyer as we stepped onto marble floors. We turned to the left and a bank of windows lined the walls on the right, giving a stunning view of the city.

The room we entered had to be a sitting room with dainty furniture that was fit for a castle. Before I could introduce myself as the housekeeper disappeared from sight, an older man with a full head of gray hair entered.

“The prodigal son returns,” the man, whom I assumed was Shawn’s father, said.

The air in the room suddenly got thick as everyone collectively held their breaths.

“I’m not here for you,” Shawn said. His frown was so deep it could have been permanently etched there.

The elder man let out a humorless laugh. “You have no respect. You show up after years without a word.”

“You know why,” Shawn said.

“Because I borrowed the money I earned.”

“You’d given the money to me. It was no longer your money. If you needed it, I would have gladly given it to you. But instead, you stole it.”

The older man’s color took on a reddish hue. “It was my money,” he shouted.

The blonde jumped between Shawn and his father, who looked ready to smack his son. “Dad,” she said, clearing up my thoughts that she was Shawn’s twin he’d mentioned.

“No. He shows up, with his hair looking like that—” I glanced at his sister. She was a natural blonde, as her brows matched her hair unless she had an excellent stylist. Shawn’s hair was brown and likely not natural, given his father’s comments. “—and brings someone here without a word. You know your mother is in no condition to receive outside guests.”

I could totally respect that and wanted to flee. There were serious issues between father and son, and I felt like an interloper.

“She’s not a guest,” Shawn said. Though he hadn’t raised his voice, menace dripped in every word.

“Then who is she?” his father demanded.

My eyes bounced between the pair as they traded harsh words. “My fiancée.”

His father’s laser focus landed on me, and he looked as if at a loss for words. I certainly was, but he wasn’t. “Is she even —”

“Dad,” the blonde yelled before giving me an apologetic glance.

“She looks almost, but not quite.”

It wasn't the first time I'd heard things like that. I was shocked more at the venomous glare Shawn wore. “She's having your grandchild, so I guess you better get used to the idea.”

A bell rang and continued like someone was frantically shaking it. Everything got quiet as we focused in that direction.

“Matthew.” The voice was loud enough to be heard but clearly weak, and Shawn stepped over to me.

“Give me a minute,” he said, and I nodded even though I didn't relish the idea of being left alone with his father. But there was no way I'd stop him from seeing his mom. I could take his father's hate. It wasn't the first time I'd experienced it.

Shawn bounded down the hall, and his sister followed. His father gave me a once-over, his focus landing on my belly a second before he, too, followed his children.

“Are you okay?” I might have jumped a little as I put a hand on the middle of my chest to stop my racing heart. I'd forgotten that Shawn's brother-in-law was in the room. He held out a hand as he came forward. “I'm Connor, Lizzy's husband.”

“I'm Tayla,” I said, taking his hand, grateful I was reminded of Shawn's sister's name.

“Ignore Ted. He's a product of times long since passed. Though I'm sure Lizzy will make sure he apologizes.”

“It's fine.”

He shook his head. “It's not. But you have to pick your battles.”

I nodded because we could agree about that.

“Tayla.” The voice that had called Shawn's name earlier called mine.

If the house wasn't completely silent, I wouldn't have heard her. Connor held up a hand to indicate I was to walk forward. I followed the path Shawn had taken until I got to an open door on the right. Inside, there was a hospital bed. There was also hospital-grade equipment that was attached to her and taking readings of her vitals.

A hand with nearly translucent skin waved me forward. "You must be Tayla."

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She took my hand in hers. "You are beautiful." She smiled at her son as if giving her approval before returning her focus to me. "Excuse my husband and accept my apologies. I wouldn't care if you were a green one-eyed alien as long as you made my son happy."

Her words felt genuine. "Thank you," I said, stealing a glance at Shawn's father, who appeared appropriately contrite.

She patted my hand and glanced at my stomach. "I hope I'm still around to see my next grandchild."

Lizzy stepped forward. "Of course, you'll be here."

She let go of my hand and seemed to lose energy. "Mom, I can come back later," Shawn offered.

"You just got here," she said.

Connor stepped forward. "I have to go to the club. Why don't I take Tayla with me and give you guys some time?" Connor glanced at me, and I shrugged.

"Thanks, baby," Lizzy said to her husband.

Shawn moved toward me. "Are you okay with that?"

What could I say? This family hadn't been together in years if their father was to be believed. How could I stand in the way of that? "I'll be fine."

He leaned in and brushed his lips over mine, sending a thrill through me. "I'll come get you when I'm done."

Was he putting on a show? He was so upset earlier, but now he acted as though everything was okay. I bit my lip as

butterflies flooded my belly despite it all and followed Connor out. My head was in the clouds, trying to process everything that had been said. Shawn had told his parents I was his fiancée. Had he just said that to get back at his father? The conversation spun in my head as we descended to the garage level. Then I remembered this was the same man who said he wanted to walk away from me. The same man who had lied to me about his name. Who knew what else he wasn't telling me? And I could feel the frown forming on my face. When I glanced around, I couldn't be sure if it was the same level as the one Shawn and I had entered.

“If you don't want to go with me,” Connor began. “I can drop you off.”

I blinked several times and focused on Connor. “No, it's fine.”

If I went to the hotel or wherever we were staying, I'd ultimately be picking apart everything that happened between Shawn and me since he came back into my life.

We reached a marbled ruby-red sports car, and Connor grinned. “It's a Dodge Viper concept car. Only one of its kind. You like?” he asked as he stroked the impressive paint job.

“It's nice. A little flashy. But cool.”

He chuckled and popped the locks. “I'm not usually a car guy like my brother. But this baby stole my heart the minute I saw it.” To each his own, I thought, not wanting to insult the man that was doing me a favor. I think he took my silence as reluctance as he added, “Matt will come for you when he's done.”

For a second, I forgot who Matt was. “Oh, Shawn,” I said out loud when I should have only thought it. I buckled my seat belt. “At least that's the name he told me.” I tried to mask the bitterness, but it came through.

As he pulled out of the garage, he said, “Matt's a good guy.”

“Of course you would say that,” I muttered.

“True. But he really is. First, I should clear something up for you. The name on Matt’s birth certificate is Matthew Sean. The spelling of Sean is different. But staying close to the truth when you are lying is best. Thus, he wasn’t lying about his name, as I don’t think he spelled it for you. And he concealed the truth for the people in that room.”

How could I fault him for that? There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my family. Hell, that had been the reason for my capture in the first place.

“Second, Matt’s business with Ruin is for my sake. When Lizzy got pregnant, he volunteered to look for him so I could be safe for our growing family.” I widened my eyes and turned to face Connor. He bobbed his head but didn’t glance my way. “You see, Ruin ruined my life at boarding school. He and a group of his friends, sanctioned by a teacher, made my life hell. I won’t get into the details, but they had a fight club. The loser gets fucked, literally. And Ruin liked being the winner, so he’d pick on us younger boys who couldn’t defend ourselves.”

I glanced at my nails, sorry for the boy who was now a man. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. But you and I have a lot in common. And I have every intention of using any resources available to me to stop him.”

“You have my vote,” I said.

He was silent a second as all the energy I’d put into hating Shawn dissipated.

“You know something else I’m sure Matt didn’t tell you?”

I looked up. “What’s that?”

He gave a quick glance and said, “He didn’t ask your brother to pay him back the money he paid for you.” I clamped my mouth shut. Dumbly, I hadn’t thought about any of that. “If you haven’t figured it out yet, he doesn’t care much about money.”

“That’s easy for someone who has it,” I shot back.

“Maybe. But Matt’s a different guy. He had a studio apartment in Chicago. You’ve seen his parents’ place. He could afford a lot more.”

Everything he said made sense, but I still had questions. “How much did he pay for me?”

Though I’d been in the room, I hadn’t been in a position to see the screens of the tablets Ruin had given the buyers to use.

“Two million.” Connor dropped that bomb and I coughed.

I might have spluttered if there had been any liquid in my mouth. Suddenly dry, the words out of my throat felt like gravel. “Why so much?” It seemed like a dumb question. Could I really place value on a human being?

“From what I understand, Ruin didn’t run a typical auction. It was a one-time bid. Highest bidder took the prize. Matt didn’t know what to bid but wasn’t going to risk losing.”

A thought hit me. “But he did lose.”

Connor nodded, though his focus remained on the road. “Based on the outcome, we think the original winner may have hit one too many zeros in his zeal to get his bid in. As you recall, he didn’t have the funds to pay.”

What had I been worth to those sick bastards? Two hundred thousand? Twenty thousand? Two thousand?

“I know what you are thinking,” Connor said, breaking into my thoughts. “The point is, Matt thought you were worth two million, even knowing he might never get it back.”

I felt like crying and chalked it up to pregnancy hormones.

We reached yet another underground garage, and I wondered when I would be able to walk the streets in the light of day again. I missed the sun and the heat on my skin. I followed Connor to an elevator after he parked. Only the elevator didn’t move as he pressed a card to a reader. A second later, the back of the elevator opened, and we stepped out into a little room. When the back elevator door closed, a security panel opened on the wall in front of us. Connor keyed in a

code and moved closer as if his eye was scanned before a hidden door opened.

“Wow,” I said. “What kind of club is this?” I was thinking it was like a war room for mercenaries. I never in a million years would have guessed his answer.

“A sex club.” I coughed and tried to mask it as if clearing my throat. Connor thought I was amusing. “It’s okay. Most would never suspect.”

My only thought was, what kind of sex club needed *Mission Impossible* high-level security with secret doors and eye scanners?

We ended up in an almost basic office, given the kind of money he surely had. The furnishings weren’t IKEA. But they weren’t Louis VI replicas, like in Shawn’s parents’ apartment, either. The desk was solid wood that was expensive but not flashy. He didn’t have fifty screens, but one long one that nearly ran the length of the desk. Other than that, there was a matching credenza behind him and not much more. He sat in one of those futuristic chairs that didn’t look like much but was probably way more comfortable than anything I’d sat in and way more expensive.

The two chairs in front of the desk were modern in design, with sleek, clean lines. The one I sat in was more comfortable than I expected, but nothing to write home about.

He steepled his fingers and regarded me. I took that as an opening and asked my burning question. “Why a sex club? You look like a CEO of a Fortune 500 company.” He had that look more than Shawn, of a very privileged, rich man.

He drummed his fingers. “For you, I’ll answer.” He paused a second. “Ruin took a lot of my childhood away. I could have let that trauma negatively affect me for the rest of my life, or I could take ownership of my choices. It took a long time for me to understand my need for control wasn’t just a response to Ruin’s actions. But really, that’s likely who I was all along. You’ve heard of BDSM, right?” I nodded. “For the longest time, I was ashamed of my need for that lifestyle. Truth is,

Ruin did a lot of things to me that I still don't like today. If my needs were a result of him, they wouldn't be selective."

I hadn't ever thought this way. But it made a lot of sense.

"I decided that opening a safe place where people could be themselves in an environment where they wouldn't be judged was needed. A place with rules that would keep out those who don't play by them. Everything that happens here is by strict consent only. And you can stop anytime you want."

It was as if he could see inside of me. I had doubts and self-recrimination for my thoughts. "So if I like being tied up, it's not because of Ruin." Had I really said that out loud?

He grinned. "Fuck no. He may have opened your mind to the possibility, but I'm sure you can think of a dozen things he'd did you don't like." That was true. Though I didn't audibly, I felt myself let out a breath that I'd been holding. "I'm doing a scene tonight. I have a Dom/sub couple that needs my help. After, I can offer the crowd a bondage demonstration. If you want, you can raise your hand, and I'll tie you up."

I laughed because his grin was wide. "And what would your wife think of that?"

He sobered. "Nothing I do to anyone outside of my wife is sexual. In fact, BDSM, although thought of as sex, is really a lifestyle that can be outside of the bedroom. So, no, I would never disrespect my wife. I can tie you up, and you can let yourself decide if you like it or not. Your choice. No judgment or pressure."

When he got to his feet, I thought I might have offended him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply—"

He waved his hand. "It's not your fault. People don't understand. Again, safe place. No one here would judge you whether you do it or not. Whether you like it or not. You can try it and stop at any time. Follow me."

We went across the hall to another room. There was a wardrobe and a sofa on one wall and a large TV on a stand on the other. He opened the wardrobe.

“Although you can enter wearing anything you like, you’d get fewer looks, and people wouldn’t guess your motives if you were dressed the part. There is everything from showing all to showing none. Shoes—” He glanced at my feet. “We have some in your size. Pick what you like if you want to. Everything is new. Again, your choice. No pressure.” He checked his watch. “I should be done in half an hour or so if you want to give it a go. If so, exit to your right. Take the first left and through the door at the end, you’ll enter the club. Keep straight into the main area and you’ll find me on stage.”

“Thanks,” I said before he left.

I sat on the sofa and picked up the remote. I turned on the TV but quickly realized I was being stupid. There was nothing wrong with being curious. And that didn’t mean I had to take him up on his offer. I stood up and went through the clothes that hung on the rack. There were see-through outfits all the way to a latex body suit that covered from head to toe.

My fingers stopped on a black corset-style bodysuit with a strapless sweetheart bust line. There was a zip-up back. It was cut high on the hips, which made it cheeky for the bottom area. Oddly, there was an attached cotton tail on the back and a white ribbon with a bunny print on the front. I checked the tag that was also attached to a bag with some accessories. *Classic Playboy Bunny Costume*, it read, with wrist cuffs, Playboy cuff links, a collar with attached bow tie, and matching bunny ears. The picture showed a woman with everything on. I wasn’t sure about the Playboy thing. The man had died years ago, and the costume was cute. The price tag also said it didn’t come cheap. I locked the door before I put everything on except the bunny ears and wrist cuffs.

There was a mirror on the back of the wardrobe door, and I inspected myself. I had to admit, I looked hot. It wasn’t often I thought that way about myself, but this was sexy. I grabbed a pair of heels as the sneakers I wore would stand out and I wanted to blend in. I left my clothes neatly folded on the sofa and exited the room.

Following Connor’s directions, I went through the door he’d told me about and music poured in. There was a wide

hallway with windows on either side. I hadn't thought about getting back to the office area until the door clicked shut behind me. A twist of my hand revealed the door had locked. *No turning back now*, I told myself.

The windows gave a view into bedrooms. The first room on the left was empty. As was the room on the right, though the bed in there had definitely been used recently. It was the middle row of windows that snagged my attention. I stepped closer to the one on the left as a woman on her hands and knees was getting a pounding from a man behind her while another man fed her his cock from the front. She looked like she was in ecstasy. For a second, I looked away until I remembered if they were doing this in front of windows; they didn't mind being watched. When I looked back, the two guys leaned in and kissed. My jaw dropped. It wasn't like I hadn't heard of such things, but I'd never seen it. The guys kissed like long-lost lovers while still enjoying the woman between them.

I moved away and went to the window behind me. A man had a woman bent over the edge of the bed while he fucked her. She had a fading red handprint on her ass while he held her around her neck. His free hand slapped her ass again as she appeared to moan. I couldn't hear a thing, but that was her expression.

The other two rooms held bodies, but I heard Connor's voice. I was curious about what he was doing and walked forward into a spacious room. There were pillars about the space likely to keep the building from collapsing on the basement area rather than for decorative purposes. There were a couple of platforms about, but one that was higher and looked more like a stage in the middle of the room.

A man dressed in black leather pants and studded straps crossing his chest stood next to Connor, who also wore black pants that looked sculpted for him. Connor, however, was shirtless and had the body for it. His wife was a lucky woman, but damn if I could be the non-jealous type, knowing women drooled over your man every night he appeared. Then again, I had to admit, Connor was droolworthy dressed in regular

clothes. No doubt the man couldn't walk down the street without getting ogled.

When Connor's voice sounded from speakers overhead, I paid attention. Connor was teaching the man the art of spanking. He explained that everyone had a tolerance level of pain. The aim was not to hurt but to find the partner's sweet spot between pleasure and pain.

Connor used the whip on the woman while explaining to the man how to wield it. It was fascinating. Though the woman seemed to get pleasure from it, I didn't see that Connor was. It was more like a teacher demonstration. When the guy did it, Connor corrected him until he got it right. Then the pair went to town while Connor watched like a proud papa.

At some point, the woman reached an orgasm. At least her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and not like a *scary she's having a seizure* way. But like she'd hit that sweet spot Connor spoke of. The man took the woman in his arms and spoke softly. Connor didn't rush them, just spoke some reassuring words to the crowd. Soon, the pair left the stage with the woman still in his arms. A person dressed in a black button-down and black pants appeared and guided them off.

Connor then took to the middle of the stage. "How about another demonstration?" he said, like the perfect ringmaster he was. "How many of you out there have ever craved being tied up?" He hadn't looked at me, but I felt my cheeks pinken. As much as I wanted to try, I couldn't bring myself to voluntarily do it in front of an audience.

A couple of hands went in the air, and I felt my opportunity diminishing. *You can do this. You know you want to.* A second later, I heard a voice near my ear.

"Do you want to be tied up?"

I glanced around and found Shawn. "Yes," I said.

He held out a hand and led me back toward the rooms I'd passed. There was another door on the left that we entered that led to a hallway. We walked to the end, to the room I'd previously seen as empty. Inside was an ominous-looking

device that formed an X. My gaze flitted over to the window, which somehow was opaque, leaving the hallway I'd walked down blocked from view. Connor walked in.

Shawn said, "Connor is going to do the honors and show me how to do this without hurting you. Are you okay with that?"

"I'll only tie you, then I'll leave you alone," Connor said. "No one can see in as you can't see out."

"You don't have to do anything," Shawn said. "It's all up to you."

"Yes," I blurted, not giving it another thought. This was my opportunity to know.

I took a deep breath and gave in to the process. I'd been more than curious about being restrained after Shawn had found me in the mansion, tied and blindfolded. I'd been nervous about being bound in a room full of unknown men until Shawn showed up. Then, everything had been thrilling. Had it been Shawn, or had I liked the idea of giving up control? Or both?

Connor pulled a wide red strip of silky material from his pocket and went into teacher mode. "This is silk and easy to get out of. Hold out your arms together as if getting ready to receive liquid in your hands." I did as I was told. Then Connor began to wind a pattern from just below my elbow to my wrist. On top, he formed a bow. He pointed to the bow as he spoke to us. "Having the bow gives you and your partner easy access to freeing you if necessary." Again, he turned to me. "Does it feel okay?" I nodded, as it wasn't too tight, and it felt smooth against my skin. But I felt nothing more. Had I been wrong? Then again, nothing Connor did had been sexual. It felt almost like show-and-tell.

Then Connor pulled another silk and handed it to Shawn. "In case," he said and winked before leaving us alone.

Shawn held it up, but I shook my head. I wanted to see him. I had so many emotions I was experiencing in the

moment. I needed all my senses available to me. He nodded and put the fabric in his pocket.

Then he took my hands in his. “Do you trust me?”

It was a huge moment, considering everything that happened. Silently, I bobbed my head. He then walked me backward while keeping his gaze laser-focused on mine.

My back hit the wood of the cross contraption. He lifted my arms and my eyes followed. Above was a hook where he attached my bindings. All I had to do was tug at the bow and I’d be free.

“We can stop at any time,” he said before taking a step back and letting his gaze peruse me. It felt like a touch, and I tingled from head to toe.

He stalked forward and spoke so close to my ear that the breath of his words fanned over my skin. I shivered, and goose bumps erupted. “Are you wet for me, my little fuck bunny?”

It was Shawn. “Yes,” I whispered. It was a hell of a thing how much I wanted him to fuck me.

“Then say please,” he commanded. As if that didn’t turn me on a thousand times more.

“Pl-please.”

He cupped my chin and pressed a featherlight kiss to my mouth. I moved in for more, but he was gone. My arms lifted higher, as did the chain until I was on my tiptoes. He came back around and pressed me into the cross with his bigger body. His fingers found the snaps at the crotch and popped them open. His finger slid into my silky depths, and I groaned.

“Fucckkk,” he all but growled. With one hand, he scooped me up. When I was positioned, he let gravity do the rest. My back slid down the wood, and I sank onto his hard length. I hadn’t noticed he’d freed his cock, but I would ask about that magic trick later. Instead, I enjoyed the moment of him filling me, stretching me, thrusting into me. Each stroke was a lightning rod to my core. A diatribe of words like *yes*, *harder*, and *fuck me* came out of my mouth with abandon. I came so

hard I was pretty sure my pussy exploded. I said something as I lost all strength in my limbs, and everything went black.

MATT

HAD SHE REALLY SAID WHAT I THINK SHE SAID? I LAID HER out on the bed before using my phone to send a text to Connor. When he knocked on the door, I stepped outside.

“Can you carry her to the back?”

I nodded and went back into the room to get her. I followed him to the door that led to the private offices. He got in front of me even though I knew the way. I’d only been there once before with Griff, but in my line of work, attention to detail could be the difference between life and death. I tended to remember where I went if I had to retrace my steps.

He opened the door between the club and the employee-only back area. He led me to a room that had a sofa with her folded clothes sitting on it. “You can stay in here until you’re ready to go.”

I laid her on the sofa after moving her clothes. Connor moved in and handed me a light blanket I draped over her. I murmured a question she didn’t answer before I signaled for him to step outside.

“She’s likely going to be out for a little while,” Connor said in hushed tones just outside the door.

I narrowed my eyes. “Should she still be out like this?”

“This shit happens when you’re fucked senseless.” He lightly punched my shoulder. “I’m proud of you, man,” he said with a smirk. I shook my head. “I’m serious.”

“Why?” I asked.

“You went out of your comfort zone.”

“For her,” I clarified. “You said she wanted to know.”

Connor had called and told me she had questions. When I arrived, I barreled forward like a bull, ready to steamroll anyone who got in my way. He hadn’t been specific, but I got the gist by hearing Connor offering to tie someone up on stage. No fucking way I would let any other man touch her.

“Exactly. For her. You’ve gotten bit, my friend.”

He wasn’t making sense. “I’m afraid to ask,” I said.

“You’ve found the one.”

“The one?” I asked with all seriousness. I hadn’t yet decided how much I’d even admit to myself about what I was feeling for her.

“You’ve been with enough women to know this one is different.”

That much was true. “Yeah. And?”

“And the first time I met your sister, I knew she was trouble.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear this story. “She wasn’t my type. Like you, I’d pictured myself with a curvy submissive like Bailey.” He held up his hand. “No, I never saw her that way, but physically and psychologically, she was my type on paper. Lizzy didn’t have enough tits for me.”

My back straightened. “Don’t talk about my sister.”

He held his hands up in surrender. “Give me a minute. She wasn’t my type. Not physically, and she was mouthy. She had so much to say. But even I knew that the first time, if I got close, she’d be it. So I said something rude to her and hoped I’d never cross her path again. Life is a bitch like that. It was inevitable.”

“So I should just give in?” I asked.

He patted my shoulder. “As if you have a choice. You’ve fucked her in public twice. You wouldn’t do that for any other woman.”

“It was life or death,” I demanded.

“The first time, maybe. The second time, you didn’t have a gun to your head. You could have gotten her out of there. You’ve already said you did it for her. What you don’t have to say is that you don’t have any regrets and would do it again.”

He was right. “She’s pregnant,” I snapped, though he’d heard it at my parents’ house.

Connor sobered up then. “Shit’s getting real. Now, not only do you have to man up for your child, you have a choice to make. If you aren’t serious, walk away. Though I doubt you could. Kalen tried with Bailey. And we both know how that went.”

“My job. How can I put my child at risk?”

“You have options, my friend. Besides, we will keep her safe, brother. Now that Lizzy has had the baby, I can take back over.”

“He knows you. You know that. He’s sick enough to have tried to keep tabs on you. I’m the one with an in.”

I told him my plan. Something I’d been thinking about since I got her from the mansion. I’d had enough time to fine-tune the details in my head. This was the first time I’d vocalized it. “The only wild card is Mr. Kingpin himself,” I concluded.

“I have ideas,” Connor said. “Let me think about it. You should take her to the apartment. And when you get there, hold her. It’s a part of the aftercare.” When I looked at him blankly, he added, “Just trust me. We’ll talk about it later. I don’t want her to wake alone.”

Back in the room, she was still asleep. I cradled her in my arms, and Connor pushed all the right buttons for me to get to the garage. He opened the car door, and I got her inside.

We left after I promised I’d call him later or tomorrow. It was crazy late, but sleeping with her was always risky. Sometimes, my nightmares felt so real, and I didn’t want her to be caught in the crosshairs.

Traffic was lighter as we drove to Connor’s place in SoHo. He had a few places around town but had been staying at his

father's, along with his brother and Bailey. Their father had health issues and needed more assistance.

I parked in the designated spot and took Tayla out of the car. She was still sound asleep, and I worried a little. Since I'd met her, I didn't think she slept this hard.

Inside the apartment on the top floor, I went to the right and down the hallway. I bypassed the first bedroom as I knew it to be the one Connor and my sister used. I went to the bedroom in the back. There, I laid Sleeping Beauty down, and she still didn't stir. I reached behind my back and pulled my shirt off. Then I got out of my jeans. My dick was a little raw at the base from the zipper as I had not pulled down my pants to fuck her. But the slight pain was worth it.

I got on the bed and pulled a duvet over us. I pulled her close and let my eyes close as I went over my plan again in my head.

Everything should work as I got to the end. All the details had backups and contingencies. I was certain it could be pulled off. And with that thought, my mind drifted.

The fantasy conjured in my head began with the sun streaming through the windows. The duvet lifted and Tayla was under the covers with a huge smile on her face. She was speaking words, but like in every dream, a lot of things didn't make sense. Though Tayla spoke, she sounded far away. Things only got better when her hand fisted around my cock. When she wrapped her pretty lips around the head, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I let my head fall back and just enjoyed the moment.

When I reared up to watch, everything changed. The sunlight that seemed to shine through the white duvet was gone. Everything was gone. The scene was dark with gray shadows. When a person lifted up to eye me with my cock in their mouth, it wasn't Tayla.

I kicked and scrambled away, uncaring if I fell off the tiny twin bed and the bars that trapped me in a room with a man I didn't really know.

“Shawn.”

Somewhere in the darkness, I heard her voice. I cradled my head, wanting out of this nightmare.

“Shawn.” Someone shook me, and I tried to blink away the horror show playing in my head.

It wasn't until I hit the floor that I was brought back to reality. Sunlight and a beautiful, wide-eyed woman looked at me from over the edge of the bed.

“Are you okay?” Tayla asked.

I glanced down and my softened cock was free from my boxers. Had it been real? Had she been giving me head? I tucked myself back in and sat up. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Not knowing what to say, I kept my head down and scooted so my back touched the wall.

“If you want to talk about it, I can listen. Believe me, I get whatever happened you want to forget. But it helps to talk. It did for me. I didn't want to go to therapy, but my job required I speak to someone and I'm forever grateful.”

“There's nothing to say.”

I could tell she didn't believe me but didn't call me out. She just bobbed her head and disappeared on the bed.

Not wanting to end things like this, I got to my knees and moved over to the bed. I bracketed my face in my hands and looked at her prone form. She still wore that sexy Playboy bunny outfit. My dick responded.

“You know what you can do for me?” I said.

She gave me a shy smile that had my cock punching its way out of my briefs. “What's that?”

“Spread your legs,” I commanded.

When she did as I asked, I crawled my way between her legs and buried my face in her pussy. The vixen had to have been playing with herself as the snaps were still undone, and I thought I'd resnapped them, or had I?

I ate my way to oblivion as she screamed and pulled handfuls of my hair as she came. When it was over, I licked my lips and plopped right next to her. I stared at the ceiling, still trying to vanquish the nightmares from my mind. Deep in thought, I didn't notice her movement until my cock was in her hand. And just like my fantasy, she sucked at the head until she swallowed me whole.

This time, I didn't close my eyes out of fear that my nightmare would return. I pushed at her hair though, wanting to see her lovely face as she sucked me senseless.

After, I held her in my arms. "I'm sorry," I began.

"No need to be sorry. Everyone has nightmares."

"Yeah, but I was talking about yesterday. I wasn't expecting that news. I shouldn't have said I'd walk away from you. I wouldn't. I can't. This thing between us is bigger than me..." I trailed off, feeling at a loss for words. I'd never truly confessed feelings like this before.

"What are we?" she asked softly.

I could tell she was holding her breath. "I don't know. But I can't imagine you with anyone else but me."

"Same," she said.

We were silent for a time. When her stomach grumbled, I asked, "Are you hungry?"

"You heard that?" she asked with a laugh.

"I did. What are you in the mood for?"

"Are you cooking for me again?"

I winked. "Don't get used to it."

The kitchen was stocked as expected. I'd have to give Griff a hard time about keeping this up forever.

She leaned on the counter and said, "Should we talk about the elephant in the room?"

TAYLA

NOW MORE THAN EVER, I HAD TO GET MY HEAD RIGHT. I couldn't afford to drown in Ruin's sins. There was a vulnerable individual growing inside me.

As much as I was unsure about Shawn's reactions, we needed to have this conversation. Though I was distracted by his hair, which nearly covered one eye. It looked like he'd run a hand through it several times.

"What's there to say? You hold all the cards," he said while plating fluffy eggs.

"You have a say," I argued.

He looked up at me as if he didn't believe I would take his feelings into consideration. "I'd say that the life I live is dangerous. And no child should be subjected to that. At the same time, I knew the risks I took. And I'll do what I have to do to protect you both."

"You mean that, don't you?"

His lips pursed, and there was a determination in his eyes that spoke volumes. "They wouldn't see me coming."

He slid a plate with piping-hot food over to me. I ate while deciding if I wanted to know the answer to my next question.

"What does this mean for us? You told your parents we were engaged." I finally asked.

"And I meant it."

I stopped with my fork inches from my mouth. “You know I can’t marry you just because I’m pregnant.” He quirked a brow, and I elaborated. “We have great chemistry, sure. There is no denying our sexual compatibility. But we haven’t even been on a date.”

A sexy smirk formed on his perfect mouth. “I guess I’ll have to rectify that. Have you been to New York before?” I shook my head. “Good. Today’s a perfect day to see the city. Nobody knows where we are. At least for now.”

The idea of a date, let alone him being my tour guide, thrilled me. “I’ll take you up on that,” I said before diving back into my food.

“We’ll stop and buy you a change of clothes,” he said.

It was my turn to quirk a brow. “You don’t like me in sweatpants?” I joked.

“I prefer you naked, but my parents might not.”

“Your parents?” I asked.

“My mother invited us to dinner. That is if you want to go.”

I blew out a breath. “I think your father would prefer if I didn’t go.”

“My father is an ass, and it’s not up to him. It’s Mom’s birthday.” How could I say no to that? “She really likes you,” he added.

“It’s impossible to say no to that.”

He shook his head. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to go.”

“No. It’s fine.”

“Go get dressed then,” he said with a playful slap on my butt.

I eyed him. “I’m going to shower first.”

He flashed me a wicked grin. “You said the magic word.”

I giggled like a damn schoolgirl and ran. “No, don’t follow me. We’ll never leave.”

But he followed.

An hour or so later, we finally left the apartment, and it felt good not to be confined inside or skulking through dirty below-ground tunnels.

It took me by surprise when, after holding the building door open for me, he took my hand in his and laced our fingers together. I couldn’t keep the cheesy smile off my face.

The sidewalk was busy but not crowded. People walked past without noticing our interlocked fingers. They didn’t notice why my eyes beamed like headlights and my heart beat invisible hearts outside my chest. I couldn’t stop the free-for-all that was my emotions. I shouldn’t read more into his jesters. He hadn’t expressed any more feelings for me than his need to protect us.

Hiding the blush spreading across my face from him, I noticed a store with a dress in the window that captured my attention. “Can we stop in there?” I asked.

His gaze trailed over my face, surely seeing the roses bloom on my cheeks. “Yeah.”

He steered us to the bohemian shop. As soon as I entered, I walked over to eye the wheat-colored straight shift with a white cotton tee underneath. It was simple and elegant and, more importantly, looked like something I could afford.

A tiny woman with a mane of curly salt-and-pepper hair approached. “How can I help you?”

“Do you have this in my size?” I gave it to her.

She put on glasses that had been hanging on a cord around her neck. “Follow me.”

We went over to a rack, where she quickly got the dress and top. “You can try them on in the back.”

I glanced over at Shawn, who had a gleam in his eye. I mouthed “no,” knowing if he followed me back there, we

would have sex despite the numerous times we'd done it this morning alone.

He cracked a smile, and I playfully rolled my eyes and headed in that direction. It didn't take long to remove the joggers and shirt and put on the dress and tee. I admired myself a few seconds before I decided to get Shawn's approval. It was his mother's birthday dinner and their apartment suggested they had requirements for dress, even if it was just family attending.

His eyes lit up when I stepped out, giving him points, considering it wasn't a formfitting dress.

"Is this okay? I don't know how formal I need to be." I asked.

"You look good. And as far as the dress, you can wear what you want. I'm wearing this. I borrowed these from Connor's closet," he said, looking far too amused.

He looked damn good, but I didn't boost his ego. "Cool. I'll get this then."

"Do you need help taking it off?"

Luckily, the saleswoman had made herself scarce. I pointed a finger at him, though I flashed him all of my teeth. "You are not coming in with me." I laughed, as did he.

"I'll come with you any time or anywhere."

It was a double entendre, and he winked, confirming it. Amused, I turned and disappeared into the changing room. Once dressed in my clothes, I brought the dress and top to the counter, where the saleswoman waited to ring me up. I was busy giggling at Shawn, who was making faces at me, when my jaw dropped.

"That will be five hundred and ninety-five dollars..."

I didn't hear the rest as I nearly swallowed my tongue. Before I could come up with a suitable way to cancel the purchase, Shawn was there handing her a black card.

"And we want that," Shawn pointed to a mannequin that wore a pair of linen pants in the same color that gathered at the

ankles. “In fact, the entire outfit.”

I hurried over to Shawn to stop him. “I’ll pay you back, but I don’t need the pants.”

“I’ve got this.”

I might have argued, but he was busy pointing out a purse, and I recognized the brand. “No,” I interjected quickly. I grabbed a smaller Tory Burch cross-body bag because he looked determined to get me something. It was still too much, but if I wore it to work, I wouldn’t be looked at like I took bribes. No one on my salary could afford the purse he wanted to buy for me.

We exited with a bulging bag, and I tried not to think about how much he spent. We hadn’t gone far when he led us to a baby store. He picked up a tiny shirt with a picture of a little boy with horns. It read, *My daddy painted horns on my head*. “I have to get this for my nephew,” he said and finished with, “Connor is a painter.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. All the artwork in the apartment is his.”

I couldn’t say I did a study of the decor of the house. My attention had been elsewhere. But when I got up this morning, I did notice a few stunning pieces. “That’s amazing.”

He nodded, but something else caught his attention. A second later, he was holding up a white onesie that read, *Not a Spare*. His grin was infectious, but I was at a loss for words. Confusion quickly melted off his face as he said, “Oh, no. Not for you. My sister. She told me she was pregnant. Again.” The bond between him and his sister had to be special because there was such a genuineness to his amusement. “Not working for you?”

I shook myself out of my thoughts. “Oh. No. I think it’s adorable. You should totally get it.”

He flashed me a grin before heading to the counter with his purchases. The pure genuineness of his delight spoke volumes about his relationship with his sister.

When he arrived with his purchases, he said, “We should go drop these off before we catch a cab to our next destination.”

I had a different idea. “Can we take the subway?” Wasn’t that a part of the New York experience?

He grinned. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

We made a quick pit stop at the apartment. I changed into my new dress and tee as we didn’t know if we’d get back to this side of town before dinner with his parents. That is when I spotted the wheat-colored espadrilles wedges. I hadn’t seen him buy them. But I recognized them from the mannequin in the window that had been wearing the outfit that caught my eye. More surprisingly, they were in my size. How had he known?

I was about to ask when I joined him in the living room, but he cut me off with a kiss. As much as I enjoyed it, I pulled back. “If we don’t leave, we won’t.”

He sighed and held out his hand. “You’re probably right.”

I took it and let the warmth radiating from my heart fill all the empty spaces inside me. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so happy. The dreariness of the subway couldn’t pull the sunshine I walked on. Instead, I took in how Shawn navigated the system like a seasoned pro. The crowds and the few rude people we encountered didn’t wipe the smile off my face. It was a short and direct trip. We didn’t have to change trains as we emerged onto Thirty-Third Street.

I only had to look up and see the iconic Empire State Building. The closer we got, the more crowded it was with people waiting in line to take the elevator up. We walked into the building and Shawn pressed the elevator button as others looked on. When the one that wasn’t designated for tourists opened, we got in. I had no idea where we were going, but he pressed the button for the seventy-eighth floor.

It opened to an impressive office space. An older gentleman almost passed through the lobby area but stopped.

“Matthew Moore.”

For a second, I didn't realize he was speaking to Shawn and glanced around, only to realize we were the only ones in the lobby besides the man who'd spoken. Then I was reminded Shawn was Matthew. Something he and I had yet to talk about.

“Long time,” Shawn said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“What brings you here?” the older man asked.

“I was in the area and wondered if I could speak to you quickly.”

The man eyed his watch, which wasn't a smart one. It was a regular but expensive-looking timepiece. “I have a few minutes.”

“Give me a second,” Shawn said to him and then took a few steps over to me. “You wouldn't mind waiting a few minutes, would you?”

“No problem. Go ahead,” I said. I needed to use the restroom anyway.

He pressed a quick kiss to my lips before darting off with the man. I approached the receptionist, who had watched our exchange. “Is there a bathroom I could use?”

She smiled genially and gave me instructions to a nearby bathroom a few steps from the lobby. I walked to the short alcove and into the bathroom. The decor was something out of a *Homes & Gardens* magazine with a gilded-frame mirror, marble floors, and solid wood stall doors. I lingered at my reflection in the mirror and wondered what Shawn saw in me. I wasn't a beauty like you see in movies, nor was I some femme fatale. I was ordinary, with a mass of honey-brown curls that desperately needed taming. With no makeup, my skin looked blotchy. I pushed back my hair and made a face at myself. I stuck out my tongue and laughed for a second. Then I remembered why I came into the bathroom in the first place. I did my business and after washing my hands, I splashed water on my face as if it would bring life to it. I patted my hands and face dry with towels and exited.

I was a step away from leaving the hidden view of the alcove when I heard the man that Shawn had been talking to conferring with the receptionist.

“As you know, Ana is out today. Could you help me update Mr. Moore’s will? We just need to change his primary beneficiary from his sister to a future wife and any children he may have. We need to update his trust as well. The rest can wait until Ana gets back.”

All the air from my lungs disappeared. I held there a second before I peeked out and saw the man leaving. I took another second before I emerged. By that time, Shawn and the man were headed back my way.

Shawn grinned at me, and I didn’t know what to do other than to smile back. I was at a loss for words for how this man was making changes for me and our child, or so I assumed.

“Do you think we could get up to one hundred and three?” Shawn asked his lawyer.

The lawyer looked amused. “Let me see if we can arrange that.” He walked over to the receptionist. “Can you call management and see if we can get them up to the balcony on the one hundred and third floor?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Russell.”

So that was his name.

Mr. Russell turned to Shawn. “I’ll get those documents updated and ready for your signature when you return.”

The man left, and the receptionist was busy on the phone, so I asked Shawn the question. “What’s on the one hundred and third floor?”

He flashed me a bright smile. “Most people go to the eighty-sixth. The iconic location of the outdoor view atop this building. Then there is the one hundred and two, which is glassed in and smaller. But one hundred and three has a secret view. Only a select few get to go up there. Likely, if they let us, we will be the only ones, and it’s outdoors. Trust me, you’ll love it unless you’re afraid of heights.”

His excitement was palpable, and I didn't want to spoil it. "I'm a little scared of heights." I also wondered, since he knew about it, had he been one of the few who had seen it before?

He took my hand. "I won't make you do anything you don't want, but give it a try if they let us."

Shortly after, a woman entered the lobby and spoke to the receptionist, who pointed us out. "Are you ready?" she asked, looking amused.

"Ready as I can be," I said a little warily. One hundred and three floors from the ground seemed daunting and a real test of my fear of heights.

We followed her to the elevators. One opened, and it was empty. She used a card and a key to access a hidden panel and set our course to the one hundred and second floor. The elevator wasn't gentle in its ascent, something I hadn't noticed the first time. We were from the seventy-eighth floor to the one hundred and second in the blink of an eye. The doors didn't immediately open. She spoke on her phone using code words before she hit the button for the door to open. She waved us out first before, seconds later, she appeared. The area was empty save for a security guard, and she ushered us to a black door off to the side. Using her card again, the door unlocked, and we were quickly hustled inside a small corridor.

In front of us was a steep metal stairway where she waved us to go ahead. Shawn, being the gentleman he was, offered for me to go first. With my heart in my throat, I moved ahead, not wanting to get into a back-and-forth with Shawn as to who should go first.

I waited at the top for the others to join me before the woman took us through another door. The cramped room we entered was filled with equipment and pipes. A door with a window insert was the only outside view, and through it, I got my first view of how high we really were.

My face must have turned green because an amused Shawn took me in his arms and murmured, "We don't have to go."

Though my brain fought me on the idea of stepping outside, I told myself the owners of this building wouldn't allow people up there if it wasn't safe. All I had to do was follow the safety directions. I sucked in air and pulled up my big-girl pants even though I was shaking on the inside. Hadn't Shawn said this was a secret view? I took his hand and let him lead me forward.

"The area is tight, and the railing is short, so be careful," the woman said as she opened the door.

Wind rushed in and I saw what she'd labeled a railing. It was knee-high with a bar set on top you could hold on to. Shawn went first, and I tightened my grip on his hand. The balcony, if you could call it that, was a two-foot-wide walkway. Though breathtaking in every sense of the word, panoramic views of the city's skyline captivated me. It felt like we could see the entire country from up here and possibly touch the clouds. We had a view of the world from an entirely new perspective.

Shawn started pointing out things like the Statue of Liberty. It was when he pointed down and I made the mistake of looking that I swallowed my tongue.

"That's the eighty-sixth floor," he said. The people looked like ants. Then again, they were nearly twenty floors below us. "How about a picture?"

He brought out a phone before I could protest him releasing my hand. I was sure the wind gust would lift me up, and I'd be done for. His giddiness and capturing my fear in his lens made me want to throttle him until he pulled me close, put his mouth on mine, and all my fears disappeared. I wasn't aware of how he maneuvered us to capture picture after picture as we made our way around to see everything. He videoed some of it and promised to send me all the pictures.

When we arrived back at the door, I'd almost forgotten where we were. Our make-out session in between kept my fear at bay.

The woman was waiting and offered to take our picture. Shawn easily handed her the phone, leaving my back exposed

to the railing. Though I smiled, I could only imagine what my face would really look like in the picture. Then we were back inside, being ushered down the steep stairwell and into the elevator that was waiting for us. When we were back on the seventy-eighth floor, the woman bid us farewell.

“You were afraid, weren’t you?” Shawn teased.

“Abso-freaking-lutely,” I admitted. “Have you been up there before?”

He nodded. “As a kid, but it was cooler being up there with you.”

His gaze pierced deep into my soul, and we were edging toward total PDA in the lobby when Mr. Russell appeared. “I have the documents you requested.”

“Just another minute,” Shawn whispered, a hair away from my lips. Then he was gone, and I took a seat where the receptionist suggested. This was the moment I wished I had my phone. Instead, all I had were my wayward thoughts.

As much as I wanted to see the city, I wanted to work on the heat that simmered between Shawn and me. Then, I remembered that sexual chemistry wasn’t our issue. He’d said he wanted to marry me. But what did we really know about one another? Okay, I’d met his family, I told myself. A lot of couples don’t do that until they are engaged. So there was one check. He’d saved my life on a number of occasions. That was a big plus. We’d had a fight, and it didn’t end in fists, so that was another check. How much more did I need to know? What was the magic amount of time or information about a person you needed to be in love? I could guarantee there were people who’d gotten married who knew less than I did. What really was my hesitation?

“Tayla.” His voice was the potion I needed to pull me out of my thoughts. “Are you ready, or are you still scared?”

I rolled my eyes but allowed my happiness to show on my face. “Ready when you are,” I said.

With his arm wrapped around my waist after hoisting me to my feet, Shawn grinned. “Ready for the rest of the tour?” he

asked, mischief dancing in his eyes.

I beamed at him, my eyes surely sparkling with delight. “Show me everything!”

Amid the bustling streets of New York City, my heart swelled with excitement as Shawn, my self-proclaimed personal tour guide for the day, took me to iconic sights like the Rockefeller Center. It was the sounds of the vibrant metropolis that solidified that I was really in the city that never slept.

We made our way to Times Square, where the dazzling lights illuminated even in the day. I marveled at the energy of the busy streets, feeling as though we’d stepped into a movie set.

“I’ll bring you back here at night. You have to see it then as well,” Shawn said with an arm around my shoulder with me tucked tight against him. “Are you hungry?”

The man was always trying to feed me. “I can eat.”

With a mischievous grin, Shawn leaned close and whispered, “Great. I want to take you to my favorite spot.”

Curiosity piqued, I followed him until we arrived at a unique gem—a charming rooftop garden overlooking the city. Twinkling lights adorned the pergola, and an array of vibrant flowers filled the air with a sweet fragrance. But to get there, we entered a building that had painted cast-iron lawn jockey statues that lined the exterior of the building. Inside was filled with antique toys and sports memorabilia that were apparently donated by famous patrons. We were treated as if we were one of them and whisked into an elevator to the rooftop. It wasn’t until after we were seated and left alone that I had a chance to ask Shawn what the name of the restaurant was.

“Are you going to tell me about this favorite place of yours?” I asked as we hadn’t been given a menu or even asked for our drink selection.

His eyes softened as he looked at me. “I come here whenever I’m in town and need a moment of peace amid the chaos of the city. And now, I’m sharing it with you. It’s mine.”

My eyes widened. “Well, mine and Connor’s and that grumpy brother of his.”

“You own this place?” I asked for clarification.

He nodded. “We resurrected it. It’s the historic 21 Club if you didn’t know. Been around since 1922. It closed during the pandemic. We couldn’t let it stay closed so close to the hundred-year anniversary. Kalen, that’s Connor’s brother, wanted to buy it because he and his wife had history here.” I could tell there was more story there, but let him speak. “Connor jumped in because they have this cool basement he wanted to use as an underground private club.”

When he didn’t elaborate, I asked, “And you?”

He shrugged, but some of the joy was wiped from his face. I lifted my eyebrow in question, and he finally continued. “One of the few good days I spent with my dad was here. He and his pals came here a lot and when I was old enough, I was brought in like some male passage into adulthood, though I was only sixteen at the time. I got to taste beer and whiskey and even had a cigar until I puked my guts up. But it was fun.”

It was easy to see that he wished he had a better relationship with his dad. “That’s cool. Though promise me you won’t bring our son here at sixteen for the same thing.”

That turned his frown around. “I won’t because we’re having a girl.”

My jaw dropped. “How can you know that?”

He pointed a finger at his head. “It’s a girl. I know it.”

I would have said more, but food came out in courses of little bites and a pairing of drinks from still water to flavored sparkling water. It felt like he was possibly re-creating his experience with his dad. Our banter was going so well I didn’t want to change the mood by asking.

“I like the water,” I teased.

“That crisp flavor just does something,” he joked back.

“You could have had a beer or something.”

He shook his head. “What’s good for you is good for me.”

I felt the blush and counteracted it with a different question. “Are you going to tell me what it was like growing up in New York?” I asked after a bite of the most delicious lamb. Who would have thought I would have enjoyed lamb?

His expression changed, and I waited on pins and needles to hear his answer.

MATT

IT WAS A LOADED QUESTION. I DIDN'T WANT TO PUT A DAMPER on our lunch by talking about my life as a poor little rich boy. It would sound privileged in the worst way. Still, I needed her to know me. I was learning so much about her just today. One thing that drew me closer was her willingness to try something regardless of her fears. We had that in common.

“My life was easy, probably too easy. So much so, I made life difficult for me and mostly for my parents,” I answered.

She giggled and damn if I didn't want to kiss that mouth of hers. “How so?”

“Well, I didn't want to be rich. Especially after I'd heard my father complaining about those who worked for us. People who didn't have what we did and just wanted a raise or something. He'd be drinking his thousand-dollar scotch, moaning to Mom that our housekeeper wanted a hundred-dollar-month raise. I hated him for that.”

She nodded, which gave me the go-ahead to release some pent-up anger toward the man. “What did you do?” she asked.

“I'd skip school and go to some city park where no one knew who I was or cared how much my parents were worth. Or so I thought. I'd play basketball or go to the skate parks with my board to feel as if I was just like everyone else.”

“Did you make friends?” she asked, with a twinkle of mirth in her eye.

“Yep. That was half the problem. We’d go into corner stores and well, my friends played the sticky fingers game. But I’d always leave last. I’d give the store shop person the money to cover whatever we took. That didn’t stop us from looking like criminals when we left running. We’d get caught by cops. They wouldn’t press charges because, yeah, it was all paid for. But we’d get in trouble for truancy.”

“Did your friends know you paid for the stuff?”

I shook my head. “We’d be in the back of a police car.”

“Same cop car.”

“Not in the end. When they found out where I lived, we were separated. But the cops never ratted me out to my friends.”

Some of the cops had been cool. Others had been harsh, and I did a lot of talking to make sure we were treated fairly. It was part of the reason that led me to join the FBI in the first place.

“What’s your favorite place in the city besides here?”

An easy question I fired off the answer to. “That would have to be this little hole-in-the-wall bar where I learned to play pool and drink like a man.” I laughed, thinking about it. “In fact, Lizzy used to tag along, and she still goes there, or did. It’s where she met Connor. Part of the reason I like him and didn’t kill him when I found out he was banging my sister. He and I are a lot alike.”

“Two rich guys who don’t want to be rich,” she said, but a tilt of her head suggested a question.

I answered. “I don’t hate money. It can be useful. But I’ll never let it own me like it owns my parents. They live to be seen in a certain light because of money. Part of it is how they were brought up, but part of it is a choice. I made mine.”

Dessert came. They were little round, elegantly decorated cheesecake bites. I wasn’t sure what she would like and had arranged for an assortment to be brought to us when I called the restaurant from Russell’s office to warn the staff we would be coming.

“Oh my god, this is amazing,” she said.

She didn't know how badly I wanted to eat her. But today, I'd decided to keep my hands to myself and prove that what we had was far more than sex. And so far, I'd been right. She had an adventurous spirit. I'd known that much from her working for the FBI.

I picked up a dulce de leche cheesecake and asked, “If everything was taken care of, where would you go in the world and why?” before taking a bite.

“That's hard,” she said, tapping a finger to her chin. “There are so many places.”

I held up a finger and swallowed my bite before I said, “Only one.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” She thought for another second before saying, “Initially, I would have said Egypt. I think it would be cool to see the pyramids in person. So much history there. But if I only get one, I'd say Italy for the same reasons.”

A laugh burst from me. “Oh, you're a cheater.”

She shrugged. “You didn't specify city versus country. You said place.” I had to give her that one. “What about you?”

I didn't have to think. “Anywhere, as long as I'm with you.”

Her jaw dropped, and I flashed a smirk. “You are too smooth.”

She'd used those words before. I shrugged. “You said place,” I repeated. “And my place is with you.”

With that, I got up, drew her to me and kissed that sweet mouth of hers that I'd been dying to kiss. She tasted like chocolate ganache cheesecake. I used one hand to cup her face and the other I let fall to the small of her back to draw her closer.

She tightened her grip around my waist and lifted on her toes. She was so soft everywhere I was hard. Though there was a roof of sorts above us. Everything above the short wall

was open air. We would be seen if we took things to the next level.

Though I didn't want to, I pulled back. "As much as I want to devour you, I promised you a date." I flashed my teeth and took her by the hand.

"Next stop?" she asked. Her eyes were filled with the same desire I felt.

I swallowed as my mind raced with where we could go. In the end, I said, "Central Park."

We walked the seven blocks to Fifty-Ninth Street. To the sides of the gated entrance, horse-drawn carriages lined the way. As we drew closer, my ire grew. Some of the horses looked tired and likely thirsty. My sister had ridden horses when she was younger, and I'd spent a fair amount of time in the stables when she had lessons.

"Give me a second," I said to Tayla, letting go of her hand and heading to confront the first handler I got to.

Starting a fight wasn't the best course of action, even if I wanted to. I wouldn't ruin Tayla's first day in New York that way. Instead, I used the next best option.

"I'll pay you for a ride, but I want you to rest and water your horse for the time it would take us for the ride." A carriage had just pulled off with a family of four. "You stay here until they get back, and I'll double your fee."

The man didn't have to think about it too long. He accepted the first half of the payment. I made the same offer to two more handlers whose horses looked worse for wear. When I was done, I asked the one I had just spoken to for the brush. He knew what I was referring to. A minute later, he produced one. I waved Tayla over.

"Have you ever brushed a horse?" I asked. She shook her head. "Here, do it just like this. It helps to relax them, and honestly, it's relaxing for me."

I showed her how and then handed her the brush. The smile on her face thawed my heart even further. I got a brush from another handler and brushed that horse as we waited. Not

long after, a carriage arrived with an enthusiastic horse. I handed the brush over and went to see that handler and arranged a ride.

“Are you ready?” I asked, having sidled up behind Tayla and whispered in her ear.

With only a grin, she slayed me. I would have done anything for her. Suddenly, it clicked what Connor said about knowing when you have the one. The one woman who would own your heart. He said it would hit me like a sledgehammer and there would be no denying it. He said it had been like that for him with my sister and he’d tried to ignore it. But ultimately, couldn’t.

I led Tayla over to the carriage and helped her up. I didn’t immediately get in and asked the guy to wait a second as I went over to proposition the three handlers in another bid to give the horses more resting time. I offered them additional money to wait until I got back. They took me up on it. Luckily, I’d gotten cash from my mom, who believed in keeping money in the house. She didn’t completely trust banks and I’d wanted more cash than I could get from an ATM at one time in case something came up.

After that was done, I got in the carriage and sat next to Tayla. Unable to keep my hands to myself, I grabbed hers as we began the tour of Central Park. I’d chosen the long ride, and we saw everything from the Wollman Rink. New York’s famous ice-skating rink where *Love Story*, *Serendipity*, and *Home Alone 2* were filmed. We rode by the carousel and the Central Park Zoo. We also saw the Boathouse and Tavern on the Green, the most lucrative famous restaurant in the world, and other places where movies were filmed. An hour later, we returned and the three handlers were still there. I paid them and felt better as the horses looked perkier after the rest and water.

“That was amazing,” Tayla said.

Though I had seen it before, it was different being with someone who was only seeing it for the first time. I noticed things I’d taken for granted. “It was.”

“You’ve seen it before,” she teased.

“Not with you.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re a charmer who charms all the ladies.”

I brought her hand to my lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles. “Only you.”

A blush crept over her beautiful skin. “We’re taking a cab to the next stop.” She pouted and so I took the opportunity to kiss her. “Trust me. Besides, you need to see New York above ground,” I offered.

“Fine, and I do trust you.”

After everything she’d learned about me, that surprised me. And yet, I was still holding back. This time, it wasn’t my secret to share. It was, for lack of a better word, classified, or rather on a need-to-know basis, who I worked for. I could only hope if she ever found out, she would forgive me just the same.

We could have walked, but I hailed a cab instead of an Uber. Though she hadn’t complained, she was wearing wedges, and I didn’t think they were the most comfortable shoes ever. Since I didn’t want a record of our movement, I’d gone the cab route. Plus, I wanted to pay cash. Cabs were becoming less common in the era of Uber and Lyft, but they weren’t obsolete. We got in and drove for about five minutes.

“Are we going back to your restaurant?” Tayla asked.

She paid attention and recognized how close we were. “No. Better,” I said as the cab let us out at 653 Fifth Avenue.

“Cartier?” she asked.

I nodded. “The building consisted of two conjoined residences. The Plant House, which is considered one of the remaining Gilded Age mansions, and the Edward Holbrook residence.”

She looked skeptical. “So we are here as tourists,” she said, with one brow arched.

I winked at her. “You are. I’m your tour guide,” I said as I led her to the doors of the store.

Her eyes went everywhere as we entered the store. The ceilings were extremely high, and the space was expansive.

“Can I help you?” A man offered as we entered.

“I don’t have an appointment, but I hoped to see—” and I gave him the name of the sales associate I usually dealt with. “If he’s not available, then your next available associate.”

The man nodded. “Someone will be with you shortly.”

Tayla had wandered in, and I found her looking at a display of Cartier’s iconic LOVE bracelets. They were oval, with the horizontal line inside the letter *O* spaced evenly around the bracelet, alluding to the bracelet’s locking mechanism.

“You should try one on,” I said when I reached her.

She held up her hands. “No way. Everything in here is more than a month’s paycheck.”

I knew that the sales associates in this store made more than most federal government employees not working in this state and not from commissions, just straight salary.

A woman approached, and I assumed the associate I’d asked for was busy. “Would you like to try one?”

Before Tayla could protest, I said, “Yes.” She looked at me and I smiled.

The sales associate asked, “Which one?” and pointed at one with diamonds.

“No,” Tayla quickly said. “That one is fine.” She pointed a finger at the plain one without diamonds.

The associate took out the gold bracelet and used a special screwdriver to lock it around her wrist.

“Looks good,” I said.

There was no mistake that Tayla liked it, too. “It’s beautiful, but no. Please take it off,” Tayla said.

I gave the associate the briefest of nods. She nodded back, and I took that as she understood my meaning. After it was back in the case, we drifted through the other rooms, but nothing caught my eye. We headed upstairs, and I grinned to myself. I ushered Tayla into the Grace Kelly Salon, knowing what we'd find there.

Tayla's eyes sparkled like the diamonds in the display cases. I knew she wouldn't try on any of the engagement rings, but I watched her expression carefully to gauge what struck her fancy. Soon, I saw it and made a mental note as she leaned over and spoke. "I don't think I've ever seen diamonds this large in person."

I chuckled. "Not a fan?"

"Not practical. You'd need security everywhere you go."

I'd gotten the information I needed and said to the associate who had followed us, "Can we go see the broaches you have on hand?"

"Why don't I take you to one of the private rooms?" The associate suggested.

We were led to a private room where the ceilings weren't as high as in the main area, but the furnishings were still as elegant as those for the public.

"Take a seat. I'll grab a few things for you to look at."

After the associate left, Tayla turned to me. "Care to share why we are really here?"

I love how uncomfortably cute she looked. This wasn't her scene, but she was being a good sport about it. "I did mention it's my mother's birthday." Her sexy mouth formed an *O*. "She collects broaches. And since I'm in town, I thought I would see what her favorite designer had to offer."

What I didn't say was that Mom was distantly related to the Cartier family from long before they opened a store in the States. My bet was that Mom would tell the story tonight after she opened my gift.

“Oh,” Tayla said in response to why we were there. “That’s good and really sweet of you.”

“I send her a gift every year for her birthday and Christmas.”

“Your dad?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

I didn’t have to explain myself, though I was sure Tayla understood the disdain I had for my father.

The associate came back in with a velvet-lined tray. On it were several broaches. From simple to over-the-top, one caught my eye. I turned to Tayla. “What do you think?”

Her eyes slid over the diamond-encrusted panthers and white jade elephants with diamond accents to the same flower broach I’d decided on. “One of these,” she said.

“We have similar tastes,” I said.

“The pink is pretty, but I think I like the blue,” Tayla added.

“Good choice. This is made of aquamarines and has a one-carat pink diamond with smaller diamonds at the base,” the saleswoman said. She was referring to the diamond portion as the stigma and style parts of a flower.

“We’ll take it,” I said and handed over my card.

“You’re not going to ask how much?” Tayla blurted, and then her cheeks reddened when the associate gave her the price.

I let the associate almost leave before I got up from my seat so that I could have a private conversation with her without Tayla overhearing.

“Please gift wrap everything,” I said before I reached her.

“Sure thing, Mr. Moore.”

I added what else I was buying under my breath. The associate left, and I turned back to Tayla. I checked my watch. “From here, we will go to Mom’s if that’s okay.”

Tayla looked like she swallowed a pickle. “Yeah, okay,” she managed to say.

She was likely overwhelmed by the amount of money I’d just dropped on my mother. “If you think about it, it’s really my dad who is paying for this since he claims the money in my trust is his. And likely, Mom will leave it in her will to our daughter. I see it as a contribution to our child’s investment portfolio.”

The government paid for everything from my apartment to my meals for the last couple of years. I didn’t spend money on anything but gifts for my mother and sister. All my earnings were just sitting there. So why not buy something that would make my mother immensely happy?

Tayla’s face split into a grin. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

I closed the distance between us. “I believe that money doesn’t buy happiness. But my mother will be thrilled with her gift.” Then I kissed her. She kissed me back, the desire edging up another level. “We could skip dinner,” I suggested.

TAYLA

THE ATTRACTIVE FEMALE ASSOCIATE WHO COULDN'T KEEP HER eyes off Shawn cleared her throat when she entered. We pulled apart, and the woman held out a red shopping bag. I got a peek of a white package with a red ribbon and a red waxed seal inside.

“Thank you,” Shawn said to the associate.

She smiled at him like he hung the moon. He was handsome and had spent nearly three hundred grand on a brooch that was about three inches long. So I got it, though I was still in sticker shock. Shawn, however, was completely clueless about her attraction to him, which kept my jealousy at bay.

“I can give you guys a tour,” the associate offered.

Shawn looked at me, so I answered. “I think we’re good.”

He added, “Do you think you can arrange a car to drive us to—” he rattled off an address.

“Sure thing. Give me a minute.”

“We will wander a bit and meet you downstairs,” he said.

She nodded. With his hand in mine, we exited the private room and meandered through the store. On the way, he pointed out a portrait of Mae Caldwell Manwaring Plant, the wife of Morton F. Plant, who had originally owned one of the two houses that made up this building.

“Can you believe the Cartier family bought the property for one hundred dollars and a string of pearls?” Shawn asked.

“That’s a bargain.” A mansion being sold over a hundred years ago for that was crazy.

“Of course, the pearls were said to be valued at a million dollars.”

“That makes more sense.”

The associate came and walked us out of the building to an awaiting black SUV. The driver stood in a black suit and opened the door for us. I guessed that was the treatment you got when you spent the kind of money Shawn had in a matter of minutes.

I kept my gaze out the window as we drove, taking in the sights of New York. But also, I hid my nervousness. I didn’t want a repeat of yesterday with his father questioning my worth when it came to his son. Even though Shawn had given him shit about it, today, more than ever, I felt our differences. He’d grown up living on Park Avenue, which was night and day from where I grew up in Chicago Ridge.

The most expensive gift I’d gotten for my mother was around three hundred dollars, and I’d been so excited to see her unwrap it. He’d just spent a thousand times that for the same reason.

The car stopped, and his parents’ doorman came to open the door for us. I hated that I now felt uncomfortable. Maybe because we’d gone through the garage last night, I hadn’t really had a clear picture of the wealth I was walking into.

Shawn handed out cash to the driver and the doorman like candy. I didn’t see the amount, but I would guess it was enough, as both men seemed pleased with the tip.

Once we were in the elevator going up, Shawn said, “Is everything okay?”

For once, we weren’t touching. He watched me from across the elevator. I forced a smile I didn’t feel on my face. “It’s fine.”

“If my father is an ass, we don’t have to stay,” he said, his gaze heavy on mine as if waiting for a reaction.

“I’m sure it will be fine.” As much as I wanted honesty in a relationship, I didn’t want to bring up my misgivings before he saw his mother on her birthday. I could make it through one night. We could talk later if things went badly.

The elevator dinged, and he took the two steps to me. With his hand on my back, we walked the familiar steps to the end of the hallway.

His former nanny and current housekeeper to his parents opened the door. Shawn gave her a tight hug as if she were family. I was sure he thought of her that way.

We were brought into an opulent formal dining room. The table was set with Waterford crystal, Wedgwood fine bone china plates, and actual sterling silverware with cloth napkins. An extravagant vintage chandelier hung above it all. It all looked too pretty to actually use.

Lizzy stood and came over, giving me a hug with the same affection that Shawn had given his former nanny. Today, Lizzy looked like the rich girl she was. Her hair was pulled back. She wore a button-down shirt and pants that likely cost more than I would ever consider spending on clothes. Connor stood, and he looked the same and greeted me with a quick hug. Like Lizzy, he wore pants and not jeans. Though the outfit I wore was expensive by my standards, I felt as though I was dressed in Walmart clothes compared to them.

I was grateful Shawn wore jeans so I didn’t feel completely out of place. We were just about to sit when the matriarch walked in with her husband by her side. She moved really slowly, and I almost jumped over to help, but Shawn was there. I loved how he loved his mother. Between father and son, they got her seated at the head of the table. Connor and Lizzy were on one side, and Shawn and I were on the other. Shawn sat nearest his mother, which left me closer to his father.

“I’m so glad all of you made it,” Shawn’s mom said.

“Thanks for having me,” I chimed in. I purposefully didn’t look in his father’s direction. Connor’s amusement, on the other hand, was hard to miss.

“You are in for a treat,” his mom said. “I hope you like seafood. Lobster Bisque is our first course.”

As if on cue, a team of servers came out with elegant little bowls filled with the rich and creamy confection. And another server was filling our wineglasses. I was given sparkling apple cider in place of wine. It all tasted wonderful, and I might have licked my bowl if I had been alone.

It wasn’t long after that our bowls were removed and replaced with another little bowl filled with kale greens, pears, candied walnuts, gorgonzola, and a honey vinaigrette.

“I should have asked if you have any food allergies,” Shawn’s mom said.

I glanced over and said, “No, ma’am. I don’t.”

She held up a hand. “No ma’am here. Call me Kathryn.”

“Kathryn,” I said, and she smiled.

On most occasions, I forced myself to eat salad because Mom always preached about eating balanced meals. But this salad was simply divine. I’d been excited for the small portion, but now I longed for a bigger one.

“This is so good,” Lizzy said.

“It’s mother’s favorites,” Shawn pointed out.

“Wonderful for you to notice,” Kathryn said as his father remained mute. “Do you know the next course?”

“Fillet Mignon,” Shawn answered. She reached over and covered Shawn’s hand but spoke to her husband. “Ted, you’re quiet.”

I enjoyed the fact that he hadn’t spoken. “Enjoying the meal, dear.”

The servers came in and, once again, made our bowls disappear. We were given a normal-sized plate with a fillet severed atop a bed of mashed potatoes and asparagus, with a

drizzle of sauce around. I wasn't a fan of the latter, but I would eat everything. Turned out I could be swayed. The asparagus wasn't the mushy affair I'd eaten before. It was crisp with a buttery richness that pleased my palette.

Even though the portion sizes were on the smaller side, I felt full after that course. I couldn't imagine being able to eat more until the crême brûlée was brought out. That was a favorite of mine and didn't disappoint until it was gone.

I was considering how to ask for seconds when Kathryn said, "I know this wasn't a traditional four-course meal, but I do hope you enjoyed it."

"Everything was lovely. In fact, I was considering the merits of asking for seconds," I admitted.

That got a round of laughs except from one. "There is a reason for the portion sizes," Ted said.

Kathryn admonished him. "Ted. Please."

Lizzy also glared at her father. "Dad," she said with a frown on her face.

I didn't look at Shawn, afraid I'd embarrassed him. But his hand took mine under the table and squeezed. "I wouldn't mind seconds myself." He pulled my hand from under the table, and I finally faced him. His expression was soft on mine as he kissed my knuckles. "Isn't it refreshing to have honesty around here?"

Lizzy shook her head at her brother, but there was amusement in her expression.

"I want to thank you all for coming, but I'm feeling tired," Kathryn said.

"Wait. You haven't opened your gifts," Shawn said.

Lizzy jumped in. "Me first."

"Of course. What did you buy her? A private island or, say, a planet?" Shawn joked.

"Jealous, Matty?" Lizzy said, reminding me once again his first name was Matt, not Shawn. I hadn't yet reconciled that in

my head.

Shawn rolled his eyes, which I almost didn't catch as my gaze bounced between the pair. Lizzy picked up an envelope I hadn't noticed from the table. She handed it to her mother. As Kathryn opened it, Lizzy told us what the gift was.

"We've made a donation to one of your favorite charities, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, in your name. I know it's near to your heart."

Shawn leaned over to me. "Mom's twin died at a young age from a rare disease." I nodded.

"A donation?" Their father questioned. "How is that a gift?"

"It's in Mom's name. You can take the tax donation," Lizzy said sarcastically. Then she turned back to her mother. "And when you're feeling better, there are tickets for the New York Philharmonic. There are several open dates."

"That's lovely, dear," Kathryn said.

Lizzy stuck her tongue out at her brother. He shrugged as he pulled out a white package. I was surprised he hadn't handed over the bag too, but I thought that might be crass in their world.

"What's this?" Kathryn said as if she didn't recognize the Cartier ribbon. Shawn had to help her as her strength waned. But when she opened the inner red leather box, her eyes twinkled with delight. "You shouldn't have. It's gorgeous." She turned it around and showed everyone. "I saw this on their website and hinted to your father..."

A smirk formed on Shawn's face, and I would have high-fived him for one-upping his awful father, but I kept my hands in my lap.

"Do you really need another broach?" Ted said, sounding bitter and spiteful.

Kathryn ignored her husband. "Shawn, can you help me to my room?"

Lizzy stood too, and air-kissed her mother before Shawn and Kathryn left. It was a few minutes before they exited the room. With all the dishes gone, I assumed once Shawn returned, we would leave.

“What is it that your parents do?” Ted asked.

Since I was the only one he didn’t know, he was speaking to me. I faced him with a smile on my face, as I was proud of my parents. “My mother is a CPA, but she now teaches at the community college. My dad is a retired officer with the Chicago PD.”

“I would have guessed blue-collar,” Ted commented.

I ignored him and pulled out my phone and found a picture of them, including my little sister, which I showed to the group.

Lizzy and Connor grinned as Ted frowned. “Where do you get your coloring from?”

It hit my bullshit meter and smashed it. “You know what? Not that it matters to me, but maybe it will to you. I share half my DNA with an entitled asshole like yourself. His name is Dwight Royal. You might have heard of the Royal Hotels. But just because that man gave his sperm to my creation doesn’t make him my father. The man who earned that name is the man in the picture I shared. He’s a hardworking man who gave his life in service of others and is a better man than you’ve shown yourself to be.”

I hadn’t meant to share the Royal name. I’d never told anyone who didn’t know who my biological father was. But Ted crawled all over my nerves and I had to wipe the smugness off his face.

Lizzy glared at her father. “Dad—” she began.

What we hadn’t noticed was that Shawn had come back until we heard what sounded like a growl, interrupting whatever Lizzy was about to say. “Apologize to her. Now,” Shawn commanded. Though his voice was controlled, there was a deadliness to it that chilled to the bone.

“What? I’m not allowed to inquire about my future daughter-in-law?” Ted said, feigning innocence.

“We both know what you were doing,” Shawn gritted out.

Lizzy stood to get between her brother, who had menacingly crept forward, and her father. “Dad, this is ridiculous. Tayla is lovely and if you continue to act this way, I won’t come around either.”

Ted straightened and looked at me. “I’m sorry if you took what I said incorrectly. I was just curious.”

Shawn moved, but Lizzy’s hand on his chest stopped him. It was Connor who spoke next.

“You don’t want to end up a lonely old man like my father, with no one who cares. Lizzy has agreed to take over your company with my help. But I won’t be on board assisting anyone with bigoted views.”

“And don’t leave it to me. I’ll sell it piece by piece,” Shawn warned, speaking of their family business.

Moving faster than anyone his age should, Ted got to his feet. “Over her?” he asked, his narrowed gaze aimed at his daughter.

“Yes,” everyone except Ted and me said in unison.

“Fine,” Ted snapped.

“If you aren’t better, Dad. I’ll tell Mom. We both know who’s really in control,” Lizzy said to her father before he stormed out of the room. She turned to me. “I’m sorry—again.”

“You can’t change an old fool in a day. My father is still trying to repair a relationship with my brother, whom he abandoned,” Connor added.

Shawn came over to stand by me. “We’re leaving.”

Lizzy pouted. “Will we see you again?” she asked her brother. Something unspoken was exchanged between them. Lizzy amended her offer by turning to me. “How about lunch

tomorrow? You and me and I'll bring Bailey. She's dying to meet you."

I blurted, "Sure," before I put any real thought into why Shawn was bowing out of lunch.

"Girls' thing," Connor said to Shawn as if to absolve him.

"Oh," Shawn began. "I bought something for my nephew. It's a shirt with devil's horns, and it says, *My dad drew horns on me.*"

"It's super cute," I added.

Lizzy and Connor laughed until Shawn said, "And I got this onesie that says, *Not a Spare.*"

Connor glanced at his wife. She said, "I planned to tell you."

Shawn, with a look of remorse, said, "Oh, I didn't know you didn't know."

Connor fingered the diamond collar around Lizzy's neck. "I think you wanted to be bad."

She said, "Maybe." And I swore she said *Sir*; but I couldn't be sure.

"Time to go," Shawn announced and led us out of the apartment.

Surprisingly, the same driver that dropped us off was waiting. We didn't talk about anything personal, as we would have been overheard.

"I wish I could have seen your nephew," I said, breaking the silence.

Shawn's face lit up. "He's a little devil, but I love that guy like you wouldn't believe."

"He gives his parents hell, huh?"

He chuckled. "He does. His answer to everything is no, and it's hilarious."

"Doesn't sound fun to his parents."

His eyes twinkled. “You just have to figure out questions with negative responses that get you what you want. Like, you don’t want to stay awake, do you?” He laughed again. “It’s fun to watch when he realizes he’s not getting his way. He grins and laughs but gives in.”

He was probably more ready for this parent thing than he realized and my heart warms.

We drove through Times Square so I could see it at night. It was just like you see on TV, lights everywhere with crowds. I chose not to get out and walk, preferring to get back to our home base.

When we arrived back at the SoHo apartment, Shawn pinned me to the wall and kissed me breathless.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said and teasingly walked away from him.

“Did you enjoy the day?” he asked.

Over my shoulder, I coyly said, “For the most part.”

His face changed. “I hate how my father ruined the evening.”

I faced him now. “Tried to. I refuse to let the man steal my joy.”

He caught up with me and snagged my hand. “I wanted to kill him.”

I reached up and put my hand on his cheek. “He’s not worth the consequences.”

He took my hand and kissed my fingertips. He certainly was handsy, and I loved it. “You’re worth it.”

My heart melted like ice in hot coffee. Still, I found the courage to ask the question. “What are we?” and then bit my lip, almost afraid of his answer.

“Together.”

“That’s it?” I hated to be ungrateful, but I needed a label. “Do you even know how you feel about me?”

He tugged me back over to the kitchen island, where he left the Cartier bag he'd brought back with him. He picked it up before setting it on the ground as he bent on one knee. All the air in my lungs evaporated.

"What are you doing?" I asked as he started to pull something out. "Don't ask because my answer is still no," I blurted. "Nothing has changed. I don't even know how you feel about me."

The hand that was in the bag dropped down, but then he pulled out a red leather box. Inside, the bracelet I'd tried on nestled there. "There isn't a word big enough to describe how I feel."

"You didn't have to buy me that," I said as his words rang in my ears.

"It's a promise," he said as he put it on my wrist and used the screwdriver to lock it in place. "I'll forever make sure you and our child are taken care of. That's my vow."

The bracelet's cool metal chilled my skin, and goose bumps rose. "I don't need this to trust you."

"But I need you to wear it."

Was it his way of staking his claim? Did I care? Not in this moment. I drew him to his feet and cupped his cheeks as I pressed my lips to his.

He pulled back and the heat in his gaze scorched my skin. "I had a lot of fun today. Did you?"

I was thrown off because our conversation was a bit all over the place. "Yeah, I did enjoy hanging out with you. Why?"

"As much as I want to touch you, I need you to understand there is more to us than sex."

I couldn't stay serious with the playful look on his face. I licked my lips and he watched. The wall of flames between us grew. I teased him with a flirty smile. "So, you just want to cuddle tonight?"

He shook his head. “You know I don’t. But I will if that’s what you want. You are important.”

What he didn’t say was *to me*. “My therapist says sex is important.”

“Is it now?” His smirk made me so wet.

“It is. But I do want a cuddle... Just naked,” I said and sashayed away.

He caught me half a second later and spun me around. He hooked his hands under my ass and lifted me up. I gasped, and he took the opportunity to snake his tongue across mine. I landed on the island as he hiked up my dress.

“I need to be inside you,” he whispered as if it took effort to speak. He cupped my breast as his thumbs swept over my nipples as they hardened.

I nodded vigorously, not wanting to break the moment with words.

Seconds later, he thrust inside me, stretching me as he moved his hands to part my thighs farther so he could seat himself to the hilt. We both groaned while he held still for a moment before he began to move in earnest to a pace we both desired. It didn’t take long, as the heat between us had been building all day. Soon, I was screaming his name as he groaned mine.

Panting, he lifted me up, and I wrapped my legs around him as he walked us to the bedroom we’d been using. There, he made love to me again. This time, with slow and purposeful movements. Moonlight shone on his face as he gazed at me with a tenderness that mirrored what was unspoken but still in my heart.

Even after we peaked, Shawn didn’t pull out. He pulled me closer. I jokingly said, “Is your arm going to go to sleep?”

“I sleep better with you in my arms.”

A stupid cheesy grin played on my lips because it was those words that made me hope that there was so much more between us than great sex and a baby. Knowing that I gave

him as much comfort from our dark thoughts as he gave me, I was over the moon. I drifted off with our bodies curled together as if we were one. I awoke to the bed cooling beside me.

I got up, wrapping a sheet around my naked body and padded through the dark halls of the apartment on bare feet, afraid of what I might find.

When I entered the living room, moonlight streamed through the open windows, casting light across his beautiful face I could only see in profile. He sat on the sofa, staring out into the night with a picture-perfect view of the city skyline in the distance.

“Is everything okay?” I asked before yawning. I was so tired; it was hard to keep my eyes open.

He turned and then lifted a hand in a gesture that matched his words. “Come here.”

I shuffled over, the sheet making soft dragging noises as I made my way over to him. He held out his arm and I sat down, curling myself against him.

“Can’t sleep?” I asked, noticing though he was bare-chested, he wore pants. Something I would think about in the morning.

“Better now that you’re here.” He said nothing more as his hand stroked up and down my arm as he stared forward.

I shifted my attention from his face to the window, where his gaze was fixed. “You love it here, don’t you?”

He wasn’t quick to answer as his hand kept a steady rhythm, sliding up and down my arm with light fingertips. “What’s not to love? Especially now.”

There wasn’t a rush to speak. When I did, I asked, “Why now?” I didn’t know if he was talking about the time or year.

“They say it’s a city that never sleeps. But they are wrong. The city is quietest right now when the night owls finally pass out before the morning birds get up.”

I yawned again. “Yeah,” because I had no idea what time it was other than before dawn, as the sky was still pretty dark.

He’d obviously noticed my yawn because he said, “You should go back to bed.”

It was like a chain reaction as I yawned bigger, feeling sleep pulling me back under. “I sleep better with you.” I couldn’t remember if I’d confessed that before I was so sleepy.

“Same,” he said, giving me a little squeeze.

Just as the jaws of sleep drew me back, I jokingly mumbled, “It’s not always sex between us, is it?”

I wasn’t sure he heard me as he didn’t answer. Vaguely, I felt myself being lifted at some point. Then I felt the soft mattress underneath me. The warmth of him at my back sealed my fate as I relaxed in dreamland, feeling completely safe.

It could have been minutes or hours. I didn’t know. What I did feel was him pulling away. “Don’t go,” I murmured, unsure if I was dreaming or not.

“I have to.”

I blinked, trying to clear my vision. “Why? Stay.”

“I have to keep you safe.”

“You have to stay with me,” I pressed, hearing the whine in my voice but still too groggy to be sure if the conversation was real.

“You are my home. I will always find my way back to you.”

That made me smile, and I drifted off, grateful the dream hadn’t turned into a nightmare.

Hours later, when I awoke to sunlight bathing my skin, his side of the bed was cold. He really had left. I sat up in a lurching movement. I headed for the shower as my emotions got the best of me. I allowed my tears to flow as I made a decision.

I dressed in the pants and top he’d bought me yesterday as I grabbed the bag I’d packed and headed for the kitchen.

There, I spotted a black object alone on the counter. When I reached it, I peeled off a sticky note.

T-

I think you'll need this.

S-

Below, he listed Connor, Lizzy, Griffin, and Kelsey's numbers. I made a call. When I ended it, a knock came at the door before it opened.

TAYLA

LIZZY BREEZED THROUGH THE DOOR LIKE A BREATH OF FRESH air. “I hope you’re decent,” she said before she saw me. Behind her came a stunning redhead.

She held out a hand. “Hi, I’m Bailey.”

Lizzy added, “My bestie from college and sister-in-law as she married Connor’s brother.”

I shook Bailey’s hand and stupidly blurted, “You’re her.”

Bailey frowned, but Lizzy got it. “She means you’re the one Matty crushed on.” Then she said to me, “I’m surprised he told you.”

He hadn’t. I put all the pieces together. I didn’t get to say that because Bailey shook her head. “He probably meant that I crushed on him when we met in college, and he only saw me as his sister’s best friend.”

“But he did come to New York to declare he wanted you,” Lizzy said, blunt as ever, confirming my suspicions.

“No. Matt was just lonely. Trust me, from what I hear, you’re his person. Not me. We were only ever friends,” Bailey said.

With all the back-and-forth, I said nothing for a second as I got my bearings. “It doesn’t matter. He left,” I said and sat on a barstool. I glanced over at the spot where we hooked up the night before.

Bailey moved farther into the kitchen and set a couple of tote bags on the counter. I was glad she was using the other side of the counter from where Shawn and I had been the night before. She began to nervously pull out food containers, and I remembered lunch.

“Oh, I forgot,” I admitted.

Lizzy blew out a breath and ignored my comment. “I’m sorry Matt left. I’m sure he had a good reason.”

“He didn’t stay, even when I asked,” I repeated.

When she didn’t reply, I glanced up and saw a frown on her face. “My brother is so in love with you.”

A bitter laugh left my chest. “Trust me, he’s not. He can’t even give whatever we have a name.”

Her eyes landed on my wrist. “Matty’s not always good with words. He’s an action guy. He brought you to our parents’ place and told them you were engaged.”

“That was to piss your father off,” I retorted.

“There are a lot of ways to piss Dad off. He didn’t have to bring you,” she said as Bailey laid out lunch for us.

“Your mom was ill—” I said.

She cut me off. “But not dying. He could have dropped you off before coming over. Matty has never, and I mean never, brought anyone home.”

I shrugged. “That’s not a declaration of love.”

She snagged my hand and held up my arm so Bailey could see the bracelet. “And what’s this if not a declaration?”

Bailey gasped and clapped her hands. I shook my head, not understanding.

Lizzy sighed. “This is Cartier’s iconic LOVE bracelet.”

“And?” I said.

She rolled her eyes, and Bailey giggled. “This bracelet was dreamed up by some Italian jewelry designer in, like, 1969. It’s meant to serve as a commitment and symbol of love. It has

to be secured onto your wrist by a lover with a vermeil screwdriver, never to be taken off. Did he give you the screwdriver or keep it?"

"He kept it," I admitted. Her eyebrow quirked as she tilted her head as if to say Duh. "So?" I questioned, still not buying her logic.

She blew out an exasperated breath. "Look. My brother's love language is giving gifts. He doesn't buy anything for himself except maybe food. But he buys gifts for those he cares about. And he's thoughtful about it."

That reminded me about the stuff he'd gotten for his nephew and future niece or nephew. I held up a hand and darted down the hall to our bedroom. When had I started to think of it as ours? I snagged the bag and returned. I left it in front of Lizzy, who pulled out the items one by one. They cooed over the two items.

"See? This is what I mean. He thought about it. He knows Connor's a painter and our son is a little devil. He just doesn't buy a gift for the sake of it." I looked down at the bracelet. She asked, "Are you in love with him?"

"Huh?" I asked, caught off guard.

"It's a yes or no question," Lizzy said, all business now.

"I don't know," I admitted.

Bailey jumped in. "How are you feeling about him leaving? Does it bother you?" I nodded. "I was a dumb question. I can see it on your face. But your answer is a good sign. If you didn't care, you wouldn't care, if that makes sense. Oh, my pregnancy brain. Anyway, do you miss him?"

"Yes," I said.

Bailey smiled. "I think you know how you feel about him. It's scary to give someone that power. Trust me, we've both experienced it. But when it's right, it's amazing."

"I don't know how to feel. I still call him Shawn, and his name is Matt," I said, letting loose all my frustration.

“Connor told me how you were introduced. You can’t blame him for not giving you his name in front of those assholes.” I didn’t. “And to be honest, you should still call him Sean. Those bad people are still out there and you wouldn’t want to accidentally give up his real name to them if you cross their path.”

She was right, but it still bothered me. “Like I spell his name in my head S-H-A-W-N and his is spelled S-E-A-N.”

“So what? My brother wouldn’t care. Trust me.”

“He’s gone, and he gave me everyone’s number but his,” I grumbled.

Lizzy came over and wrapped me in a hug. I dissolved in a heap of tears. I wanted to blame it on pregnancy hormones, but that wasn’t the truth.

“Trust me when I say he’s not keeping secrets from you. He’s keeping you safe. That’s what he does. He keeps even me in the dark. Though he acts like a villain, he’s honestly a hero.”

Bailey came over and she started crying too. “Oh boy, look at us. A bunch of pregnant women crying.”

“You two are. I’m fine,” Lizzy said and wiped at a tear.

A knock came at the door. I stepped away from the pair and went to open it, knowing who stood on the other side as I’d called down to security earlier to give permission for her to come up. Kelsey entered.

“Hey,” Lizzy said. “I remember you. You work for Griff.”

“Yeah,” Kelsey said. Her hair was bone straight today, glossy black and bouncy.

“Going somewhere?” I asked Kelsey, grateful for a subject change.

“Where is Griff?” Lizzy asked almost at the same time as I spoke.

“Griff is pretending to be some starlet’s bodyguard,” Kelsey answered.

Bailey asked, “He’s a bodyguard now?”

“He was requested, and for the amount of money she’s paying us, he’ll entertain her personal request,” Kelsey answered with a roll of her eyes.

“Someone’s jealous,” Lizzy said.

Kelsey let out of humorless laugh. “No reason to be. He’s in his element.” Griffin was a flirt, and we all knew it. But even I could see that Kelsey might have a thing for her boss. “Anyway, I got your transport back to Chicago.”

“You’re leaving?” Bailey asked.

“It’s time to get back to reality,” I said.

“Matty brought you here for a reason,” Lizzy said.

“And he left me. I promised him a week. It’s time I got back to my life.” Truth was, Ruin would be looking for Shawn over me. Ruin was the kind of man who would underestimate a woman. He would likely think Shawn removed my tracker, but I was still with him. I felt sure I was safe to return alone.

“Do you have time for lunch?” Bailey asked.

Kelsey answered for me. “Actually, no.” She laid out the plan and reiterated all the reasons I couldn’t get on a commercial flight. Bailey packed up lunch and sent half with me and Kelsey.

Griffin’s company was moving equipment for this job with this starlet and another job he had. Because of a threat and potential violence from a stalker, he needed an armored car, among other things, to get there quickly.

There were several other large crates on the plane that I didn’t ask about as we boarded unconventionally from the back of the plane.

I wondered if Shawn would be pissed when he heard I was headed back to Chicago.

MATT

GRIFF CAME THROUGH AGAIN. LUCKY FOR ME, KALEN WAS heading for Chicago on business and I was going to hitch a ride with him since the other King brothers weren't available to fly me.

I was first to arrive on board the Kings' private company plane. The interior was as comfortable as a luxury hotel, with soft leather seats and finished with maple paneling.

As I settled into my seat, I couldn't help but feel bad I'd left Tayla. I wanted to stay with her after she asked me to. But I couldn't.

I called my handler.

"You finally decided to check in," she said.

"Cortez made contact. He wants me to take over the business for him while he's inside. My first task is to find his wife."

"Did he give you a time line?"

"Forty-eight hours and that time is up," I said.

"Then why are you calling?"

"I need my old place."

"I told you we moved you out."

She may have said that, but the government was slow moving. Plus, it was a good asset to keep, as they could use it as a safe house if need be.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not available.”

“Convince me why you should move back in.”

“Temporarily. It fits my cover. I know the place. A hotel could put me and guests at risk.”

“And an apartment wouldn’t do the same?”

“Maybe, but again, I know the place.”

“Not much to know,” she said.

“Maybe not. But there is the escape through the vents if things go south.”

She waited a moment before giving in. “Fine. Don’t get yourself or anyone else killed.”

We ended the call as Kalen walked in dressed in a tailored suit, as if he was ready to buy a planet, and took the seat across from mine.

“You made it,” he said, giving me a friendly nudge. “I wasn’t sure, given it was an early flight.”

“Thanks,” I said. Kalen and I hadn’t been on the best of terms, though we managed to get along. “I should probably apologize.”

He had his laptop out and was focused on the screen. “What for?”

“I get it now.”

He looked up and crooked a half smile. “I heard the lovebug hit you.”

“I don’t know if the word is love, but I see how different my feelings are for Tayla than they ever were for Bailey.”

“You’re in love,” he said.

“How would you know? And I’m not even sure it’s at that level.”

“Have you been able to stop thinking about her since you left?”

I didn't have to think long on that answer. "Maybe it's an obsession," I jokingly said.

Kalen took me seriously. "If you were obsessed, you would be thinking about only you. Not her. And I dare say you are putting yourself in the line of fire for her. Connor and I did the same."

He was right about that. He closed his laptop and leaned back, crossing his arms. "I know it may seem like a cliché, but sometimes you just know. When I first met Bailey, I knew she was the one, even though I didn't want to acknowledge it. But I'll tell you, it's a feeling like no other."

Similar story to the one Connor told.

I nodded, taking in his words. "Should I tell her?"

Kalen chuckled. "Trust me, I'm not one for giving relationship advice. But I do know that life is too short to hold back how you feel. You never know what could happen."

I thought a lot about what he said before drifting off. It was a short flight, so my nap was brief. Soon, I exited the plane and because we landed at an FBO, I hoofed it to long-term parking. From there, I caught a shuttle back to the main airport terminal. I entered on the upper level for departures. I went to the lower-level men's restroom and changed clothes. Before I exited, I bought a baseball hat, put it on, and then went out to get a taxi. Hopefully, all of that would mask my appearance at the airport.

When the cab arrived at my old apartment, it was go time. Though I walked casually to the door, I was on high alert for anything. Jovial smiles at the passersby on the sidewalk were a mask for shrewdly assessing every individual as a threat.

My building wasn't fancy, chosen for that very reason. My persona as Shawn, a corrupt cop with the Chicago PD, didn't afford me luxuries. Therefore, Shawn had gone to work off duty with the notorious crime boss, Nicolas Cortez.

I jogged up three flights of stairs and avoided the elevator. I wasn't packing and didn't want to be confined with a hired

killer if that was in store for me. I wouldn't stand a chance in that situation.

At my door, I reached below the mat for a key. It was the most cliché hiding spot, and why it was chosen. Normally, it wouldn't be there. But my handler had put it there so I could access it. I had cameras installed in the hallway light fixture overhead. One pointed at my door at one end, and the other camera aimed down the hallway. I'd checked them during the cab ride over. The only person who had come to my door in the last twenty-four hours was my handler.

I entered the apartment and immediately felt a sense of comfort. It would be an odd feeling to some, as I'd only been living here for a few years, but this place had come to feel like home to me during that time.

In the middle of the room stood a worn mocha leather sofa. It faced a flat-screen TV on the right affixed to an exposed brick wall. A bookshelf was to the left of the TV and held titles I'd never read and other knickknacks to give the appearance of home.

To the right of that was what could only be described as a kitchenette. It sported a small two-burner stovetop and tiny oven combo and a vintage refrigerator that looked like it was made in the seventies.

The other half of the room to my left held my bed with a nightstand on the right. The only other door was on that side and led to a compact bathroom, barely big enough for one. Everything had been carefully organized to maximize the tiny living area.

I headed to the bathroom and turned on the shower at maximum temperature. Steam was called for, given what I was about to do next. This apartment was most certainly bugged, either by the feds or someone after me. In the past, I'd swept for such things on a daily basis, but I was without my toys and needed something I had hidden in the bathroom if my colleagues hadn't found it.

When the room filled with a misty haze, I came in, dropped my bag on the floor, and closed the door. I got to my

knees on the pretext of getting something out of my bag, assuming I could still be seen. Then I slowly opened the bathroom cabinet door, hoping not to make a sound as the steam should shield me.

I pressed hard on the back wall of the cabinet and a tiny click happened as the false panel was released. I lowered it some and reached in to find the semiautomatic Ruger Mark IV and full clip that I had hidden there, along with the suppressor. As soundless as I could, I moved the false panel back in place before I put the clip in the Ruger, but not all the way and screwed on the suppressor. I left it all in my bag and stood up. I still needed a shower and took advantage of the steamy water. It scalded my skin, but I welcomed the ability to feel. I'd been numb since leaving Tayla. Once I eliminated the threat, I would beg her for forgiveness for leaving.

Once changed into fresh clothes, I went back into the main area and left my bag purposefully placed near the door with the gun almost ready to go with only a T-shirt covering it.

"I need to do laundry," I murmured to no one but for the ears of whoever was listening. It was the truth and also explained to anyone watching why I'd left my bag near the door and not by the chest of drawers next to the bathroom.

For all I knew, no one was listening or watching, but better safe than sorry. I relaxed on my sofa, even though I was anything but. I tapped on my phone, opened a food delivery app and placed an order with my favorite Italian restaurant. As I was about to put my phone down, it vibrated with a movement alert. I opened the website for the camera and got a view of my hallway. A figure in black moved toward my door. At this point, I ignored the possibility that I was being watched.

I dashed for the bathroom and turned on the shower. It was still foggy in there and would provide the cover I was hoping for. The bathroom wasn't where I planned to be. I made for my bag before ultimately ending up to the right of the door opposite where my bag was. I'd grabbed the gun, holding the magazine so it wouldn't fall out. It was too late to push the clip in without being heard.

As I suspected, the intruder didn't knock. The handle moved slowly until it met resistance. There was a light knock as if the person was testing if I was within hearing range. A minute later, I heard tools and looked over at where I'd left my phone. In seconds, the door clicked open since I hadn't used the dead bolt. The door opened slowly, concealing my position behind it.

The figure in dark clothing glanced around before their attention focused on the bathroom, where steam billowed out. As they crept toward that door, I slowly stepped around behind them. Before they got to the bathroom, I clicked the magazine in place. Too late, they spun around, but my gun was aimed squarely at their forehead.

A man in his early thirties, with the look of someone who had seen too much, faced me. I arched a brow when he didn't lower his gun.

"Put it on the ground and kick it toward me," I commanded.

He held his hands up, gun still in one before he slowly lowered himself to his knees. He put the gun down and used his hand to push it in my direction. Lucky for me, I saw what he was about to do before he did it. He lunged for my legs. I jumped back, but it still put me off balance.

I kicked, not to hit him and expose my leg for him to grab, but to push his gun out of reaching distance. He reared up and made like a bull for my midsection. There was nothing for me to do but hope I didn't lose the grip on my gun on impact. We crashed back in a duel of wills. I punched at his side and that was a mistake. He guessed right that I wasn't planning on shooting him if I didn't have to. He spun and knocked at my gun hand.

There were many options, none of them good. In swinging my arm out of the way, my aim was toward the ground. I had neighbors below me and couldn't risk harming an innocent person. Instead, I rammed the gun at his face, leaving him dizzy. I sideswiped his leg and he fell forward to the ground. With a knee in his back, I wrenched his arms behind him and

pulled cuffs I'd hidden in the sofa to restrain his wrists. Once that was done, I got off him.

As he panted, I barked orders. "Where is your phone?"

He didn't balk at my request and answered instead. It was the first time he'd spoken. "In my pocket."

I bent down and paid close attention so that he didn't try to kick me as I searched his pocket and came up with what I assumed was a burner phone. I opened it. There wasn't security and only one number was on the call list. I stood up, moved back, and dialed it.

A familiar voice answered. "Is it done?"

"Probably not as you expected."

"Shawn," Nicolas Cortez said.

"Surprised?"

"Disappointed."

I tucked my gun in my waistband and went for the murder-for-hire's gun as I said into the phone, "Disappointed I'm alive?" I kept one eye on my intruder with the phone between my cheek and shoulder as I emptied his gun of bullets and decocked it.

"Disappointed you didn't kill my wife as ordered."

"You really shouldn't say these things over the phone," I suggested. "Besides, it was a long shot I could find her. Give me a minute," I said and put the phone down. I could hear him talking, but he would wait.

I hauled my intruder up by the waistband and got him to his feet. "You have one shot at walking out of here alive," I said in a low tone, not wanting my neighbors to overhear as I frog-marched him to my door. "Leave and don't come back. If you try anything, I'll be forced to go for center mass." He nodded.

This was the riskiest moment as I uncuffed him. My hold on the gun was tenuous during this time. Thankfully, he didn't try anything as I stepped back and aimed at him. "Go," I said.

And he left. I guessed he decided killing me wasn't worth his life. I closed and locked the door, not that it would stop the guy. He was clearly gifted with picking locks. I picked up my phone and turned on the camera view before setting my gun down. Then I picked up the burner phone and walked to the window.

"Still with me?" I said.

"What is going on?" Cortez said.

"I let your guy go." I was banking on the feds listening in and preparing to take the guy into custody.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," I repeated.

"You have a thing for letting pretty things go."

I didn't think he was talking about his hit man.

"I've got too many eyes on me. You should know that. The cops and the feds are waiting for me to screw up. Doing anything for you is too risky. Letting her go and have her believe I was her savior gave me brownie points."

I was curious how he would react. How well did Cortez know Ruin? Were they working together?

"Should I be worried about this *me* attitude?"

"No. Last thing I need to add to a list of charges is cop killer. Besides, I went to California looking for your wife." It was a lie. I was testing to see if he'd known if I went to New York or not.

"What did you find?"

My intruder finally emerged from the building, where he was approached by plainclothes cops and herded into a black SUV.

"Nothing," I said.

"Why California?"

"Well, we both know your wife would not survive in a small town. Other big cities are risky. California, specifically

Los Angeles, is the perfect mix of urban but ritzy enough for her.”

“Was this a hunch, or did you have information?”

I scoffed. “Information? I’m a leper in the PD. I don’t have the same contacts as I used to.”

“What good are you to me?”

“Alive? If I’m killed, they will pin it on you. And not being dead means they are spending some resources trying to indict me and not all on you.”

“Maybe. Besides, your kid dealer will likely take care of you for me when he finds out you cut a witness free. Bye, Shawn.” And he hung up.

Finding out if he and Ruin were working closely together hadn’t been clear. He knew enough to confirm they were acquainted with each other. Time would tell on the rest. But as long as Tayla stayed in New York, the longer I had to deal with the Ruin problem.

My phone signaled a call. I closed the burner and retrieved it.

“Griff. What’s up?” I said.

“You’re not going to like this.”

I blew out a long breath. “What?”

“Tayla’s on her way back to Chicago.”

Fuck.

TAYLA

THOUGH I TRULY BELIEVED THAT RUIN WASN'T LOOKING FOR me, my anxiety was still at an all-time high. Having Bailey's cooking saved the plane ride. Barbeque pulled pork, mashed sweet potatoes, and oddly delicious crisp green beans kept my worried thoughts at bay. When we finished eating our fill, I cornered Kelsey on something I'd been wondering about.

"Are you ever going to tell me what's going on with you and Griffin?" She had been a little more than annoyed when relaying that Griffin was playing security guard to some young up-and-coming movie star. But I hadn't wanted to corner her about it in front of Lizzy and Bailey. Now we were alone.

Kelsey shifted in her jump seat that lined the cargo plane and stared out at nothing as the plane shook slightly with turbulence. I could tell she was hesitant to talk, but I wasn't going to let her avoid the conversation any longer.

"It's okay. You don't have to tell me," I said, placing a hand on her arm. "It's none of my business."

"It's complicated," she said, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt.

"Complicated how?" I pressed, my curiosity piqued.

She sighed heavily, finally turning to face me. "He's my boss, and he's made it clear he won't cross that line."

My eyebrows shot up. "Did you make a move first?"

"Not exactly," she admitted, her cheeks flushing slightly. "We almost kissed, but he stopped and then made that

announcement. Things have been weird since.”

I nodded slowly. “But you have feelings?”

Kelsey looked at me with a mixture of sadness and frustration. “Yes, I do. And it’s not just a crush or infatuation. I really care about him. But it’s like I can’t do anything about it because of our professional relationship. I don’t want to lose my job, you know? And I don’t want things to continue to be weird between us.”

I could see the internal conflict written all over her face. She was torn between her heart and her mind. I didn’t envy her position.

“Have you thought about finding another job?” I asked tentatively.

Kelsey shook her head. “I love my job. And it’s not just about Griffin. I’m finally doing work that I’m passionate about. I don’t want to throw that away just because of my feelings for him.”

I could understand where she was coming from. It wasn’t easy to find a job that you loved. But at the same time, I didn’t want her to suffer in silence.

“Well, if you ever need to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Nothing to talk about. Everyone knows he’s a massive flirt. I’m just another in a long list of women he’s playing games with.”

I didn’t know what to say, as I didn’t know him well enough to contradict that statement. So I leaned back and stared at the cargo strapped in the middle of the open area and thought about my own situation with a man I was falling deeply for.

“What a pair we make,” I muttered.

“Seems to me your man has declared his intentions,” she said, lifting up my wrist where the bracelet lay.

“It’s just jewelry.”

Her eyebrow arched in silent question. “This isn’t just any jewelry. A man can buy you an expensive bracelet that means nothing. But a man doesn’t buy you a Cartier LOVE bracelet for no reason. He knew exactly what you would assume. And if he didn’t want you to think that way, he’d have bought a different bracelet at Cartier.”

Lizzy and Bailey had said the same thing. I looked up as the memory of him putting it on me replayed in my head. “You think so?”

She pursed her lips. “I know so.”

The rest of the plane ride, I tried not to relish the idea that maybe there was something real and solid between Shawn and me. I didn’t want to hope for nothing.

When we landed, Kelsey had arranged a ride home for me. Griffin felt it was okay if I went home, but I should be cautious. I think Kelsey had made it clear to him my intention regardless of his thoughts on the matter. Kelsey couldn’t come with me. She had to stay and make sure the equipment was unloaded and got to the right place.

I could have gone to the field office first, but I needed my car. I didn’t want to rely on a ride home from work not organized by Griffin’s team. They had already done so much. Plus, I needed to have answers to all the questions I would be grilled on when I revealed myself to my boss. So, home first. Field office later.

It was an odd experience when I arrived at my apartment. It was almost like seeing it for the first time since I hadn’t lived here long before I was taken that second time. The entire walk to my door, I kept looking over my shoulder.

Inside, I bolted the locks before I put my keys in the bowl on the side table near the door. I dropped my bag on the floor as I walked into the living room. All the window blinds were closed, so I couldn’t see outside, but I imagined the view. I swept the apartment as if it were an op. The only thing I didn’t do was call out *clear* after checking each room. The kitchen was small and there wasn’t really a hiding place other than

behind the island. Once that was clear, I headed to my bedroom on the right.

The door was open as I'd left it, and the bed was still made. I made another right into the walk-in closet, which had been the deciding factor in taking this place. At the end was my bathroom. All was clear.

I relaxed and stopped in my closet on the way back. There was something I needed to get.

Racks were doubled on both sides. I stopped midway and reached to a shelf above my clothes. I pulled out an Aerosoles shoebox. It wasn't a flashy name brand and one I assumed would be passed over by any intruder. Inside, under a woman's platform heel sandal my mother claimed was perfect for evening and everyday dress, was my work phone. As expected, it was dead. I put the shoebox back and headed to my bedside table to plug the phone in.

As far as I could tell, no one had come into the apartment. I headed to the kitchen, where my landline phone was. One required by the building so the bell system downstairs could ring me for any visitors. I picked it up and dialed my mom.

Because she was on vacation with my dad and sister, I didn't worry yet. Though Shawn hadn't wanted me to call my family because Ruin could have cloned my personal cell phone, I was calling from a landline. I didn't think Ruin had the capability or inclination to trace my calls from this line. Plus, my family wasn't in town. I felt safe to leave Mom a voice message letting her know I was back and to call me on this or my work phone when she had a chance. If I didn't hear back from her by tomorrow morning, then I'd worry.

Next, I checked my refrigerator. Just as I expected, it only held a few old condiments and a half-empty carton of milk. I sighed, knowing I needed to go grocery shopping.

I went back into my room and got my laptop to place a food delivery order. Knowing that I was going to work later and it would be a long day of answering questions, I placed a short grocery delivery order of the essentials to get me through the weekend and was able to snag the last delivery time today.

If I wasn't pregnant, I might have waited. But I was hungry all the time and going to the store seemed riskier than having something delivered.

When my food delivery arrived, I planted myself on the sofa with a bottle of water and my take-out boxes and settled in to stream a movie.

It felt lonely without Shawn next to me. I immediately nixed the romantic comedy trailer that was playing and went for a bloodbath thriller that boasted no romance.

When my landline rang, I hustled over to answer.

"Delivery," the man said.

It was a little early, but I hit the button to buzz him in before little alarm bells went off in my head.

Most times, the delivery person would announce the company they were with. I wasn't sure if it was the movie or something else, but I couldn't shake the fact the man had sounded off.

I went into my bedroom and opened the bedside table. Inside was a box. I pressed my middle fingertip on the scanner, and it opened. Too many people use the thumb as their security fingerprint.

The box opened, revealing my SIG Sauer P226. I'd just checked the magazine, which was loaded with fifteen rounds when I heard the knock at my door.

"Just a second," I called so I could be heard before I walked in that direction with the SIG aimed at the floor.

I felt my heart rate increase as I approached the door, knowing that I had to be careful. I took deep breaths, trying to steady my nerves. My heart was pounding against my chest, and my palms were getting sweaty. I had to take a moment to compose myself before I opened the door.

Through the peephole, I saw a man dressed in a delivery uniform holding a paper bag. He looked like an ordinary delivery guy, but I couldn't shake off the feeling that

something was off about him. His posture was too rigid, and his eyes seemed to be avoiding the peephole.

I hesitated for a moment before he lifted the bag and aimed it at the door. I flattened myself to the wall in time before he shot dead center through the door.

Training kicked in, and I should have shot back, aiming for center mass, but I didn't. I reached for the handle and wrenched open the door, flattening myself against the wall again.

Another shot rang out and I hurried to see through the opening to make sure none of my neighbors had come out in the hall. In the split second I had, I fired. Though the target area would be smaller, I aimed lower and hoped I'd hit pay dirt.

He went down. Flat on his back. His leg hemorrhaging. I went for one of the cushions on my couch before going to the man.

I pushed the gun out of his reach and applied pressure to the wound.

"Call the police," I said when my elderly neighbor's grandson stepped out of the doorway. He nodded and dashed back inside.

My heart raced with adrenaline. I was grateful I hadn't broken under the pressure. It was a testament to my therapy and training that I could still function in a high-pressure situation. I hadn't dissolved or frozen from fear. That was a good thing. I'd come a long way. Now, I wasn't just fighting for me but my unborn child as well.

Police and EMTs were there in minutes, asking me to get on my hands and knees. Though I shouted that I was FBI, they were trained to cuff me and assess the situation. I tried not to be offended by how little care they took in doing so.

After I was perp walked back just inside my apartment, I was forced to stand in handcuffs until a detective finally approached me. For a second, being bound this way brought back ugly memories. I focused on my breathing as I reminded

myself these were the good guys, not the bad. I would be released soon enough. I closed my eyes and saw Shawn's face, his voice in my ear, my wrists bound with red silk.

"I'm Detective Lacey. And you are?"

The memory vanished and I opened my eyes to see a man a few inches taller than me standing too close. If not for Shawn consuming my heart and mind, I would have taken more notice of how attractive the man was. "Special Agent Tayla James," I said and couldn't hold out a hand because mine were handcuffed behind me.

"So I've heard." Apparently, the officers had understood me even though they acted like they hadn't. "Do you have anything to corroborate that?"

I told him where my ID was in my purse, hidden behind some clothes in my closet. It was when he pulled it out that he finally uncuffed me after contacting the bureau to confirm.

"Sorry about that. Procedure."

When I said nothing, he went on to ask me to recount my story, which I did.

"That should be enough for now. Your door still works, though I would replace it," he said cheekily. "I could help you with that."

"Thanks. I think I can handle it."

"By the way, your groceries arrived, and the perishables were put in the fridge."

"Thanks," I said, having forgotten all about them.

He pulled out a card. "If you can think of anything else or need a hand with that door, call me."

His wide smile likely melted hearts, but mine already belonged to someone else. After he left, I stepped back into the living room, where a tech had just removed the bullets from the small wall between my windows.

When everyone was gone, I closed the door and stared at the nickel-sized hole splintered in my door. Had I not moved, I

would be dead.

I debated on leaving or going into the office. My boss would have left by now, and I decided I wouldn't let any asshole displace me. That didn't make sleep come easy. I worked on my reports of the incident and what had happened to me since I was taken from that op.

Then I rested, or I tried. I fought the ghosts of Ruin and the memories of Shawn. Both haunted me through the night. I'd been wrong about Ruin not wanting me. I couldn't think of anyone else who would try to kill me. I hadn't worked at the FBI long enough to have enemies. But I also couldn't figure out why Ruin would send someone to kill me when he'd kept me the last time. Shawn would hate that I hadn't run and gone to hide out somewhere else. But I couldn't run forever.

I kept my gun loaded and next to me, wondering if Shawn would show up like a knight in shiny armor. The morning did bring a guest, but not the one I expected.

TAYLA

I GAVE UP ON SLEEPING AT DAWN. AFTER MOVING THE SIDE table in front of my bullet-hole-riddled door, I took a long, hot, much-needed shower until the water cooled against my skin.

How had Ruin known I was back? That thought had plagued me all night. The only things I could think of were either my apartment was bugged, there was a mole in Griffin's company, or Ruin had paid someone in my complex to rat on me if I returned home. It made me more resolute in my choice of staying here. Two of those options would have still left me vulnerable in a place I didn't know if I choose to leave.

I was in the middle of making breakfast when the landline rang.

"Hello," I answered, not expecting anyone.

"I'm here to install your new door."

I opened my mouth but closed it. I shouldn't be surprised. However, Griffin's company likely knew about the shooting through their network of spies.

"Who sent you?"

Because it was early, I could hear the rustling of paper. "It looks like Shawn Rook placed the order."

My heart leaped in my chest. "Give me a minute." I set the phone down and went to find the burner phone. I called Griffin, and when he didn't answer, I tried Kelsey.

"Hello," she said groggily.

“Who is that?” I heard in the background. Was that Griffin?

“Kelsey. Did you guys order me a new door?”

“What? Just a minute.” There were muffled words exchanged in the background. “Sorry. Late night. Heard about your little shoot-out. Disappointed you didn’t call.”

“Sorry. I didn’t want to bring you all in my mess,” I said.

“I know you’re the big bad FBI, but we both know this has something to do with everything we’re dealing with. Keep us in the loop, okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, but I thought about my divided loyalties. Once I went back to work, there would be things I couldn’t share.

“To answer your question, no. We didn’t send the door. But Griff says Shawn ordered you one.”

“Is Griff—”

Kelsey cut me off. “Look, babe, I didn’t get much sleep last night. Can I call you later?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The call ended. For a second, I wondered again if Griff was with Kelsey until I remembered the guy at the door. I picked up the landline receiver. “Come up,” I said and buzzed him in.

Shawn knew about my brush with death, and he hadn’t come. I ignored my disappointment as I let two men into my apartment.

“This is a reinforced steel door,” the first one said after they had it installed. “The peephole doubles as a camera.”

“How will I access it?” I asked.

“I have to install the panel. My guy will also install another camera above your door to give you a hallway view.”

Shawn had thought of everything, but I wished he were there to explain all of this. Part of me had wanted to refuse the

gift. But I needed a door. I would find out how much it was, and I would repay him.

When they were done, I had a wall panel as well as a portable remote screen that I could move around with. It also had security, which would send me an alert to my phone if my door opened. They refused a tip and said all had been taken care of before they left. I headed to work shortly after.

I drove the short ride to the downtown field office. I could have taken a train, but we were required to have access to a vehicle if needed. Using my access card, I pulled into the garage. I parked in an open spot, which was far from the elevator.

A sense of melancholy washed over me. I still hadn't heard from Shawn, and I worried for a number of reasons. I made it to the office and went directly to my boss, Special Agent in Charge Davis's office.

"James," he said, addressing me by my surname. "Can you tell me why you didn't let us know immediately when you got away?"

I knew this question was coming. "You heard about last night?" He nodded. "I didn't know who I could trust." It was the easiest answer that would explain all my actions, and it was true.

He said nothing for a second, seemingly contemplating my answer. "Do you have a report on last night?"

"I sent the report." I'd filed all the necessary paperwork electronically before I'd gone to bed.

"I want to hear again."

My recount didn't change, and he stopped me when I got to the shooting. "You didn't shoot center mass?" he said.

"No, sir. We can't question dead men."

"Dead agents can't get answers," he countered.

"I trusted my training and ability." He said nothing. "I would like to be in when he's questioned."

“You know you are on desk duty pending an investigation.”

I rolled my eyes. “I could have killed him and didn’t. That should prove something.”

He shrugged. “There are procedures that must be followed.” There was that word again: procedures. Detective Lacey had said the same thing. I was beginning to hate the word. “Did they take your service weapon?”

I shook my head and removed the gun from my shoulder holster. “It was my personal gun I used in the shooting.” I set my work-issued gun on his desk. “You saw my other report. I can definitively say the senator’s son is the one who held me captive.”

“And we have your word. But we need more than that for a judge to sign off on a warrant for a senator’s son.”

I folded my arms across my chest as anger bubbled up inside me. “Exactly why I didn’t shoot to kill a potential witness.”

“And if we can get him to finger the son for this, we can get that warrant.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. “So what you’re saying is a criminal’s word is better than mine,” I groused, even though I knew the answer to that.

“No, but since he was there to kill you, his testimony can’t be labeled as collusion with you.” He drummed his fingers together before adding, “You should go home and get some sleep. You look tired.”

Annoyed by the bureaucracy, I turned and walked out of his office. I hated being sidelined. He stopped me.

“I expect you here in the morning. Will go over *all* the time since the op until now.”

There had been gaps in the reporting, as I hadn’t wanted to implicate Griffin, Kelsey or Shawn. Something I needed to talk to them about. I had to find the fine line between a lie and the truth.

Still, there was one thing I forgot. I turned back and took the few steps to his office. “There’s something else you should know.”

He eyed me curiously. “What’s that?”

“I’m pregnant.” With that, I left his office and headed to my car.

I was so busy in my head that I didn’t hear the approach before it was too late. Someone grabbed my arm in a shadowy corner of the garage. I wouldn’t be taken again. I ducked and wrenched my arm up.

A low grunt came from the attacker as I twisted their wrist behind their back. My Quantico training was finally paying off. The person tried to wiggle out of my grip, but I held on tight.

From the shadows, I could see he was tall and broad-shouldered, but the black hoodie with the hood pulled low over his head obscured his face. Only I’d spent enough time in this man’s presence not to know exactly who he was. Fear prickled at the nape of my neck, but I refused to let it show.

“Ruin, what do you want?” I demanded, glaring at him.

He relaxed and revealed his face by removing his hood. Dim light cast shadows on his face. “I want to know why you aren’t with Rook.”

That name rang a bell, and I remembered the door guy saying Shawn Rook had placed the order. Now I needed to know what to say. Shawn and I hadn’t coordinated stories, given that Shawn assumed I’d stay put in New York.

“Is that why you sent a shooter to my apartment?”

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” He hadn’t answered the question, but would he really implicate himself? My guess was I wasn’t the intended target. “Now, why aren’t you with your owner?”

I didn’t like that word, but now wasn’t the time to debate it. “He let me go.” Ruin’s brows shot up, and I rushed on. “I told him I was FBI and he let me go.”

“Just like that?”

“I promised not to put him in jail,” I spat to make the lie sound better.

When he reached behind him, I felt the emptiness of my shoulder holster. “I promise to do the same for you.” I took the calculated risk and loosened my grip before letting go. If he had a gun, I would lose anyway. I needed to be able to move.

His eyes narrowed. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because you know who my family is,” I admitted. “And if you kill me here, the full force of the bureau will come looking for my killer.” I wasn’t sure what did it, but he seemed to consider it. “Alive, I will do everything to protect my family. Dead, not so much,” I added.

A door opened in the distance. He pointed a finger at my face. “If I get even a hint that you’re coming after me, I’ll kill your parents and take your sister as my next pet.”

I balled my hands into fists and tried to keep my face from showing the hate I felt.

He didn’t leave. “Tell me where my chattel is.”

It took me a second to put that sentence into context. He was talking about the women we’d freed. “I don’t know. I swear.”

“You took them.”

I slowly shook my head. “I didn’t.” I remembered the tracker. “That was when Rook let me go.”

There was no lying my way out of that. We had trackers on us. He would have known we were there.

Footsteps got closer, but Ruin made no move to leave. “Why was he there?”

I shrugged. “To look for you? I don’t know. He took me there after I told him I was FBI.”

Ruin was not easily read. “You talk and your sister lives.”

That threat was worse than him saying she'd die. I let him walk away. Though I wanted to run back into the FBI office and tell my boss what happened, I had to leave. If Ruin had a mole in the bureau, I couldn't give the appearance I was going back on my word.

Back at my apartment, secure that my new security system was operating and no one had entered my apartment, I called my boss, not wanting to put my report in a file someone else could access. Though I would put it all in writing.

He said he'd look at security feeds of the garage based on an anonymous report that someone saw something funny happening. He agreed for me not to send in my report but to write it down and save it, leaving a time stamp of when I did it. With Ruin's wealth and influence, it was likely he had someone in the bureau working against us. The question was how high up the person was.

I called Kelsey to relay the events. She put Griffin on the phone.

"What the hell, lassie." It was the first time I'd ever heard Griffin speak with a Scottish accent. "Yer going to get my balls blown off. Shawn is in a shite mood."

"If Shawn has something to say, he can come say it to me himself."

Griffin grumbled something I didn't understand. "Ye should have stayed in New York."

"I couldn't stay there forever, now could I?"

"Women," Griffin mumbled.

"You love us," I teased.

"Women, sure. They keep me bed warm. Ye, not so much. Shawn would kill me if I thought of ye as anything more than a little sister. Now, what did ye tell the feds?" There wasn't a hint of flirtiness coming from him. Things were serious. So I told him what I said and what I should say. He had ideas too.

When I hung up, I wondered if Shawn would show up at my door.

MATT

MY IMMEDIATE REACTION TO THE NEWS THAT TAYLA HAD LEFT New York was to find a way to intercept the plane. Then I considered confronting her at the airport. I did neither.

The safest option for Tayla was me not being around.

Not a day later, I reconsidered my options. Someone had tried to kill her. The likely suspect was Ruin. But how would he know she was back in town? I thought back to my call with Cortez. He could have passed on that information that I'd cut Tayla loose to Ruin. Then Ruin could have used his resources to find out where she lived. It wasn't as though he didn't know her name.

I ground my teeth.

"Matt, are you still there?"

For a second, I'd forgotten I was on the phone. "Yeah, I'm here."

"Did you hear me when I said I think I've pinned down the shell company he's using?"

I hadn't. Connor had been looking for years for a company tied to Ruin or his cronies. "What did you find?"

Connor was a genius hacker, and I wouldn't doubt anything he said. "When I heard that Ruin called the women he'd kidnapped chattel, it reminded me of when you said at the auction he'd called the girls fillies. I began searching for horse farms, cattle farms, or livestock auction houses that weren't

attached to legitimate farms or ranch addresses in this area, and I found one.”

“What’s the name?” I asked.

“Check it. Niur Auction House.”

“Okay,” I said, not immediately getting it.

“Niur is Ruin backward.”

“Damn. Not original, but yeah, he’s full of himself.”

“Not original because he isn’t the first to invert a name, but clearly, it worked. I’ve been searching for him for years.”

“Are you sure it’s him?” I asked.

“Not a hundred percent, but enough to follow the trail. The company lists an auction. Time is nine at night. Suspicious for an animal auction.”

“But not for what he considers livestock,” I added.

“Exactly.”

“I think we can use this,” I said and laid out for him what I was thinking.

When I finished, he said, “And what about Tayla?”

Tayla had been in my every waking thought. “What about her?”

“Matt, Kalen and I have been in your position before. Don’t fuck this up.”

“I’d rather her be alive and hate me than dead.” Because I had no plans of talking to or seeing her until this was over.

“You haven’t called? So she doesn’t know?”

“I know the bureau. They have her place bugged and not because of anything she’s done. They are hoping to catch Ruin, hell, maybe even me. My handler thinks I’ve gone so deep undercover I can’t see daylight. I can’t risk anything we talk about being overheard.”

“Do you want me to get her a message?” he asked.

“No.” But I did have another question. “Do you know if she’s seen a doctor about the baby?” It had only been a few days, but it was possible.

“I haven’t, but if I hear, I’ll pass it along.”

“Thanks, brother,” I said because our friendship felt that close.

“No problem. You ought to know your nephew loves his shirt.” That made me grin. “He points to it and utters *Unc Matty*, but I think he’s just repeating what Lizzy says.”

“I wish I’d gotten to see him when I was in New York.”

“Don’t worry. Lizzy will send you enough videos. It’s like you’re there.”

That made me think of my kid again. “Hey, I was thinking about buying a place here in Chicago.” My studio didn’t belong to me, and it wasn’t big enough for a couple, let alone a kid. “I’m hoping you can do what you did with your places, so no one knows I own it.”

“What are you looking for?”

I thought for a second. “Three—no four bedrooms and three baths. Something in the city.”

“Not in the suburbs?”

“Not yet. I need to make sure all my enemies are contained before I can sleep easy in an unguarded home. Something in the city for now.”

I knew Tayla wasn’t leaving Chicago. She couldn’t stay a day in New York, and her family, including her little sister, were here. I wanted to be present for my child and that meant living here full time.

“I’ll run a script and see what’s available.”

“I want a doorman and garage access.” After another second, I added, “And near a park, if possible.”

“I figured. A price range?”

“I trust you,” I said.

“I’ll send you what I find.”

That was how we left it. In the meantime, I had to call Griffin and coordinate what we needed to execute the plan. That didn’t mean I’d forgotten about Tayla.

Though I couldn’t speak to her and didn’t want to send a message through Connor or Griffin, that didn’t mean I couldn’t send something.

TAYLA

MOM CALLED ME THE NEXT MORNING AND I DIDN'T TELL HER about the shoot-out at my house or how badly the op had gone. Still, she could read me. "Have you seen your therapist?"

"I'm fine," I said, though I knew I would be required to meet with one before I could return to duty. And that was probably a good thing.

"I know my daughter," Mom said.

"I'm fine. I want to hear about you." There would be time to share with her everything when we saw each other, not over the phone.

"I do have news. We won a cruise." She was so excited and told me all about winning a cruise trip the night before.

"Are you sure this is legit?" I asked her for the second time.

"You worry too much. I called the Disney cruise line directly and confirmed. It's an amazing all-expenses-paid trip."

She started to tell me the details, and I stopped her. "Don't. I'll be jealous. Just take lots of pictures and be ready to tell me everything when you get home."

"The prize is worth over fifteen grand. We have the largest stateroom," Mom gushed. "How lucky are we?"

I didn't think luck was involved. Griffin or Shawn had intervened after my confrontation with Ruin. He'd made

threats about my family, and all of a sudden, they were headed on a two-week cruise somewhere on the other side of the world in a week.

“Cell reception may be spotty, though they say it won’t be. But just in case you don’t hear from us,” she said.

“You guys have fun and make sure to tell everyone I love them.”

Instead, she passed the phone around and I quickly spoke to my dad and sister before we ended the call. It was for the best, I knew, but I hadn’t been away from my family this long except for my training at Quantico. I didn’t like it then or now. Mom still didn’t know I was pregnant. I didn’t want to tell her over the phone. Plus, I wanted to be sure everything was okay. I had an appointment scheduled for later in the week, and I wondered if Shawn would make it. Though I had no way of telling him myself, I could relay a message. I hadn’t yet.

Bureaucracy moved slowly. Time itself felt like it was moving slower. With my family gone, Shawn MIA, and Kelsey in California, I had no company but myself. Thankfully, I’d been cleared of any charges for the shooting at my door. However, after my pronouncement to my boss that I was pregnant, I’d been put on desk duty and told to meet with my therapist.

I was in tears when I arrived home from my doctor’s appointment later that week. Though everything was fine, and the baby measured out where it should be, my hormones got the best of me.

Likely because I had some romantic notion that Shawn would have magically arrived in time for my first ultrasound. Because I was further along than a normal first baby visit, I’d gotten the works. And I’d seen and heard my baby’s heartbeat—all alone.

I wiped the tears before I opened my mail. I left the package for last. It was always fun getting a package, even when you knew something was coming. In this case, I hadn’t ordered anything that I remembered. It was possible I had a while ago and whatever it was had been on back order.

Anyway, once I got past the junk mail, I tore open the bag and was surprised to find what appeared to be a white T-shirt. I unfolded it to find a red heart on one sleeve and nothing else.

There was no note or even a receipt inside. But I just knew it came from Shawn. He would do something like that. I wondered at the meaning. If he was saying my heart, or his, was on the sleeve. I tucked it to my chest regardless and thought of how Lizzy said he shuts himself off not to be secretive but to keep others safe. No doubt he thought he was doing what was best for me. I held on to the shirt like it was my lifeline.

Then my thoughts turned to the bureau. I hated the pace my office worked. My intruder had given up solid information about Ruin's organization. He hadn't been able to say it was the senator's son who ran the business, but he had given the date for the next auction in exchange for full immunity. Unfortunately, the auction couldn't come soon enough. I wanted to see Shawn again and share the ultrasound picture of our child.

Instead, the landline rang, reminding me of a visitor I expected. I buzzed him through and waited by the door.

My half-brother, David, breezed in like he owned the place.

"Why did you want to see me?" I asked. I'd agreed to the meeting during a late-night call where I'd been too tired to argue.

"Is he living here with you?"

"Not this again," I said and rubbed at my forehead. I could feel a headache coming on.

"Does the FBI sanction this relationship between you and a criminal?"

I shook my head. "He's not a criminal."

His eyes closed to slits. "He hasn't told you, has he?"

"What are you talking about? They freed him after what happened to me."

“He hasn’t,” David said, ignoring my statement. “You don’t know who he is, do you?”

For a second, I wondered if he knew Shawn’s real name.

“He’s Shawn Stanton. A former Chicago PD officer who worked off duty for the crime lord Nicolas Cortez.”

I’d heard something about that in the news. I’d been back from training when it came out. My focus had been on my sister that day. The day I’d been taken.

Shawn Stanton, Shawn Rook, Matthew Moore. All the names circled in my head, and I was dizzy from it. I almost blurted out Shawn’s real name.

“You don’t know him,” I said instead.

David got in my face and put his hands on my shoulders as if he wanted to shake some sense into me. But he didn’t. He pulled me into a hug. “I don’t blame you for falling for him. He had me fooled, too.”

I stepped out of the embrace. “We’ve been down this road before. He’s a good guy who paid two million dollars to free me as a favor to you, I might add. He didn’t ask you to repay him, yet you tarnish his name.”

David looked like he had swallowed his tongue. “He what?”

“Exactly. You asked him to find me. I was at an auction. You know, the human kind. Which meant I had to be bought. Shawn paid two million, and you heard me correctly. I’ll say it again in case you didn’t. Two million dollars to free me. Did he tell you that?”

David stuttered. “It was probably drug money from Cortez.”

“So what if it was? He got me out. Would you have paid two million dollars to free me?” When he said nothing, I said, “Regardless of where the money came from, he didn’t throw it in your face or ask you to repay him, did he?” David remained mute. “So stop talking about him. He’s the father of my child

and will be in my life forever because of it. I need you to be okay with that, or we won't have a relationship."

"He's bad news," he declared before marching toward the door.

I spun to face him. "Before you go, one more thing. Tell our father I want to see him."

His eyes widened slightly. "I'll arrange something," he said begrudgingly.

"You do that. And mind you, I want to see him before he's dead. I've never spoken to the man as an adult." Then I thought of something. "I don't want your mother to be around when it happens."

The woman didn't like me, and I couldn't blame her. I was the product of an extramarital affair. Still, she was downright nasty, as if I had some say in being born.

He didn't respond and left. I closed my eyes. I hadn't wanted our conversation to go that route. David was too stubborn when it came to Shawn, and I really didn't understand his resentment. It couldn't be over a woman that Shawn wasn't even involved with because that would be childish on my brother's part.

DAYS WOULD PASS like they were on repeat. I went into the office and came home to sleep. Rinse and repeat. I'd seen the therapist a few times and I felt better for it. I didn't know when I would be one hundred percent, but I had my baby to think of. I couldn't dwell on the past. What happened, happened. The most important thing was forgiving myself for getting caught the first time. Bruises could heal. I wouldn't let Ruin own my mind. It was one of the takeaways I'd gotten from Connor. He seemed to be doing well. I could too.

I'd given up on seeing Shawn because the man remained elusive. Kelsey was still in California, though we talked briefly every few days. My family was halfway around the

world and enjoying their cruise, though it, too, would be ending soon.

The day of the auction was different. This day could bring the closure I needed. If Ruin was dead or locked up, I knew I would sleep easier for it.

Stupidly, I was up early and spent time flat-ironing my hair. I even put on makeup. Some part of me hoped to see Shawn, which is why I wore the heart-sleeved tee with jeans. Though I wasn't on the takedown team, I'd managed to wrangle a position in the van as a watcher with the oversight team. I would be one of the eyes and ears, sending them information about things outside of their view through various cameras and drones. I grabbed my office FBI jacket, bundled it in my bag, and left for work.

The one concern had been if Ruin had someone on the inside. This was why the takedown team that had been assembled largely came from field offices in Wisconsin. Little happened there and the team was excited for action. Meetings had been held in a secure location outside of town. It was just my boss and I, working from my field office, who knew about the operation.

The disguised van drove slowly down a side road, its windows reflecting back the murky morning light. Its faded gray paint and mud-splattered tires, along with the name of a utility company, gave it an air of legitimacy. Me and a select few were in the back, hidden behind a curtain of black fabric. The air was heavy with apprehension as we passed several brick row houses.

Farther down the mixed-use area like where we'd found the kidnapped women, a ramshackle building with peeling blue paint loomed in the background like a bad omen. We all knew this was where we'd find parts of the human trafficking ring. The industrial building sat dormant under the guise of an auto body shop and all the secrets lurked beyond its walls. The stormy weather from the night before gave us much-needed cover, and we rolled closer to our destination before parallel parking in an open spot.

We spent the day testing cameras and comms, preparing what night would bring. There were a lot of checks and making sure personnel were in position. We sent up drones to do an overview. Because this wasn't my normal gig, I'd been given a low-priority role. My camera angles that filled my screen faced away from the building and down the street.

Hours later, near go time, I noticed him. I might have done a double take before I made an excuse to leave the van. Something about feeling sick as I rushed out.

I ran like a crazy woman to intercept him. Lucky for me, night had fallen, and my shadow likely hadn't been noticed by the men at the auto shop two blocks down the other way. I slipped between two parked cars to emerge in front of him on the sidewalk. I pushed him down a side street and into a pool of light from the lamppost above.

"You can't," I said, a little out of breath. "You can't go. They'll arrest you."

I had done some research about Shawn Stanton and found what my brother said to be true. Pictures under the headlines matched my Shawn. The question was, why the alias? There were a few reasons. One of them could be, as Shawn suggested. He'd wanted to keep the bad guys away from his family. That didn't explain how the Chicago PD had hired him. He had to have valid credentials under that name. Another reason could be he had legally changed his name to distance himself from his family. The only problem was that all the headlines suggested he was a bad man. And even though Shawn warned me he wasn't good, I still didn't believe it.

"I have to go," he said. His eyes seemed tormented as we faced each other, still not touching.

Just then, the sky opened, and rain fell in a torrent.

I wrenched the shirt he wore and tugged him close. "You didn't listen the last time and left me. I'm begging you to stay here. With me." There was a declaration there he had to see.

He cupped my face as rain raced down, hiding my tears. "I'm doing this for you."

"Stay for us," I begged.

He dipped his head and kissed me. Hail could have come down and I wouldn't have noticed. When our mouths separated and he looked like he wanted to say something, I said it for him. "I think I'm falling in love with you." Falling and fallen. The difference between the two was semantics.

He touched his forehead to mine. "I know I'm in love with you."

The words stunned me so much that when he let go and marched forward, I was frozen. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds. But when I looked around, he was gone. I raced ahead but didn't see him. I turned around in circles, searching.

My hair was a frizzy mess. All my hard work flat-ironing it gone as rain covered me. I didn't care. I just needed the man I loved, safe.

As I passed the van from across the street, the agent who'd sat next to me was in the doorway waving at me to come back. My need to find Shawn was irrational. He needed to know that the FBI had it covered. He didn't have to sacrifice himself for me. If I thought it through a little more, I would recall telling him he would be arrested. But love makes you crazy. I ignored my colleague and ran toward the auto shop like my life depended on it.

The closer I got to the building, I saw him enter. "Wait," I cried out. Thunder covered my words, and the door closed behind him.

The fence surrounding the place was shut as well. I veered to the right, searching for a hole in the fence, when I was caught. I attempted to yell, but a hand clamped over my mouth. Flailing as I was, my attacker dragged me into the shadows of the building as I watched in horror while the FBI moved in.

"Lass, he has to do this," came the whisper in my ear.

Bolt cutters were used on the front gate as the FBI silently approached and surrounded the building. Everything next happened fast. Someone shouted *FBI* as a battering ram was used on the door. Shots rang out.

I'd recognized Griffin's voice and had relaxed in his hold, knowing it was too late. Time ticked on without meaning until agents emerged from the building with several men in handcuffs. Shawn was one of them, along with Ruin. Five were put in one paddy wagon and Shawn and Ruin in another.

"You can let me go," I said in horror.

One of the possibilities of Shawn working in the Chicago PD was that he was an undercover agent. But according to everything I knew, he would have been separated in such a way that it didn't look suspicious. He wouldn't be placed in the same police transport with the other criminals. Which could only mean one thing.

I took off for the FBI van I should have been in with tears in my eyes. Griffin didn't stop me. With agents all over the scene, Griffin didn't call after me or try to stop me.

When I got in the van, the team looked at me. "Sorry. I had to pee really badly. Pregnancy thing," I said and sat. Someone handed me a towel, and I dried off, leaving my face for last as I tried to stop crying.

Because the bust was successful, I only got a slight reprimand for disappearing. My boss likely didn't want me to file a complaint about not having adequate facilities for someone in my condition. I got away with breaking the rules. Shawn didn't.

I was in the kitchen making a sandwich because I was starving when breaking news on my TV in the living room caught my attention. I had the remote near me, so I pressed a button to turn the sound up.

As I mentioned at the top of the hour, we have breaking news. We have received word that Senator Covington's son, Randolph Covington, was killed in an apparent shoot-out. He had been arrested in an FBI raid to stop a human trafficking

ring at an industrial building on the south side of Chicago early this evening. We should note that Senator Covington claims that his son owned the building and didn't know what was going on there. Another interesting note is that Shawn Stanton, a Chicago police officer on leave pending an investigation into his dealings with Nicolas Cortez, the famed crime boss, was also killed. We have footage of the incident and warn that it would not be suitable for young viewers.

I rushed to the back of my sofa while holding my breath and gripped the edge for dear life as a grainy video showed masked gunmen approaching the back doors of the FBI transport van. Popping sounds of gunfire rang out before the gunmen wrenched open the doors. We were given a good view inside. Ruin and Shawn's faces were visible before more shots rang out and both men were flung back by the impact.

The news anchor started to say something about how they obtained the video, but I dropped to my knees as an unearthly cry left my throat.

He's dead. He can't be dead. He's dead chants reverberated in my head. I flung my head back and cried out, uncaring about the noise I was making because my heart had just shattered into a billion little pieces.

I lifted up and scrambled to my feet to find my phone. With shaky hands, I dialed a number.

"Tayla," Kelsey said with alarm as if she knew why I was calling.

"Is he dead?" I asked with a prayer in my broken heart.

"I'm sorry—"

Whatever else she might have said was lost on me as the phone fell from my hand. I rushed to my bathroom, fell to my knees, and retched into the toilet. The chips I'd been nibbling on came up in a rush, along with the juice I'd had. Then, it was nothing but dry heaves.

I couldn't say how long I had sat there. Eventually, I made it to my bed and stared at the ceiling until darkness claimed

me. I called in sick the next day but managed to make another call that had to be made.

Connor answered the phone. “Is Lizzy there?” I asked because I’d dialed her number.

I could hear the pity in his voice as he said, “She’s not available right now.”

Of course she wasn’t. Her twin had died. “Please tell her I’m sorry,” I said because I had no other words, but I had to make that call.

“I’ll pass it along,” he said.

On the verge of another sob, I hung up. Somehow, I’d hoped that she would tell me it was a lie. But even Connor hadn’t done that.

How could the other half of my heart be gone? Because it was. It would be days before I could leave my apartment.

TAYLA

WHEN MY FAMILY GOT BACK TO TOWN, I ASKED MOM IF SHE could come over alone.

“Oh honey, what’s wrong?” She asked as I fell into her arms when she entered my apartment.

We walked over to the sofa and sat, with me curled up next to her as I had done as a child. She held me without words as I sobbed, unable to form coherent words just yet.

Once my tears quieted enough, and I didn’t sound like gibberish, I explained. “The man that saved me,” I began.

“Yes, that Shawn guy.”

I nodded feverishly. “I fell in love with him.” If there had been any doubt, my reaction to the news of his murder solidified my feelings.

Mom rubbed my back and made no judgment yet. Because I didn’t want her to think the worst, I added, “I think he loved me too.”

“Loved?”

“He was killed, and now he won’t meet our child.”

Her hand stopped, and I went on to explain the parts I hadn’t told her about how I’d been released from captivity.

“Oh, baby,” she said, squeezing me tight as I finished. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I choked out.

I hadn't spoken to anyone. Kelsey had called me every day, but none of her messages had contradicted the news. She'd only stated that if I needed anything, to let her know.

Mom held me for a long time and said we'd get through it. "Do you want me to tell your dad?" She didn't mean the sperm donor.

"Please." I couldn't speak on it again.

"Your sister wants to see you. She brought you some souvenirs. I can tell her you're not feeling well."

As much as I wanted to stay curled up in a ball forever, I had a piece of Shawn growing inside me. My child would need a mother, not a basket case. "I'll come by tomorrow," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, and she stayed a little longer until she had to leave.

What got me through the days to come was knowing my family was safe. Ruin was gone, and I didn't think there would be anyone looking for them or me.

And in the month that followed, I settled into a routine of work and home. Weekends I'd spend with my parents and sister.

I hadn't been invited to a funeral or a memorial. Kelsey said there hadn't been one. I didn't call Lizzy again, and she hadn't called either. Still, once the baby arrived, I would let them know. I assumed she was having as hard of a time dealing with Shawn's loss as I was and didn't blame her for the lack of contact.

Two weeks later, I was called into my boss's office.

"Tayla, have a seat."

My belly was really noticeable at this point and I had to take care as I sat.

He leaned back. "How are you enjoying desk duty?"

About as much as any field agent, I thought. “It’s fine,” I said.

“I have an opportunity for you to take part in an op that you are uniquely suited for.” I said nothing, knowing he would continue. “We have evidence from the raid that points to a baby farm. We have an undercover in place who has made visual contact and has put feelers out suggesting he and his partner want to sell their baby.” I knew where he was going with this. “That’s where you come in. They are going to want confirmation of a baby. We can’t send someone in with a prosthesis. They will do an ultrasound to confirm. We need someone pregnant to go in with a wire and get them to offer to buy the baby. It’s an in-and-out job. What do you think?”

I thought a lot of things and didn’t wait to respond.

EXACTLY ONE WEEK LATER, I was fitted with new tech stud earrings. One was a camera. The other was a mic. I couldn’t wear a traditional wire because the criminals would expose my belly for the ultrasound to confirm that I was pregnant.

When I got off the plane in Salt Lake City, I went to meet the undercover agent. I’d been given the agent’s name, Mitch Scranton, which didn’t say much. I assumed it was a false name. The only other thing I’d been given was the car make and model and license plate number. I was to meet them at the arrivals pickup at a certain time.

Lots of things ran through my head as I waddled forward, having spotted the car. My feet moved faster as I saw a mop of brown hair. With only a carry-on, I yanked the passenger side door open and dipped down to see this Mitch. All the hope I’d carried for the past week died. It wasn’t Shawn.

“Do you need help?” Mitch asked as I stared at him.

I shook my head and straightened. I opened the back door of the sedan and put my carry-on in. There wasn’t much in there. This was a one or two-day op. My doctor had given me clearance to fly as long as I stopped flying before thirty-six

weeks. I got in the front passenger seat and stared straight ahead.

Mitch pulled into traffic and went over the plan as we drove over an hour out of town. We passed by plenty of farmland. Mitch explained the place where we'd go in the morning was surrounded by wheat fields. They were tall and the only cover FBI teams would have when infiltrating the place.

We pulled off the highway and drove a couple of blocks to a low-end motel. There weren't many cars in the lot and he pulled right in front of a bank of doors. He got out before I did and got my carry-on for me. I might have considered his chivalrous action if I hadn't wished I was home. I'd accepted this assignment with the deranged idea that Shawn would be here.

Mitch opened the door and held it open for me. I stepped inside the room and was assaulted by a faint, musty odor, but I was grateful there were two beds. I took two more steps in when everything changed.

A grunt sounded, and I turned in time to move out of the way as a fight between Mitch and a masked intruder ensued. My movement left me unsteady, and I fell back and landed with a bounce on the first bed. My rounded belly did not help me put my training into action. I rolled to get to my feet, but it was over before I stood.

The intruder was on me in that second. A bag was pulled over my head and my hands were secured in zip ties faster than I could blink. I tried to make it harder for the person to move me, but I was scooped up. Thrashing my legs didn't stop me from being removed from the motel room. Next thing I knew, I was placed in a chair and my feet were secured as well. Kicking hadn't helped.

I didn't give up but stopped trying to rise. It was no use, and I was wasting energy. I told myself if I hadn't been so pregnant, I would have made it out of the situation. None of that mattered. Instead, I used my other senses, specifically hearing, to gauge where I was.

A door opened from a distance, so I was likely in the back of a van of some sort. The engine started, and we were on our way.

“What do you want?” I asked, not caring if it was futile.

He didn’t answer. I assumed it was a he for how easily I’d been picked up. When the question didn’t work, I started counting time. If I had some idea of how far we traveled, it might give me an idea of where we’d end up. The car slowed about twenty minutes later. The door opened, but he didn’t come for me.

Shortly after, I heard muffled voices. I could make out some of the conversation.

“You have her?” I was pretty sure that was a female voice.

There was a metallic knock. Likely, my captor had indicated that I was inside. “—doctor here?”

I missed some of it. “—back soon.”

The door near me opened. I was dragged out as I fought. But bound as I was, there was nothing I could do.

“Honey, why don’t you make it easy on yourself? You can live or die. We don’t need you.”

I felt the muzzle of the gun at my back and stopped. There was no doubt they would kill me. The calmness of her voice made that perfectly clear.

She pulled off my hood right before I heard a car door slam. I turned to see the van driving off. Dirt covered the license plate, so I couldn’t memorize that.

“Now you can see there are no cars here. No phones or any electronics.” I doubted the latter. She or someone else had to have contact with whoever ran this operation. “And if you do fancy running off, there are hundreds of acres of farmland between you and anyone that cares. Plus”—she pointed to her right where a pen of dogs sat hungrily waiting—“we feed them just enough so they don’t starve. They’ll be happy for any meal. I bet if they caught you, they’d go for your belly

first.” She made her point. “I’m going to free your legs. If you do anything, I won’t hesitate to shoot to kill.”

There were people working inside the compound to my left. It appeared as though they were building another structure. Women were working in a garden. None of them looked friendly.

I held still as she freed my legs. She left my hands bound as we made the jug handle farther into the compound. As we walked, I noticed that the women were dressed two ways. Some wore a long gray dress to the feet with overall straps over a white shirt. But the majority of the younger women wore a faded blue sack dress that was loose and unbelted and hung straight from the shoulders to cover the feet. There was significance in that difference I made a note of. The men were all dressed like modern-day pilgrims in simple trousers and shirts with suspenders.

We passed several ramshackle structures that passed for homes. We stopped at a two-story one about halfway in. A young girl in a sack dress was hanging clothing on the line. My guard, who hadn’t given me her name, called out to the girl. “Serenity, come here, girl.”

A pretty but awfully gaunt girl came over with a faded expression of someone who’d seen too much at a young age. “We have a new visitor who will be staying with you, your pa and your brothers.”

The girl tried to smile, but it was lost in an expression of worry.

“Finish hanging those clothes and come upstairs.” I was pushed in the direction of the door that looked like a strong wind could blow it off its hinges. It squeaked when it opened, and I had a sinking feeling it was kept that way for a reason.

We entered a great room that housed handmade furniture for living and dining areas. I couldn’t make out a kitchen. The woman gave me a little push toward stairs that looked a little more like a ladder placed at a forty-five-degree angle with open risers between each step. The way it squeaked, I feared it

would fall under our combined weight, but we made it to the top.

Upstairs, I made out three doorways before I was herded toward one on the far right. A peek in the room next to it revealed a bed. Not so much for the one I was pushed into. There was a mattress on the floor against the far wall. And a chair was in the corner opposite. But what I noticed was the chain bolted to the floor in the center of the room.

“Same rules apply, girl. First, take off those clothes.”

A faint scent of decay despite the open windows made my skin crawl. If this woman thought she could shame me, she'd be sadly mistaken. Any sense of modesty had been lost on me through my time with Ruin. I pushed down my maternity pants and kicked them off my feet. I held out my hands because I couldn't take off my shirt with my hands bound.

She came over and pushed up my top to reveal my belly more. “I'd say six or seven months.”

I didn't respond. She'd made it clear I wasn't needed. I wouldn't risk my child for a snarky reply. She bent enough to lock the chain around my ankle. The symbolism wasn't lost on me.

When she stood, Serenity was in the doorway. The woman turned around and barked orders. “Cut off her bindings and get her a dress. The doctor will be by the see her soon.”

As the woman left, I noticed she, unlike every other woman in the compound, wore pants. Her ugliness poured from the inside all the way out. I could feel her jealousy as she looked at both me and the girl.

The girl seemed to hold her breath until we heard the front door squeak.

“Can you free me?” I probably had no right to ask, but I had to try. She shook her head and pointed at the lock around my ankle. “You don't have the key.” She shook her head again. I didn't know if she was trying to be quiet or if she was mute. I held out my hand. She revealed a pair of garden shears and snipped the plastic bindings. When those fell away, I

rubbed at my wrist. That was when I realized my bracelet was gone and my heart broke all over again. I didn't know when I'd lost it.

She waved a hand to get my attention. I glanced up, and she pointed at me before miming eating. "Am I hungry?" I asked, and she nodded. I was. "Actually, I need to use the bathroom first."

Her finger rose to point at a bucket, then the chair, and landed on the open window. That's when I noticed the hole in the seat of the plastic chair. "No bathroom?" I tried and hoped maybe she was wrong.

She shook her head and left the room. She returned with a dress much like hers, only bigger in the belly. I slipped it over my head and hated the feel of the scratchy material against my skin. But it was better than being naked.

"Serenity." The voice was male, stern, and came from downstairs.

The fear that hit the girl frightened me. Her eyes were too wide when she gave me a parting look, and then she was gone.

I needed to get out of there. I sat and pulled my bound foot to me. It was harder than usual because of the baby. A basic *O* ring encircled my ankle, and I worked at bending my foot so I could work it off. I stopped when, at some point later, I heard the floorboards creak.

Seconds later, Serenity appeared with a paper plate and paper cup. She set it next to me and mimed eating and drinking. I nodded, though I had no intention of eating or drinking anything they gave me. Though it appeared there was no plumbing or maybe even electricity in the house and dirt under her nails, cleanliness was the least of my worries. I worried more about what they might have put in the food or drink to keep me under control.

My stomach growled. The baby needed food. I had no intention of staying here for months or even days. I was getting out of here as soon as humanly possible. The woman's threats had given me pause, but everyone needed to sleep. If

my counting had been good, we'd driven ten minutes after exiting a road. That was about thirty minutes of walking. If I could slip away in the night, I had a fighting chance of them not noticing long enough for me to make it to civilization before they released the dogs. I couldn't do that if I were drugged.

What couldn't wait was my bladder. I didn't use the chair. I squatted over the bucket and then hauled it to dump the contents out of the window.

By nightfall, I was trying to break the rusty ring around my ankle because I couldn't work my foot through. I wasn't giving up and was going to see how well the chain was bolted to the floor when the door below banged open and voices sounded downstairs.

"You got dinner ready, girl?" the same male voice I'd heard earlier called out.

There was no reply, but I imagined her frantically bobbing her head.

"I heard we have a new one," a younger but no less ignorant male voice said.

"Is she pretty?"

They had the twang of someone from the South, not Utah. They probably moved here for work or, more likely, to hide from the law.

"She ain't for touching," the older man boomed out. I sighed with relief. "Not until the doc clears her."

If there ever was a time to leave, now was it. Only I didn't have many options. Then I remembered my high-tech earrings. Everything had happened so fast that I forgot to activate them. The team would have no idea what happened because we weren't scheduled to go until tomorrow. I had the power to turn them off and on so I would have privacy when in the bathroom and getting dressed. The studs were tiny and looked like cheap metal so as to not draw attention to them.

I reached up and carefully turned the piece on the back to activate the mic first. At this point, I could see nothing, but I

could hear a whole lot. I was in the middle of turning on the camera when I heard running up the stairs. The men laughed. I scooted to the doorway in time to see Serenity barreling up to the landing. As I sat in the open doorway, she gave me a frantic wave as if to signal me back inside my room before running the opposite way to the door at the end. She threw herself inside and shut the door.

The camera had been activated when, a few minutes later, the older man appeared at the landing. I scooted just out of sight, not wanting to draw attention to myself. He turned away from my doorway and I peeked out. I had no idea if the camera and mic were working, but I prayed they were.

“Serenity.” He laughed a little sloppily.

A noise at my window caught my attention a second before I heard one of the brothers say, “I want to see the new girl.”

“Pa said we had to wait.”

“Pa said not to touch.”

A chill ran through me and I scrambled to the back of the room and grabbed the slack of the chain. I was ready for anything. If that bastard came for me, I’d kill him if I had to, so help me God.

A lanky kid not much older than the girl stumbled through my door. The moonlight hit his face, highlighting his deranged expression.

“What are you?” he slurred.

“Come and find out,” I spat out.

He bent for the chain, and I held fast. He yanked, and I pulled with an opposing force. Stronger than he looked, I slid in his direction. I made myself deadweight and I stopped sliding.

When he came, I rolled and used the chain to wrap around his neck. I pulled tight enough to get him to stop moving. *Could I kill him?* I asked myself seconds before a figure entered the room, but not from the door. My plan had been to

ask the guy for a key to free myself until an ally had come through the window.

He wore black tactical pants, a long-sleeved shirt and a mask that hid his features. He had to be FBI. Maybe they had surveillance up. Tactical Guy came over, but I pointed to the door.

“Save the girl. Room down the hall and to the right,” I whispered frantically. I didn’t know for sure if she needed saving, but I had the one brother. I needed to make sure Serenity was safe.

When the first brother passed out, I loosened the chain and checked his pulse. He was still alive. I heard a grunt sound out in the hall. Hopefully, Tactical Guy had taken out the second brother.

Then I heard the father yell, “Who the hell are you?”

I pushed at the brother. He was still out. I let the chain slacken so I could move to the doorway as I watched Tactical Guy restrain the father with an arm secured around his neck.

Since I saw what was about to happen, I covered my left ear as the girl came running and yanked a knife from the strap around Tactical Guy’s leg and rammed it into the father’s groin area. The bloodcurdling scream would replay in my nightmares. I couldn’t guess why she’d aimed there, except it was close to where the knife had been strapped to Tactical Guy. She might not have wanted to kill her father, but hurt him nonetheless.

A lot of things happened after that. Over a bullhorn, the FBI announced their presence. Lights went on like the compound was the center of a baseball field.

The father was down and Tactical Guy restrained the daughter. I understood he couldn’t let her kill him if she wanted to because it would only put her in more trouble. What she’d done could be argued by a good defense lawyer as a mental break. But people frowned on murder even when someone deserved it.

He took the knife as she slumped to the floor in silent tears. The door downstairs burst open and Tactical Guy came over to me. A second later, he removed the mask, and I cried out, only to be stopped by a paralyzing kiss. Then he was gone, and the house filled with agents.

A lot of questions had to be answered as I navigated the next few hours. My savior had disappeared and wasn't around for any of it. I reported to the team that I believed the women dressed in the one-piece dresses were likely captives.

It wasn't until the next day that I made it home, tired and confused. I rationalized that I hadn't dreamed up my savior, though the team leader had accounted for everyone on the op and my savior wasn't among them.

Wearily, I opened my door and came in. I tossed the keys in the bowl, closed the door, and finally looked up.

There he stood, like a figment of my imagination. I did only what a rational person would. I ran over and beat on his chest to confirm he was real, and he let me.

“How could you make me think you were dead?” I cried.

MATT

WORKING AT THE BUREAU ON AN UBER ELITE GHOST TEAM didn't mean we didn't get dressed down for breaking protocol. I got a lot of shit for moving in early. Once I heard those fuckers talk about seeing my woman, I didn't give a damn about my orders.

Tayla was safe. That was all that mattered. The only question now was if she'd forgive me.

I clasped her wrists to stop her fists and kissed each one, remembering how I'd had to zip-tie her. I'd done my best to do my job and keep her safe. Leaving her with that vile woman had been my undoing. I'd parked the van in the wheat and doubled back. I'd watched the house they kept her in like a caged animal, pacing the field I'd hidden in. When darkness fell, I'd gotten closer, standing at the back wall that faced the field listening.

“Are you going to say anything?” she cried. Tears covered her face, and I hated that I made her that way.

“Shawn had to die, and everyone needed to believe it. I couldn't tell you in case someone was watching you. You were a credible witness to his death.”

It was also the end of an era for me. I'd semiretired from the bureau. My focus was on my family whether they knew it or not. It didn't mean I was completely out. It meant I could choose my assignments. Also, Griffin offered me a partnership in his security business. I was still thinking about it.

Tayla reached up, and I thought she might slap me. Instead, she ran her hands through my newly dyed hair. Gone was the brown and the dye job was close to my natural blond.

“I hate you,” she said, yanking away from me and giving me her back.

“No, you don’t.”

I hadn’t meant to sound cocky as she spun and narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re dead to me. Remember?”

I glanced down. She had a point. I met her gaze again and held out a hand. “Hi, I’m Matt. Nice to meet you.” I wanted more than everything to be Matt. Matt was worthy of Tayla. Shawn wasn’t.

She stepped forward. Her hand came out, but instead, I got the slap I’d been expecting earlier.

“Not nice to meet you. You broke into my apartment—”

I stopped her rant by cupping her face and kissing her. She melted against me immediately. Her soft skin and body were a lightning rod to my cock. I was insta hard and knew she could feel it.

When we finally came up for air, I said, “I love you enough to walk away with you hating me as long as I know you and our kiddo are safe. I had a choice, and I made it. But now you, your family—”

“And ours,” she completed.

“Are safe.” The kingpin thought I was dead, too. Leaving no threat looking for Shawn.

“Who do you work for?” she asked. I knew this question was coming. When I didn’t answer, she asked another. “Are you an undercover agent?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that,” I said but held her gaze, hoping she could read the answer there.

She nodded. “Shawn is dead. What does that mean?”

“It means Matt is a free man.” I rubbed my newly clean-shaven face. It was funny how most people wouldn’t link my

new look to my old one. Shawn mostly wore jeans. Matt dressed like the million-dollar man he was. Boss pants and button-down shirt and Gucci loafers. The outfit was a couple of grand. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent that much on my entire wardrobe, let alone one outfit.

"I fell in love with Shawn."

I pursed my lips. "Then I guess Matt will have to win you over."

"Can you stop talking about yourself in the third person?"

I bobbed my head. "It's a little weird for me, too. I've been Shawn so long..." I feared a part of me would always be him.

"Shawn wasn't a bad guy," she said and took my hands in hers.

"You don't know what I've done," I said.

"I do. I read about Shawn. I also know from firsthand experience what Shawn did for me. I don't know Matt. And if Matt is anything like his father, I don't want anything to do with that version of you."

"I need you to know that every time I was with you, I was me. The real me, whether that's Shawn or Matt or a mix of the two. I felt myself when I was with you."

She looped her arms around my neck and lifted on her toes. I met her halfway as we kissed again.

"I have something for you," I said when we came up for air.

I pulled out the bracelet I'd removed from her wrist. "It was you?" she said.

"I didn't want them to take it from you."

"I didn't even notice."

"You were a little busy being abducted." I screwed it back on her wrist.

"Were you a part of the op?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that," I said.

She frowned. “Is Ruin dead?”

This was a harder question to answer. “It’s better if you go with what the news reported.”

Ruin had met Karma, and his name was Connor. Griff had asked if I’d wanted to stay while Connor made the man pay, given my position in the FBI. It hadn’t been a question. Ruin had hurt Tayla. Revenge was best served when it was least expected. And Ruin hadn’t expected to see me.

We’d even gotten intel on his other cohorts who needed to be caught. The one question I really wanted to know was what Ruin’s connection was to the kingpin. Turned out, he had used Nicolas Cortez to help acquire the trackers he used. Their relationship was limited to that.

With Ruin out of the picture, Griffin was working to helping the women we’d freed back to lives they wanted. It would take time.

“He can’t hurt my family?” Tayla asked, drawing me out of my thoughts.

I gave a barely imperceptible shake of my head. Her apartment was still bugged. “He’s dead, according to reports. You should feel secure in that.”

“Are you moving?”

“I’m buying a place and hope you’ll move in with me,” I offered.

I didn’t like the silent no she gave me. “Agents aren’t allowed to live with anyone else.”

“Then marry me.” It wasn’t exactly how I planned to ask again, but nothing we’d done had been conventional.

“I wouldn’t marry Shawn. I won’t marry Matt for the same reasons.”

I took her left hand. “You are going to make my mother mad at me. She insisted I give you this.” I pulled the red box from my pocket with my free hand. I flipped it open and showed her the ring inside. Her eyes grew round. “It was my grandmother’s engagement ring. When you weren’t wearing a

ring at her birthday dinner, I got an earful. She made me promise I'd give it to you. You won't make me a liar, will you?" I could see the wheels turning in her head. "A long engagement until I can win you over?" I offered.

"You're lucky I love your mother. But you have a lot of work to do if you want me to wear this ring."

"Anything," I said as I slipped it on her finger. I loved seeing it there, knowing she was mine and no one else's.

She stepped away. "First things first." She led me to her bedroom, where she opened a side table. She used her *fuck you* fingertip to open a gun safe. Inside, on the top, was a picture. "Here is a sonogram picture of our daughter."

A wide grin split my face. "I told ya."

"You did. And there she is." I looked at the picture. It was odd to see the shape of the baby in shadows. "And I want you to love her like Matt but be her dad like Shawn."

I chuckled. "Why is that?"

Her expression was deadly serious. "Because I want Shawn to kill anyone that wants to harm her."

"You can count on it."

EPILOGUE

THE DIRT ROAD BROUGHT BACK UGLY MEMORIES OF OUR BRIEF time in Utah, but we were in Pennsylvania. Tayla was due any day, but this couldn't wait.

She sat in the back seat with a young girl, or rather, a woman. We'd learned from the raid on the baby farm that Serenity was around twenty-two years old. She and her mother, who at the time had been a teen mom, had grown up here. It was shocking to learn how long the farm had been working.

The man Serenity's mom married likely killed her. A psychologist suspected Serenity had witnessed the crime.

"Over here," Griff said from the passenger seat, pointing to an open area on the side of a two-lane farm road. We were in the territory of a community that didn't embrace technology.

I shook my head at the getup he was wearing. He had on a pilgrim outfit he'd gotten from a high-priced costume store. "You really think that's going to work?" In the compound, men did dress similarly, but not so 1700s.

He shrugged. "From afar, yes. What will they know? Besides, I need to get to the electronics Kalen left. If I'm spotted, likely no one will question me," he said, sounding like a true American today.

Bailey was back home. Kalen had sent her here for the summer to keep her safe. She had the added benefit of spending time with her family. There had been an alert on the security that Kalen had installed to keep the compound safe.

Only a select few of the community were aware of the security measures that had been implemented. Kalen was on his way, but Griffin had been closer. No one knew him here as they did Kalen. And Griff didn't want to answer a bunch of questions to gain access. So he'd disguised himself and planned to slip in and out of the compound unnoticed.

"Don't get your crazy ass killed?" I joked.

He flashed me an award-winning grin. "And disappoint the lassies?" He turned and gave our companion a wide smile. Serenity giggled, which seemed unlikely as the girl wouldn't speak. But it seemed no woman was immune from Griff's charms.

Once Griff was on his way, I drove forward and eventually pulled into a small parking lot. I got out and went to the guard gate. We were made to wait for someone to come to get us.

I expected Bailey to be the one, but it was Turner, Bailey's childhood sweetheart, who showed up.

We clasped hands as I had been here before and met him. I moved him out of earshot of Serenity and Tayla, who stood with her. Tayla was aware of why we were here, but I didn't want Serenity overhearing.

"That's her?" Turner asked.

I nodded. "They tried putting her in a shelter. As you can imagine, that didn't go over well. She won't talk, but man can she scream. She grew up without technology and the people couldn't get why she wouldn't speak."

"You tried other places, you said."

"I didn't personally. But those in charge went to a couple of communities. No one would take her. Even though they didn't know each other long, she's taken a liking to Tayla. I think because she feels as though Tayla understands what she went through, considering they'd locked Tayla up in her house."

Turner nodded. "I don't know if the council will approve it."

“I don’t know what else to do. They will put her in a psychiatric hospital if you guys don’t take her. She didn’t like our place. Too many electronic things. She sat rocking in a corner. I don’t know what to do short of moving here myself. Tayla will not let this girl be harmed.” Not that I would.

He glanced at Serenity’s bare feet. “She won’t wear shoes. I don’t know if she ever has,” I added.

“Let’s go,” Turner said. He didn’t look confident.

This compound was quite different from the one in Utah. It was well maintained, and the homes were sturdy. I glanced back to see Serenity smiling. Though different, I suspected it was more familiar to her than any place she’d been so far.

We stopped at a building in the center of town if you could call it that. There weren’t stores or anything of the like. But this building was surrounded by all the others. A small group of people waited outside. Most were men, but there were two women with them. They were all dressed as if two centuries hadn’t passed. It was similar to an Amish community, but Bailey and Turner insisted it wasn’t. Similar but very different, they’d said.

Turner held a hand up, and we stopped. Serenity twirled around and stared at the sky as if she heard music. I took Tayla’s hand and squeezed, hoping for the best.

The group spoke in hushed tones and there was a lot of headshaking. Things got heated to a point. We overheard some of the conversations.

“What family would bring a single woman of age into their home?” a stern-faced woman said.

“She has nowhere else to go,” Turner countered.

“I’m sorry, but that’s not our problem. We feel for the girl, but unless someone is willing to marry her, we can’t take her in.”

Turner glanced over at us, then to Serenity, who danced as if at peace with the world and said, “I’ll marry her.”

Tayla

A COMMOTION ENSUED, but I couldn't focus on it as a sharp pain tightened my belly. I doubled over as my water broke.

I'd worn a dress similar to the one we'd bought Serenity for the ride over. It wasn't exactly the style of the women in front of us, but it was modest in nature and covered everything from neck to toe. So my water breaking wasn't a secret.

"Fuck," Shawn said. Yeah, I hadn't yet gotten used to calling him Matt, and he was okay with it. "We need to get to the hospital."

I frantically shook my head. "Too late."

His brows rose high. "How long?" he said, guessing that I'd had contractions for a while.

"The entire drive," I said. That was from New York to Pennsylvania. We'd driven because putting Serenity on a plane, even a private one, wouldn't have gone over well.

"You didn't say anything," he grouched.

"I didn't want you to worry and figured it would be hours."

"Turner," Shawn bellowed. "Get Bailey. Now."

Everyone turned our way, and the women rushed over. "Okay, let's get you inside," one of them said.

I could feel the baby's head crowning. So maybe I lied. It had started last night. I'd been so busy trying to keep Serenity calm that I'd ignored it. We had to go through so many hoops to get her from state care. It helped she was a legal adult. It didn't help that she was mute and acting erratically. It had taken effort and highly paid lawyers to get to this point. I wasn't going to spoil it by having a baby, or so I thought.

Inside, the women worked as one. They had a pallet on the ground and me on it before the next contraction hit. They tried to shoo Shawn out of the building, but he refused.

Not long after, Bailey appeared with her own newborn slung against her. She took my hand as another woman who'd come with her kneeled between my legs.

"Tayla, meet my mom. She's an experienced midwife. You're in good hands," Bailey announced.

Shawn kneeled on the opposite side of Bailey. She nodded at him. "Time for you to be a papa," she said to him.

Bailey's mom had my dress modestly rolled up on my knees. The only people in the building were women, except for Shawn. I worried a second for Serenity, but after everything I'd heard about Turner, I knew she was in good hands.

"Now push," Bailey's mom said.

For the next however long, I couldn't measure time except by pain. My hair was a rat's nest around my head as sweat covered every inch of me before my baby was placed in my arms.

"What's her name?" someone asked.

That was a good question. I looked up at Shawn.

A FEW MONTHS LATER...

DAVID WALKED me into a home that was fit for a king. It was way too large and too ostentatious for words. My rubber-soled shoes squeaked on the marble floors as I entered. We headed up the left side of a grand double staircase. At the top, we passed an open elevator door.

He opened double doors at the end of the hall, and we stepped in. I wasn't sure what to expect, but there was my

father. He was gray and pale and looked small in the king-size canopy bed. What also caught my attention were the two men standing off to the side. They resembled David and I felt ambushed not expecting to meet my other brothers today. One came forward.

Before I could get closer to the bed, I was waylaid. “Tayla,” the younger one said and wrapped me in a hug. “I’m your brother, Dean.”

He held me a second longer before he let go. His expression was kind and welcoming, unlike the other brother I knew to be Declan. He said nothing and only eyed me suspiciously.

“Is that my daughter?” the frail man said, breaking the standoff between me and Declan, whom I didn’t know I was meeting today.

“Yes, Dad. Tayla’s here.”

David urged me past Dean and forward. I ended up on the right side of the bed.

My daughter let out a little yawn and opened her blue eyes. “You brought my granddaughter,” my father said.

He’d requested it. Shawn hadn’t been happy about the idea and wanted to come. Because everyone thought Shawn was dead, he couldn’t.

I held out my daughter so my father could get a better view. The man grinned. “She looks like a Kewpie doll with that swirl of blonde hair at the top of her head. I wonder where she got that from.”

There was no way I could tell them that Shawn—Matt had blond hair. The Shawn David knew was a brunette. I laughed and shrugged. “Recessive genes.”

My father reached out and patted my hand. “Don’t you worry. We Royals take care of one another. David will make sure you have the money needed for her care. He’ll start a trust for her to ensure she can go to college and have a proper start in life.”

It was a thoughtful gesture because they all assumed I was a single mom. But David eyed his father like he was crazy. I was about to say I didn't need anything when Declan said, "Mother."

We all turned toward the double doors as one. When I saw the woman who looked good for her age, I turned to glare at David. He'd promised me his mother wouldn't be here.

"Mom, why are you here?" David asked with genuine surprise.

She breezed forward like she owned the place, and so she did. "I had to see what all the fuss was about." She stopped in front of me. "The baby is cute."

I didn't begrudge the woman her dislike of me. In fact, I wasn't sure I wouldn't feel the same if I'd been in her place.

"I should go," I said, really not wanting to get into a war of words with this woman.

"It's not you," she began. "Well, it is you. You are the walking reminder that my husband cheated on me. And then you give him his first grandchild. It's hard to like you when you are the epitome of my failures."

I had the worst luck when it came to rich, older people. They either loved or hated me. "I really should go."

Though I had many questions to ask my father, like why he cheated with my mother and lied to her and why he continued to pay child support for me when I wasn't a child. But I'd gotten what I came for, even in that brief time we shared. Acceptance. He'd looked at me like a father looks at his daughter. There had been unmistakable pride in his eyes. I wasn't just a bill to pay every month. I could be happy with that.

Time would tell if I'd see him again and try for a private conversation, just the two of us.

DAYS LATER...

“I’VE BEEN THINKING,” I said as we parked in front of my parents’ house.

“What about?” Shawn asked.

“I think I’m leaving the FBI.”

His mouth shut. It had been something I’d contemplated. I’d joined for all the right reasons, but there was too much red tape. Like they still didn’t know who the mole was. There were suspicions, but a long investigation was underway. Justice moved too slow for my liking. Besides, I had a better offer. One that would allow me to do what I loved and still work from home while our baby was an infant.

“You’re going to accept Griffin’s offer.” It wasn’t a question.

Griffin needed a new analyst. Kelsey had been doing it part time while using her computer expertise for the other half. His company was growing by leaps and bounds and Kelsey had less time to do the analysis work.

“I’m not going to lie. I’ll miss fieldwork. But I’d rather see our baby grow up more.”

“Whatever you decide,” he said.

I loved that he hadn’t thrown money at me and suggested I do nothing but enjoy the perks of being in a relationship with a millionaire or billionaire. I hadn’t asked for details about his bank account.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

He’d met my family before. Dad had pulled him outside for a little man-to-man chat. My mom was leery, mostly because of my bio dad. Two blond men with money. She was worried he wasn’t in for the long haul. My little sister, however, loved Shawn. Every time, he’d show up with little gifts for her. Nothing fancy. He knew I wouldn’t approve, but things like books or a paint set. Today, he’d spent a little more

and gotten her a telescope. It was a learning one for kids, so I hadn't balked.

He leaned over and kissed me. "I'm always ready."

I giggled. "I know. But later."

Much later because when we got home, Little Miss would likely want to breastfeed. But after, it would be all about Mommy and Daddy time.

What he didn't know was how close I was to saying yes. Yes, to us setting a date. The date we'd make it official and be married.

"I love you," I said and pressed another kiss to his lips.

"I love you more," he said, jumping out of the car to open my door and help me out.

He got our daughter out next and cradled her like she was glass. "How's my princess?" he cooed.

When she blew bubbles at him and his face lit up like it was Christmas morning, I knew I'd been right about him. He was a natural father and I felt like the luckiest woman in the world.

"That's my pretty girl. Who's the prettiest one of all?" he said to our little one.

I cocked my head in his direction. He had the grace to blush. "You know you're the fairest one of all," he said and winked. "But my baby girl here is going to steal hearts and I'm going to have to bury them because if so much as one boy touches a hair on my daughter's—"

And there was my merciless protector, I thought as he made baby faces at our daughter. I took his arm and steered him toward my parents' door because this could go on all night. And I was ready for Sunday dinner.



I'd like to thank you for taking the time to read my novel. Above all, I hope you loved it. If you did, I would love it if *you could spare just a few minutes to leave a review ~ just a few words are fine*. I would greatly appreciate it. Thanks so much!

Want more?

Each King man can be read as a standalone. But here is the original release order:

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Griffin & Turner's stories are coming!!!

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Buy links can also be found on my website.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

stalk
terri e. laine

Terri E. Laine, USA Today bestselling author, left a lucrative career as a CPA to pursue her love for writing. Outside of her roles as a wife and mother of three, she's always been a dreamer and as such became an avid reader at a young age.

Many years later, she got a crazy idea to write a novel and set out to try to publish it. With over three dozen titles published under various pen names, the rest is history. Her journey has been a blessing, and a dream realized. She looks forward to many more memories to come.

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